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The Gospel and our Culture A Response to Elaine Graham and Heather Walton

I welcome the Editor's invitation to respond to the critique of *The Gospel and our Culture* presented by Elaine Graham and Heather Walton. For the sake of brevity, I hope I may be allowed to refer to the two parties in this discussion as GOC and GW.

I appreciate the very fair and generous way in which, at the outset of their article, GW have described GOC. In fact their presentation gave me the momentary impression that GOC was a more prestigious entity than it actually is. I record my thanks for this. In what follows I shall first make some detailed comments and then go to what I think is the heart of the matter.

What "The Gospel and our Culture" is not

1. GW state that GOC is concerned with a crisis of values in our culture. It is nothing of the kind. At its centre is the contention that the whole language of 'values' (freely employed by GW), has lost all contact with reality. 'Values', as discussed in GW's paper have no ontological foundation. They 'emerge from human activity'. They are therefore ephemeral and change as different 'regimes of truth' (Foucault) succeed one another. In fact the contemporary use of the word 'values' (which has come into ethics from economics) is an expression of the fact (which Nietzsche foresaw) that the operation of the Cartesian principle of doubt must destroy the possibility of speaking about 'right' or 'wrong' and that only the will to power would remain. 'Values' are an expression of the will. They are what some people want. GW are still operating in this post-Nietzschean world, and the object of GOC is to unmask its real character.

2. GW charge GOC with being deceived into thinking that the root issue is epistemology, whereas it is in fact ontology. The Enlightenment was, they rightly say, much more than a matter of epistemology. 'Human agency', in such things as the industrial revolution and the rise of capitalism, had much to do with it. I thought that I had always made it clear that I accept the big element of truth in this. It has been one of my main (too often repeated) affirmations that the idea of a disembodied rationality is an illusion; that all human rational discourse is socially and historically embodied. In this I am wholly with the post-modernists. But this is not to say that human reasoning is simply a product of social or economic forces. GW come very near to suggesting this. When they say that the Enlightenment was not

primarily an epistemological movement but the work of social forces such as the industrial revolution, they come near to making dialogue pointless, since if truth-claims are sociologically determined then dialogue is pointless and the only reality is power. No one can deny, for example, that the epistemology of Descartes had a big role in preparing the way for the Enlightenment; can anyone claim that his ideas were a product of the Industrial Revolution? It is very important to insist that thought and practice are in a continuous reciprocal relation with each other. But the introduction of the blessed word 'praxis', bringing with it the glow of heroic liberation struggles, does not enhance clarity of thought. It is therefore inaccurate to portray GOC as though it were merely a call for an intellectual shift of perspective. It is that, but always and only in the context of the life of the Church, of actual discipleship, of living out the truth in the public life of society. And of course, (the reciprocal relation again) it is only in the course of living it out that one is led to further insight. If we must call this 'praxis' rather than discipleship, I will not quarrel.

3. I am taken to task by GW for having spoken of culture as 'the social aspect of human living' and accused of thinking that society is merely a collection of individuals. I used the phrase in the course of arguing that to treat 'culture' as something quite different from the way human beings behave, and to talk only of the relevance of the Gospel to individual behaviour, was a symptom of the contemporary privatization of religion. I am baffled to understand how this can be taken to mean that society is only a collection of individuals: that is the position I was attacking. On the other hand I do wonder what GW mean when they correct me by saying that 'culture is the foundation of human living'. Is 'culture' something which pre-dates the existence of human beings?

4. I am accused of nostalgia for a more stable and cohesive past. I suppose that a sick man's longing to be well again might be described as nostalgia, but need not be a source of shame. I do think that ours is a sick society. I long for health, but I do know that there can be no return to the past - either to mediaeval Christendom or (as some seem to wish) to a sort of pre-Constantinian innocence where we live in perpetual protest with some hopes for martyrdom. I know that we are in a situation for which there are no precedents in history. GOC is a call to the churches for a courageous exploration of a future yet uncharted.

