

Colin Greene on *Metavista*, the Bible, Church and Mission in an Age of Imagination



Colin Greene interviewed by Paul Fromont regarding mission and his new book – *Metavista: Bible, Church and Mission in an Age of Imagination*.

Name: Colin Greene

Bio: Rev. Dr. Greene hails from the Celtic fringe where he spent most of his formative years in N. Ireland, Canada, the US and England, so not surprisingly he is not quite sure where he belongs! At the present time he is enjoying living in rural Northumberland in England and he is, among other things, Head of Theology and Mission Development for SgmLifeworlds,

a small innovative Bible Agency. His innovative work and writing in the area of theology and cultural engagement have earned him a reputation as one of the leading thinkers about gospel and culture issues in Britain. He has published a number of books the most recent of which are; *Christology in Cultural Perspective: Marking out the Horizons* (Paternoster and Eerdmans, 2004) which won an award from the Academy of Parish Clergy as one of the top ten books of 2004. He has written numerous articles and book chapters and was theological consultant, editor and contributor to the *Scripture and Hermeneutics Seminar* (8-volumes, published by Paternoster and Zondervan 2000-8) as well as other highly acclaimed media, arts and education projects. He is still involved in creating and practicing a biblically grounded, theological and practically focused vision of cultural engagement in England, Africa and the US. He is an ordained Anglican minister who has served in four Anglican parishes and taught in a number of different theological contexts around the world. He is also a committed globe traveler, rugby enthusiast and ecumenist who in all his writing, teaching and speaking naturally gravitate to the intersection between theology and contemporary cultural concerns.

Title of book: *Metavista: Bible, Church and Mission in an Age of Imagination*. It is a contribution to the "Faith in an Emerging Culture" series.

Described by the publisher in this way: "The core narrative of Christianity, the book that conveys it (the Bible) and the institution of the church have been marginalised by the development of modernity and post-modernity. Strangely, post-modernity created an opportunity for religious thinking and experience to re-enter many lives. Yet post-modernity is not an adequate framework for thinking about life. There is therefore an opportunity for Christians to imagine what comes after and to prepare the church for a new engagement of mission with western culture. The church, through a creative missionary imagination, can re-define western cultural life. With a boldly crafted vision this book does precisely that."

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1. **You've co-written *Metavista* with Martin Robinson. What questions or concerns were you hoping to engage as you researched and wrote the book?**

Well a book is like going on a journey – no matter how well you plan the route you're never quite sure where you are going to end up! With us the start of the journey was realizing that the world had changed both dramatically and irrevocably in the last 20 years – so much so that it left many people in a permanent state of spiritual vertigo! We knew what some of those changes were about and where they were leading us, but we wanted both to explore and describe much more precisely the new cultural space we are all heading into and what challenges to faith and discipleship this new meta-vista or this new cultural horizon presents. Our experience was rather like that of Ezekiel who, after his incredible vision, described for us in the first chapter of Ezekiel, realized that God had got a whole new set of wheels and was on the move beyond traditional Christendom landscapes. God was no longer locked up in the temple but he was out

among the exiled refugees, among the people who most needed his comfort and presence.

2. **Why do you hope people will read *Metavista* and what do you hope they'll take away from that experience? Also, given that you're an Anglican priest / theologian, are there missional opportunities that you particularly hope "Western" Anglicans will "get" if they read it?**

I firmly believe God is raising up a new generation of prophets and visionaries who are what I call 'brokers of a new reality'. In other words they really want to know what is going on in our world on all kinds of levels, politically, economically, spiritually and culturally. They want to know what are the contours of the cultural space we presently inhabit and they want to be able to celebrate what is good about that process of rapid globalization, as well as critique what is dangerous and reckless about it. As an Anglican I want the Anglican church in the West to stop re-arranging the deck chairs on the Titanic and accept that the Christendom ship is now sinking very quickly and will soon be gone below the waves of rapid fundamental change and innovation. The Anglican Church requires a new missional imagination and to do that it must re-engage with the biblical narrative in such a way that it can discover new ways of being church among the cultural refugee's and spiritual seekers of our generation.

