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A Message that Connects?

Andrew Lord reflects on the telling of the Christian story in non-British cultures. He attempts to identify a British worldview and suggests a form for the Christian story which could connect with British people. Taking tragedy as a major theme, he suggests that this story will have meaning for those who have found themselves deeply moved by the tragedies of recent times such as the Hillsborough, Dunblaine and the death of Diana.

Introduction

People in Britain continue to believe in God and yet see the church as increasingly irrelevant. The gap between church and culture continues to grow – the question is: how do we bring them together again? The Alpha and Emmaus initiatives suggest that people are still willing to enter church culture to learn about the Christian message. Seeker services underline the willingness of the church to present the message in more culturally relevant forms. But despite the effectiveness of these efforts the problem still seems much greater than the solutions proposed. It is time to ask risky questions about whether the basic message we proclaim still connects with people. In this article I want to suggest that we need to listen to and understand the stories that bring our British culture together. From this we will see how we can better tell the Christian story in a way that will connect with people. This will have implications for the worship, pastoral work and mission of the local church, helping to bridge this gap between church and culture.

The debate between 'gospel' and 'culture' in the context of Britain has been going on for many years. Lesslie Newbigin highlighted the issues in his landmark book *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*.¹ He was particularly concerned with how we hold on to and proclaim a universal message in Pluralist Western societies where relativism rules. Graham Cray has provided us with many insights into postmodern culture and lessons the church needs to learn from that.² More recently Robert Warren has traced trends in society and suggested ways in which churches need to change in the light of this. He also suggests that the message of the gospel needs adapting for our culture and presents an understanding based on the dynamic of being human.³ The wider debate is that of *contextualisation* which has been fuelled

1 SPCK, 1989.

2 Graham Cray, *From Here to Where? The Culture of the Nineties*, Church of England Board of Mission Occasional Paper No. 3, 1992.

3 Robert Warren, *Being Human, Being Church*, Marshall Pickering 1995, pp 102, 114ff.

by the way Western founded churches in other countries have carried with the gospel Western cultural expressions of the faith which are not relevant to the local receiving culture.⁴ The Rt. Rev David Gitari, amongst others, is calling the African church to discover a truly African Christian theology and praxis and the church in Britain also needs to discover a Christian theology and praxis for the British Culture of today.

Contextualisation debates can tend to focus on particular cultural issues (e.g. pluralism) or praxis (e.g. styles of worship). What is missing is an appreciation of the controlling story in cultures. The importance of such story can be illustrated from the Jieng people of the Sudan. Western missionaries of good intent founded churches and schools in Sudan, hoping that converted school children would ultimately return to their cattle camps and villages as teacher-evangelists. But this proved an elusive dream as schools relied on taking children out of their cultures in order to be taught. Missionaries had to leave because of the civil war (1955-1972) and the mission schools closed. In due time indigenous schools were started which became an effective vehicle for the Christian gospel. Civil war began again in 1983, and as many fled their homes they found their cultural systems shaken. In one period of persecution, in 1991, the Jieng's enemies systematically killed all the cattle on which the community was based – cattle were the source of wealth and security for Jieng communities. The enemies hoped to wipe out the Jieng by their main source of identity. It was in this context, more than any other, that the Christian story connected with the Jieng people and provided a new communal identity.⁵

Jieng Christians told the Jieng story in terms of the biblical story. The God 'in the above',⁶ has driven people out of their land because of their attachment to false gods. Like the people of Israel they have suffered loss of identity and exile. But God is gracious – He sent his son, Jesus, to suffer and die on the cross in order to lead us back home. We need to turn away from false gods, burn their images and put faith in the true God who is revealed in the suffering Jesus.⁷ This Christian story came to hold the Jieng people together at a time when their existence was threatened. It has resulted in the almost total conversion of a people to Christian identity and allegiance in a 10 year period.⁸

When the Christian story connects with the people's story the church becomes relevant and people respond by turning to the God revealed in Jesus. What is the people's story in Britain at the end of the 20th Century? What are the stories that unite us and bind us together? Clearly there will be a number of key stories, in a similar way to there being a multitude of different cultured groups within Britain. In this article I want to examine one series of stories that have brought Britain

4 David Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, Orbis Books, 1991, pp 420ff.

5 Marc Nikkel, "Children of our Father's Divinities' or 'Children of Red Foreigners?'" In Andrew Wheeler (ed.), *Land of Promise: Church Growth in a Sudan at War*, Paulines Publications, Nairobi 1997.