5. GW write: 'Christian discipleship for Newbigin requires the 'leap of faith' into a group which sees itself as uniquely privileged to indwell the truth'. I make three brief comments. (i) I have never used and never would use the phrase 'leap of faith'. Christian discipleship is not an irrational leap into the unknown. It is a personal response to a personal call from Him who is the Word made flesh. It is responsible commitment. (ii) If the 'group' in this sentence means the holy catholic Church, then I certainly do believe that it is the unique bearer of the true narrative, and that to 'abide in Christ' (indwell) is to be on the way to truth. (iii) If the implication of the sentence is that there is some way of knowing truth apart from the personal commitment which is faith, then one would have to say that the writers were under an illusion. But I suspect that this is not the case, and that at this point GW slipped back from their post-modern stance into the typical 'modern' illusion that there can be available to us the kind of indubitable knowledge that Descartes claimed to offer, a kind of knowledge which does not involve faith. Since the article of GW represents a post-modernist perspective, there is no point in pursuing this particular issue. The issue at stake is something else, namely the question whether there is any such thing as truth at all. That must be the main point of the discussion between GW and GOC.

6. I must register strong dissent, not to say outrage, at the suggestion which GW make at the end of their article that the raping and abuse of women is a consequence of the 'hegemony' of the biblical story. This is an unworthy strategy to raise the emotional temperature at the cost of truth. The truth is that, wherever the Bible has gone and has been accepted among the many cultures of the world, it has

always had the effect of enhancing the status of women and of the respect accorded to them in society. The raping and abuse of women is an appalling manifestation of human sin, but to suggest that it is the consequence of the teaching of the Bible is monstrous.

Chaos, Order and Truth

The framework which shaped the entire thesis as presented by GW is a dualistic one. There is a fundamental dualism between order and chaos, and human history is a perpetual cycle of alternation between the two. 'Order and chaos exist in a dialectical relationship; not to be reconciled by a future in which "all things shall be well", but continuing in ambivalent tensions which contain the seeds of contradiction, destruction and renewal' (p.6). This ancient and deeply pessimistic view of the human situation has haunted much of history. Why does it now surface in a society long liberated from it? Part of the answer lies where GW locate the sources of cultural change - in the social construction of thought. It looks remarkably like the projection into metaphysics of the current ideology of the free market in which order is seen as the antithesis of freedom and 'de-regulation' is the path to happiness.

Into this dualistic metaphysics and cyclical history, GW fit the concept (derived from Foucault) of successive 'regimes of truth'. Each regime inevitably represses alternative visions of truth, since it is of the nature of truth that it is distinguished from untruth. The repressed version of truth eventually asserts itself, and another 'regime' takes over. This has some affinity with Peter Berger's concept of 'plausibility structures', a concept which I have found very helpful. Every society does indeed have a set of assumptions and practices which render any particular belief plausible or implausible. But it is quite another matter to suppose that the content of the word 'truth' is exhausted by this use of it, that there is no such thing as a truth which transcends these ephemeral regimes and by which they could be judged. If 'truth' is only what is so defined by the contemporary regime, then there are no rational grounds on which it can be questioned within that regime. It can only be overthrown by the marginalized regime which waits in the wings for the inevitable onset of chaos before establishing a new kind of 'truth'.

Beyond the endless cycle of alternating chaos and order there is no God who speaks and acts to confront us with the truth which judges all our 'regimes of truth'. Rather GW offer us 'our vision of a God who emerges from the shadows, from the unspoken and the unknown'. It is easy to recognize here Feuerbach's *brockenspectre* - the image of our confusion thrown up against the sky.

Let me venture a few comments on this scenario.

1. GW seem to assert that order, coherence and stability are always obtained at the cost of repressing alternatives. But on what grounds is this repression reprehensible? Obviously not on grounds within the current 'regime of truth'. If, then, we have to look for grounds in a future regime of truth, then we have to accept that that new regime will also have its own forms of repression. If, for example, the contemporary regime represses the free choice of sexually active males by making rape a crime, are the grounds for this simply part of the temporary and contingent character of the present 'regime'?

If repression is a necessary element in all 'regimes' of truth, on what grounds can repression be regarded as wrong? The fact that GW see repression as reprehensible is evidence of their belief (in spite of themselves) that there exists some standard of truth beyond the ephemeral 'regimes' of truth. GOC wants to support them in this belief.