3. **In *Metavista* you engage with, amongst others, Bishop Tom Wright's schema of a "five-act drama" (cf. p.110) as one way of understanding the historical or narrative flow of Scripture. You however opt for four "*unfinished stories*" (cf. p.118): The creation story, the Israel story, the Jesus story, and the church's story. I was interested in your understanding of these stories as "unfinished" and wondered if you could give us a sense of both "why" they're unfinished, and the possible missional implications that you have in view?**

*If you read my previous book "Christology in Cultural Perspective" you will discern a fundamental critique of those who still believe that engaging with the Bible is all about learning more and more about the world behind the text. In other words they think that good exegesis and understanding of the Bible depends on good historical critical approaches to the text. I don't deny that we have gained much from this approach but like many people nowadays I am more interested in the world within the text and the world in front of the text. I believe a good biblical theology of cultural engagement requires new forms of biblical interpretation that do not succumb to the historicist fallacy of locking meaning up in the historical past. My critique of my good friend Tom Wright is that his five act drama model seems to me to operate on the basis that the only part of the drama that is now open to our full participation is the fifth and final act – i.e., the church. Instead I view the biblical story as an open-ended narrative that contains four fundamental stories all of which are re-appropriated and re-configured in the others. So for instance the creation and exodus traditions are picked up and re-configured by second Isaiah as the writer seeks to come to terms with the traumatic reality of exile. The Jesus story picks up both the creation and Israel stories and reconfigures these traditions in terms of Jesus' preaching about the coming Kingdom of God. Furthermore none of these stories has reached historical resolution – the creation story is still ongoing as is the Israel and Jesus stories – Jesus has not completed his mission of bringing salvation to the world through the Holy Spirit – so that entails that people can enter the biblical story at any juncture – they can be environmentalists who want to preserve the creation from global warming and destruction – they can be Jews or those who are sympathetic to finding a way of politically and culturally living under God's rule, and they can be followers of Jesus who want to know more about what his message of the Kingdom really means for today. That means that we are engaged in a mission **with** Jews and environmentalists not a mission **to** such people. Of course we want more people to come into the Jesus part of the story and we can still share our faith to that end, but we can also celebrate the fact that there are many diverse pilgrims and believers who are at least on the journey, or in the story with us, and 'he who is for, or with us', as Jesus said, 'is not against us!'*

4. **So what might this look like for your average church that sits at the intersection of these four unfinished stories? As an example, what might they hear as the invitation (or question) of each “unfinished story” to them in their context?**

Well Paul that's a really good question! I can only speak about how I have been challenged by reading the biblical narrative in that way, hoping that my experience will apply to others.

First of all it says to me that Christians should be at the forefront of the global warming debate and the environmental crisis that affects us all. We should be asking fundamental questions about the rapacious aspects of global capitalism that leads to the extermination of other species of life and imperils the future of the planet. We should be studying and applying the creation narratives to this situation, making the point that God invites humans into the drama of creation to be co-creators with him - so an unfinished creation requires greater care and co-operation with God's purposes, not greedy disregard for the sanctity and beauty of life.

Secondly we should own up to the rampant anti-Semitism that has been part of our Christian heritage and realize that if the Israel story is still not finished then we must accept that God is still faithful and holds true to his first covenant and we the second covenant people of God cannot do without our Jewish brothers and sisters. As I say in the book that does not mean condoning the sectarian Zionism that can sometimes grip the state of Israel but it does mean that post-holocaust we have to find ways of bringing Jews and Christians and Muslims together in mutual dialogue and mutual attention to one another's Scriptures and traditions.

Thirdly we must realize that Jesus' mission to bring reconciliation and salvation to the world is still ongoing and therefore we have a part to play in that – we are called to be his contemporary disciples who still go into the towns and villages with the good news of the Kingdom. We can still live by the ethics of the kingdom and practice the compassion and hospitality of the Kingdom. We can still be Jesus people who live his simple lifestyle and embrace his inclusive invitation to serve God and our fellow human beings.