6 *Nhialic*, 'One in the Above' was the name of the supreme deity in Jieng tradition, and the name used to translate 'God' by Christians.

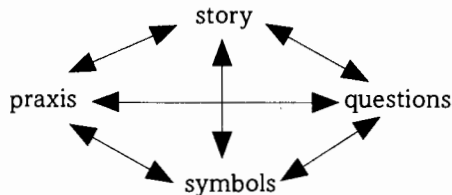
7 This story was verbalised by Paul Kon Ajith, an indigenous Christian 'prophet figure' whose message was not heeded until the cattle raids.

8 Andrew Wheeler, *Land of Promise*, p 23.

together in recent years. The Christian sociologist Grace Davie has commented on a number of stories that have brought to the fore something of the spiritual searching evident in contemporary Britain: Hillsborough, Dunblane and the death of Diana, Princess of Wales.⁹ To these we may add the death of Jill Dando and the more distant yet felt stories of the gun massacres in the United States. Reflecting on these stories in the light of the Christian story reveals some interesting suggestions for mission in Britain.

Community story

In the context of the first century, Tom Wright has provided useful insights into the worldviews which underlie cultures and embrace all the deep-level human perceptions of reality.¹⁰ It is through worldviews that we see the world, and if we are to understand a culture then we need to ask questions about the underlying worldview. Wright suggests that worldviews be seen as the following interacting functions:



Story is the most characteristic expression of a worldview. From these stories one can in principle discover how the basic *questions* of life are answered – who are we, where are we, what is wrong and what is the solution? The stories and the answers they provide to these basic questions are expressed through *symbols*. Worldviews are expressed in action, in *praxis*. It is often through examining praxis that the shape of someone's worldview can be seen.

Thus in the example quoted above from the Sudan we could suggest that the controlling story is one of God responding to those in exile due to their worship of false gods, when they turn back to Him as revealed in the suffering life, death and resurrection of Jesus. This story suggests that the Jieng see themselves as the children of the God above all, on a journey back from exile, with evil reigning because of false worship, but the solution found in the Cross of Christ. The basic Jieng symbol is now the Cross, replacing the cattle of the past. Praxis includes burning of idols and the careful crafting of crosses.

Turning to examine the British worldviews brings complications. In the Sudan we considered the story of just one of the tribes. Britain comprises many tribes, each with their own controlling stories. In this article I am focusing on a series of stories that span the tribes. Also I am limiting discussion of worldviews to the function of *story* rather than going into detail about the questions, symbols and praxis.

9 Grace Davie speaking at the Lichfield Diocesan clergy conference, April 1999.

10 N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, SPCK, 1991, p 122ff.

The stories of Hillsborough, Dunblane, Diana and Dando are all tragedies that evoke many emotions and interpretations. The story of Diana evoked the greatest response, perhaps because we followed it in the greatest detail over many years: the story of a young woman falling in love with a Prince, getting married and then increasingly struggling to survive; eventually the separation and divorce out of which seemed to come a fresh determination to live and serve others, with great love and care being shown to the disadvantaged; and yet all these fresh hopes shattered in the tragic car crash that took her life. Jill Dando's story is of an ordinary, warm, cheerful woman who got a job as a presenter with the BBC. We got to know her as the person who enjoyed life through the Holiday programme, and as someone working to overcome evil through *Crimewatch*. She was engaged to be married when she was shot dead outside her front door one May morning. In Dunblane and the US massacres we are presented with a brief snapshot of a longer story: ordinary schools with innocent well-loved children going about their everyday lives, suddenly gunned down without reason; young lives full of hope for the future killed in an instant. The Hillsborough story was one of ordinary people enjoying an everyday football match, finding 94 people crushed to death in an afternoon.

Heart-rending stories of innocence and hope, of suffering and despair amidst ordinary situations, often involving people enjoying life and trying to bring good things into the lives of others. Stories with tragic endings leaving unanswered questions. They are stories that linger on in people's memories and which resonate with stories we come across which will never make the news: neighbours who get to know and love their son's partner and develop a growing friendship with her mother, only to find that as this friendship becomes particularly special the mother becomes ill and quickly dies. This form of story seems to connect with people in a way that gospel story we share often doesn't. Often the church connects in terms of providing love and comfort, and in the funeral details, but do we always know how to connect with the wider story? I'm not convinced we do.