2. GW rightly draw attention to the power factor in all cultural change. The question at issue is whether there is anything else but power at work. Nietzsche saw that Descartes' programme for indubitable knowledge must defeat itself and leave nothing but the will to power. His intellectual heirs among the post-modernists do not seem to leave open any other possibility. If there is no transcendent reality beyond the contemporary 'regimes of truth', on what rational grounds can that regime be questioned? There are none. It can only be replaced by the exercise of power, and its place will be taken by another regime which differs only in its choice of alternatives for repression.

3. If indeed 'God' is 'a being of chance, contingency and chaos', if, in other words, incoherence is the mark of reality, how is it possible even to construct a sentence? No human being ever has, or ever could act as if this were the case. Even animals act on the assumption that there is a real world which has to be explored, and about which one can be rightly or wrongly informed. To be wrongly informed means that one will die of hunger, heat, enemy action or some other factor in the real world. It is therefore a matter of life or death that one develops a 'regime of truth' which corresponds as far as possible with what is actually the case. This is simply what it is to be a living creature. There is no possibility here of arguing from more fundamental premises. It is an integral part of being a living human being that one is called to explore, try to understand and take account of a real world. It is, of course, possible to make verbal statements to the effect that ultimate reality is incoherent, but it is not possible to live by that belief, and the expression of it is simply the sign of a culture which has lost the will to live. Like others before it, such a culture will simply die.

4. We have to direct attention to what is, I think, the root issue, namely the meaning of freedom. GW see order as the enemy of freedom (a typically Thatcherite concept) and repression as the means by which order militates against freedom. They reject the belief that there is an over-arching truth by which all the different 'regimes of truth' might be judged. From this it follows that freedom can only be defined as absence of limits. If there is, as the Christian tradition (and many others) affirm, a reality beyond the human self in whom truth resides, that is to say who is consistent and coherent rather than chaotic, then my freedom cannot be freedom from all limitations. Freedom could only be in a relationship with that reality. It could be, and the Christian tradition affirms that it is so, that the order established by that transcendent reality is one which enables human freedom and does not repress it. It is indeed true that there are forms of order which are repressive of human freedom. But there are also forms of order which liberate human beings for a full life. The difference is, of course, at the heart of the debate between socialism and laissez-faire capitalism.

Of course if it were really the case that God were 'a being of chance, contingency and chaos', then any 'order' imposed by such a 'God' would indeed be tyrannous. The definition of 'God' offered by GW is precisely the definition of an arbitrary tyrant. No human society can exist without some concept of law and some agreed order, and without a centre of power capable of restraining the forces that would disrupt that order. When those who occupy the seat of central power act consistently, coherently, and in accordance with some understandable criteria of truth and right, then the members of the society can enjoy a measure of freedom. When the occupants of the seats of power act inconsistently and incoherently, there is no freedom. And when there is no centre of power but only chaos, then there is no freedom at all.

For and Against the Post-Moderns

GOC has never understood itself as primarily a critique of our culture but as an effort to clarify the issues involved in communicating the Gospel to this particular culture. In so far as it has been (necessarily) a critique of our culture, this has been primarily in terms of what is often loosely called

'modernity', because this is still, in spite of the post-modernists, the dominant power in the public debate. (It is true, as GW say, that the Enlightenment was in the first place a movement among a very small elite. Kant was sure that his ideas would do no damage because the working classes would not be able to read them.) But, as we surely know now, the ideas which the 18th century savants developed have become the accepted assumptions of all societies which are seeking 'modernization'. But the perspective of GW in the article under review is that of post-modernism. The issues raised here are different from those raised in the encounter of the Gospel with 'modernity', and call for a response which takes account of the difference.

One of the most often quoted sayings of the Enlightenment was Lessing's complaint about the 'great ugly ditch': 'Contingent happenings in history cannot prove eternal truths of reason'. This, of course, immediately ruled out the Christian story as a source of eternal truth. The post-modernists, if I understand rightly, have neatly stood Lessing on his head. The so-called 'eternal truths of reason' are in fact products of particular histories. So we have 'The Genealogy of Morals' (Nietzsche) and 'The Archaeology of the Social Sciences' (Foucault). It seems to me that, at this point, the Christian has to side with the post-modernists against the Enlightenment. In his book *Theology and the Social Sciences* John Millbank shows that the root of the modern use of the word 'science', as denoting a special kind of knowing, was the shift from a way of seeing truth as located in narrative, to a way of seeing truth as located in timeless, law-like statements. Of such statements, the cosmology of Newton was, of course, the reigning paradigm. It seemed that 'eternal truth' must be capable of formulation in statements which have the timeless character of mathematics. Millbank records as the first use of the word 'science' in its modern, specialised sense, the phrase 'political science' as used by Machiavelli and Hobbes. Politics, hitherto understood as part of history, would now be understood in terms of laws on the basis of which predictions could be made. In due course economics followed. Instead of being a branch of ethics it came to claim the status of a science capable of being expressed in mathematical formulae and capable of making reliable predictions. And the following century saw similar claims being made for a science called sociology.