Christian story

What is the Christian story? Is there just one, or are there as many as there are different contexts? I want to suggest that there are many different Christian stories, each a recognisable variation of a common story which has its roots in the biblical story. Wright suggests there is one general form of Christian story, which he is then going to show is the story of the NT;

The story is about a creator and his creation, about humans made in this creator's image and given tasks to perform, about the rebellion of humans and the dissonance of creation at every level, and particularly about the creator's acting, through Israel and climactically through Jesus, to rescue his creation from its ensuing plight. The story continues with the creator acting by his own spirit within the world to bring it towards the restoration which is the intended goal for it.¹¹

We can see the similarity of this story to the Christian story of the Jieng people, but for the Jieng there is a greater emphasis on the worship of false gods (the

11 Wright, *New Testament*, p 132.

rebellion), the Cross (the creator's acting) and the exile and return. There are various Christian stories which are similar yet distinct. Wright is just considering the first century and the Christian story we find in the NT, whereas here we are also interested in 20th century Britain. This necessitates an extension to the idea of worldviews as presented by Wright.

I want to suggest that there exist multiple Christian worldviews – there is no one objective worldview, no one objective Christian story. This would be a return to a *positivist* position which believes that there are some things about which we can have solid and unquestionable knowledge. Yet at the same time I want to avoid the *phenomenalist* position which would suggest that each Christian worldview is just an expression of different peoples' understandings and has no connection with external reality or even with other Christian worldviews. Along with Wright I want to suggest the need for a *critical realist* approach. Given the different Christian worldviews that exist, they should be allowed to critically interact with each other and especially with worldview found in the Bible. This critical process will lead to the modification of some worldviews and the recognition of a common Christian worldview which, Christians would assert, speaks truly of reality.

This approach to the problem of contextualisation seems to offer new ways forward. It emphasises the international nature of the Christian church, the need for Christians to interact theologically with each other, the need all Christians have to allow their worldview to be modified by the understandings of others, and yet also affirms a common worldview through which Christians understand reality. One important cause for debate is about the role of the Bible and the nature of its authority. For some, the above suggestion does not appear to give supreme authority to the biblical story. Many supposed Christian worldviews may contradict the biblical story and what do we do then? Wright proposes a new way in which the biblical story carries particular authority for Christians – it is the story we are to immerse ourselves in, and out of which we carry on the Christian story in our own lives.¹² Thus, if a particular supposed Christian story does not display this immersion in the biblical story then it should not contribute towards a common Christian worldview.

The way this critical realist approach affirms and challenges other models of contextualisation needs further analysis. Briefly, I would suggest that there are three key issues for any model of contextualisation: (1) where they start: individual humans (religious/secular, present/past experience, life in general/felt needs), communities (cultural themes, politics) or God (revelation); (2) what they focus on: timeless propositions, issues or stories; and (3) what authorities are assumed: Bible, theological systems, life commitments (e.g. overcoming injustice).¹³ The approach outlined here starts with communities, focuses on their stories and relates them to Christian stories which derive their authority from the biblical story of God's working.

12 I am presenting Wright's understanding in slightly different terms which are appropriate for this discussion. See Wright, *New Testament*, pp 139-143 for more details.

13 These issues can be seen in the different models of contextualisation reviewed in D. J. Hesselgrave and E. Rommen, *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods and Models*, Apollos, Leicester 1989.

Having presented the case for there existing different Christian worldviews, we return to the original aim of better telling the Christian story in the Britain of today. A Christian story that connects with the British people also needs to connect with tragic stories we examined earlier. Those stories had the form of considering an ordinary person (or people) living an everyday life as we all do with their ups and downs, often people who were trying to do good for others and yet whose efforts came to a tragic end in death. If we follow this story pattern with the biblical story in mind then we arrive at a Christian story that should connect with people in Britain today. This story could run as follows:

People, created by God, started out in the world innocent, enjoying creation and full of hope; things went wrong and people no longer felt completely at home, suffering and pain became a part of daily life, people become divided from other people; yet the good never disappeared and many committed themselves to bringing good to others; in all of this God had been present bringing good to suffering people and nations; but this seemed never quite enough to fully overcome the suffering and things came to a head with the tragedy of Jesus suffering and dying on a Cross; yet through this God has enabled people once again to find their way home to a place re-created and full of hope; along the way home God guides and empowers people to serve others through his Spirit living within them; the Spirit provides a way to face and overcome suffering, bring healing and wholeness and finally arrive safely home.

The story contains the key gospel themes: Creation, Fall, Israel (by implication), Jesus and the Cross, Spirit, Re-creation (heaven). It links with the tragic stories and yet takes them further: they end in tragedy with the unanswered question: what is the hope for the future?¹⁴ The Christian story works towards the tragedy of the Cross and then moves beyond through the work of the Spirit towards the final hope of re-creation. And it is the Resurrection of Jesus that is the ground for this hope.

Implications for the church

If the above Christian story is one that will connect with many British people (and this needs proving in experience!) then what are the implications for the church? It is worth noting the general nature of proposed story that aims at connecting with the culture more than filling in all the details. People are to be drawn into the story in a way that then enables them to understand the details. Hence 'through [the suffering and death of Jesus] God has enabled people once again to find their way home to a place re-created and full of hope' comes before specific doctrines of the atonement. This reverses the order seen in some approaches to evangelism but is based on an understanding of the NT word 'gospel' as relating to the whole story of Jesus and not just 'how one gets saved'.¹⁵ It is the responsibility of the church to communicate the gospel to all people, because it is a story that claims to make sense of the whole of reality.

14 In this regard it is worth noting Newbigin's comment that Western culture is characterised by a loss of hope. *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, p 232.

15 For further details on this see Tom Wright, *What Saint Paul really Said*, Lion, 1997, Chapter 3.

It is interesting to consider what an Alpha-style course based on the above story would look like. It would perhaps start with an overview of the story, connecting it with experienced life. Then there would be weeks looking at each aspect of the story in detail: Creation, Why Suffering?, Why Good? (God in the life of Israel), Jesus (suffering, yet loving), Cross (and hope), Holy Spirit (guide and empowerer), Christian life (service), Re-creation (heaven). In these weeks drawing from stories in John's gospel might be particularly appropriate given its use of the tragic literary genre.¹⁶ Such an approach is more story-based than issue-based and gives more of an emphasis on creation and suffering than is found in Alpha. In my limited experience Alpha provides an attractive format and opportunity for people to come to and grow in Christian faith, but the connections between faith and life come in the discussions as indirect result of the video presentation rather than as a direct result of the presented material. The story approach would, I suggest, give more direct connections between faith and life.

A story can just be nice to listen to. But the Christian story demands a response, it demands of the listeners the possibility that it may undermine their existing worldview stories and present a better understanding of reality. In other words, the Christian story should lead to people being converted to being followers of the God of the story. It is within the nature of stories to effect a change and that is why they are so often found on the lips of Jesus.¹⁷ The church has a responsibility to present the overall Christian story in a way that connects with the society in which it is based and in a way that demands a response. This is the work of evangelists and the work of everyone who shares stories with their neighbours.

The mission of the local church involves reading the story of the community in which it is based in the light of the biblical story, and presents the resulting story in a manner that demands of the listeners a response to God. The listeners also include the members of the church whose job it is to live out the resulting story. It is no use telling others how 'God guides and empowers people to serve others through his Spirit living within them; the Spirit provides a way to face and overcome suffering, bring healing and wholeness and finally arrive safely home' unless we are able to live out the reality of this. Here lies a challenge to be a church where the Holy Spirit is in evidence, where people are working with the suffering, where healing and wholeness are realities and where there is a sense of hopeful journey. When a connecting Christian story is presented verbally and in the life of the church, then people will respond.

In the light of this clearly our churches' worship and pastoral ministry must also reflect the connecting Christian story. Our worship and liturgy should act out this story and enable people to get in touch with the God of the story. It would be a useful review to see how our usual liturgies fit with the story presented – what is missing? What do we add? Our pastoral ministry should use the story to help people see their place in it and God's closeness to them in whatever they face. How are

16 See Mark Stibbe, *John, Readings: A New Biblical Commentary*, JSOT Press, Sheffield 1993, pp 192f.

17 For a thorough discussion of the role of biblical stories see John Goldingay, *Models for Scripture*, Paternoster, 1994, Chapter 5, 'Witness in the Form of Story'.

issues of culture and story presented to those involved in the pastoral work of our church? The pastoral workers should be a key resource of connecting stories for our locality.

Conclusion

The gap between church and contemporary British culture is still wide, despite many good attempts to overcome it. In this article I have suggested a way of bridging 'gospel' and 'culture' by means of story. This represents a new approach to the problem of contextualisation using insights from Tom Wright's analysis of the worldviews that underlie cultures. What is needed is a Christian story that connects with the stories that hold the British people together. By reflecting on various headline stories in the light of the biblical story, I have suggested a Christian story that will I hope connect with many British people. We each need to take on board the responsibility for telling the Christian story to our communities in a form that connects with that community. This is the work of mission, and it is the work of the church to live out the reality of this story.

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