Typically 'modernity' has seen science, understood in this way, as the locus of reliable truth. If I understand rightly, the post-moderns are calling this in question and demonstrating that all forms of human knowing arise out of the social experience of a community. But it does not follow from this (as post-modernists often seem to affirm) that the truth claims which we make are nothing but the products of 'human agency' (the favoured phrase of GW), and that there is no time-and-culture-transcending reality to the understanding of which human thought is directed. This is mere assertion and has no rational foundation. There are no rational grounds for denying the possibility that some or all of these human stories of grappling with experience might have come to a real, even if partial and flawed, grasp of a transcendent reality. And, of course, the affirmation which GOC is concerned to make is that there is one of these stories which does, in fact, enable those who 'indwell' this story to come to a progressively deeper and wider understanding of the transcendent reality. Of course that raises the question: Why this story among all the others? I will come to that in the following section.

In their closing section, GW set against this Christian story 'our vision of a God who emerges from the shadows, from the unspoken and unknown'. Such a 'god' (for the capital letter is only proper when we are speaking of the personal being who is not unspoken and unknown, but has spoken and made himself known) is indeed a pure product of human agency. The belief that ultimate reality (whether called by the divine name or otherwise) is unknown and unknowable is one of the most pervasive of the dogmas that rule in 'modern' culture, and the post-moderns have simply taken it over uncritically. But it is absurd, for in order to know that ultimate reality is unknowable we would first have to know it. This

dogma is pervasive because it is immensely attractive: it enables everyone of us to construct a 'god' from our own mental resources. It is, of course, always possible to disbelieve the Christian story, and a majority of the world's people do. It shares with every other fundamental interpretation of human experience the fact that its truth cannot be demonstrated *a priori* but only as it is taken as the starting point for a vigorous commitment to understanding and coping with the real world in which we are set. The language about the unknown and unspoken (familiar to anyone who has lived in India) is an abandonment of that calling which is the calling of every living being - to seek to know the truth. It is a vote for death.

What "The Gospel and our Culture" is

I come now to what I think is the crucial issue. I have said that I accept the post-modernist critique of modernity to this extent, that I reject the idea that human beings can be the possessors of timeless truths which are supra-cultural and supra-historical. I find the locus of truth in a story of which I am a part. I see my relation to truth as being not that of a possessor but of a seeker who trusts that he is on a path that leads to further understanding, but who knows that full understanding of the truth is something promised only at the final consummation of the story. I therefore seek to 'indwell' the story (exactly, I hope, like the black woman referred to by GW) in the faith that if I continue faithfully in this way I will be led into fuller understanding of the truth. That truth is not a product of 'human agency'; it is the reality from which all that exists has its being.

GW claim that to accept this, or any other 'master-narrative' is oppressive, for it necessarily marginalizes or represses alternative visions of truth. They are reacting (and I share this reaction) against the master-narrative which 'modernity' since the Enlightenment has told. In this narrative human history is the progressive triumph of 'civilization', understood as the mastery of nature and of human affairs by means of the universal power of 'reason' as the Enlightenment understood it. 'Mastery' is the operative word. It was a narrative in which the male was dominant. During the hegemony of this narrative the word 'culture' was never used in the plural (first use 1899). There was one thing called 'civilisation', something to which all peoples should be enabled to progress. Peoples did not have different cultures: they were at lower or higher rungs on the ladder of civilization. The 19th century saw the Romantic reaction against this in Europe, and the 20th has witnessed the much more vigorous rejection of it by non-European peoples. The science developed in Europe is accepted for the sake of the technology which it makes available, but other aspects of 'modern' European culture are rejected. 'Multi-culturalism' extends beyond such matters as the arts and the manners of customary behaviour to more fundamental matters. The concept of human rights, for example, has been criticized as a cultural imposition by Europe on the peoples of Africa. We have not merely ethical multiculturalism but epistemological multiculturalism. The Enlightenment project of a 'reason' which could bind the whole human race into one has been rejected.

At this moment in history it is understandable that, in reaction against the Enlightenment project for human unity, there should be among the heirs of the Enlightenment a relapse into relativism and scepticism about the possibility of knowing any truth which could hold the human family together. It is natural that there should come back to haunt us the deeply pessimistic dualistic metaphysics with its corresponding view of history as an endless and pointless cycle of alternating order and chaos. It is from this dark and ancient paganism that the Christian Gospel invites us to be set free. It can so liberate us because, among the various 'master-narratives' on offer, it is in one vital respect unique.

Its uniqueness can most simply be indicated by saying that from start to finish it is marked by the sign of the cross. Every 'master-narrative' has an in-built tendency to imperialism, because it looks for an

intra-historical triumph of the truth for which it stands. Christians (God forgive us) have frequently been seduced into thinking and acting in precisely this way. But when they are so seduced (and we still are) they deny the true story. At the centre of the Christian story stands the fact that the incarnate Lord, by whom and for whom all things exist, suffered rejection and death. That fact precludes any expectation that there can be a total union of truth and power within history. And, if the cross had been the last word, the death of Jesus would only be one more confirmation of the apparently endless opposition of power and truth. It was not the end. The resurrection of Jesus, made known to those who had been chosen and prepared to be the bearers of his secret, is the assurance to those so chosen and prepared, that the union of truth and power is a reality, but that its full manifestation lies beyond death and therefore beyond history. It is that assurance which enables those called to be the bearers of the secret to be a company of hope, realistic hope, in a world which is often as dark and hopeless as it is portrayed in the scenario offered by GW.

There *is* a possible centre for human unity. We do not have to accept a scenario in which truth is unknown and there is no arbitrament except that of power. There is a possibility of a kind of trans-cultural unity which is already dimly adumbrated in the existence of the universal Church, and which is made possible by the personal calling of him who said both: 'Take up your cross and come with me' and 'Come to me and I will give you rest'.

The Father-figure against which GW feel called to rebel is not the one whom Jesus called 'Father'. If the word 'God' stands for a solitary autocrat imposing order by the sheer exercise of power, then the rebellion would be honourable even if futile. But God, as the Christian story understands the matter, is neither this solitary autocrat, nor the 'being of chance, contingency and chaos' dreamed up by GW. God, the transcendent reality, is a trinity of love forever poured out and forever shared. The Christian story is that, by the coming of the Son to be part of our history, an invitation is given and the way is opened for the human family to find its unity in the very life of God, a unity of reciprocal love.

It is true, alas, that Christians have often tried to convert this invitation into a kind of imperialism, and they have been punished and humiliated for so doing. But they are ever and again called back to the true master-narrative which absolutely precludes such a distortion. Here, where the incarnate Lord suffered and died for the sin of the world, is the one place where humankind can truly find its unity, for it is the 'mercy-seat' where sin is forgiven and where, therefore, we can learn to forgive one another.

GOC is not about 'crisis of values'. It is only in a secondary sense a critique of contemporary culture. It is about the truth of the Gospel, about trying to unmask the illusions which obscure that truth, about helping the churches to be more articulate and credible witnesses to the Gospel. If I may put it in a very personal way, it is - for me - about the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me, and therefore about my longing that his love may be met with a corresponding devotion.

GW conclude their article with these words: 'We see (GOC) as raising a sepulchre not to be shaken by the years; guarding an empty tomb. Yet for us, life is no longer to be found there; it has moved on elsewhere'. My response to them must be something like the following. 'Yes, the tomb is empty, but it is because the Lord is risen and goes before you. I commend to you the example of two other women, who also found the tomb empty, and also moved on - but to a future not of despair but of hope. It is, of course, possible to believe that the future holds nothing but an endless cycle of alternating repression and chaos. Millions have believed it. But there is another possibility. The crucified Lord has broken that cycle. I want you to believe that. That is what 'the Gospel and our Culture' is all about.

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Selly Oak Advent 1991