Finally it seems to me that the contemporary church is at a fundamental crossroads. To keep going on as we are is to invite further decline and marginalization – but to respond to the call to radically engage with our respective cultural contexts is to go public again. It is to become an informed, subversive and prophetic minority who like a light set on a hill focus the light of Christ into our homes, towns and communities. The world we live in is often deeply fragmented and fractured so how do Christian churches become healing, uniting, reconciling communities of faith, hope and charity? That I suppose is the real question! I asked my 30 year old daughter who stopped going to church many years ago, but who is still searching for a spiritual home, what kind of church she would be interested in and she said informal meeting places that practice inclusive community and charity. That is not a bad place to start reinventing church!

5. **How do you understand (and talk about) the term “mission”, and how do you articulate for local churches the importance of mission? Often the question that is heard is, “why should we engage missionally with our local context?”**

Fundamentally I understand mission in terms of the Missio Dei, in other words, what is God's mission to the world? I understand God's mission to be sharing his triune life with the whole creation and inviting us to be participants and co-creators of the shalom, security and peace that eventuates from acknowledging his reign as the only true and just God. Once you understand the Bible as the narration of God's story of redemption and reconciliation then that means God's story is contextualized in the many cultures and historical contexts his story embraces. God tells his narrative in the midst of our stories and cultural contexts which entails that mission must involve radically engaging with our local contexts so that we understand the stories and narratives that shape and often distort and diminish the lives of others.

6. **Are you able to give an example of where you have seen this reality worked out in a local context?**

Well, when I took over a small struggling Anglican church in a large housing estate, in my early 30's, I discovered a beleaguered, insecure, aging congregation who went to church mainly out of habit and who were very unsure about the whole business of mission. But gradually over five years that all changed as we realized that we were the Jesus people who celebrated the arrival of God's inclusive kingdom. So we started building bridges to the wider community. We hired a joint Methodist/Anglican youth worker, we launched out on an ambitious rebuilding program so that we could do more things in our new church center that benefitted the wider community and Sunday worship became a real celebration of the family of God who were genuinely proud of their local church and the way in which it had indeed become salt and light to the wider community. That is a real example of how a church can be transformed when it accepts the invitation to share in God's mission to the world.

7. **What do you see as the most significant challenges for local churches around mission?**

*I say in the book that one of the failures of the Christendom model of being church is that it inevitably marginalized the Bible as the source of the churches political and ecclesial identity in the world. The reason for doing so was that the church had hitched its own mode of operation to another story, one about power, status and influence in the world. That story, which the religious right in America is replaying for us, is being done so with all the distortions and idolatry that ensues from this misunderstanding of the Christian message. I am convinced that the church as a whole and the local church in particular have to learn how to indwell the biblical narrative in such a way that it finds a **new** biblically grounded identity. An identity that allows the church to reclaim a legitimate prophetic voice in the way we go about the business of life in the 21st century. In other words the church learns how to do 'public theology' – or as Tom Wright puts it – the church learns how to perform the biblical story in the public life and discourses of our globalized world.*

8. **What about the most significant opportunities?**

What I have described as the most significant challenge is also the most significant opportunity. Metavista is all about constructing a radical theology and practice of cultural engagement. What we have to realize is that the Judeo-Christian faith is still a living force for renewal and transformation in Western – now also – global culture. We have to become familiar once again with those resonances – we need to become infused once again with a biblical imagination that refuses the separation so beloved by modernity between public and private space, religion and politics etc.

9. **Finally, what three or four intentional practices would you encourage local churches to engage in if they were wanting to re:form or re:shape their life and ministry around a missional engagement between the biblical narrative and the local context and culture(s) of which they are a part?**

First of all we need to get out of the ghetto and start re-engaging with the public life of society and culture(s). As Karl Barth said, we need to be reading our Bibles and the newspapers at the same time. We need to realize that so many Christians have become culturally isolated because they attend only to church culture rather than the challenges and opportunities that a digital and globalized world present to us.

Secondly we need to become much more adept culture readers. For example, we need to ask fundamental questions about why global capitalism, for instance, has led to a global credit crunch where the poor and needy become even more vulnerable. We need to attend to the culture of greed and acquisitiveness that rules the corporate cultures of our big banks and financial institutions for instance. We need to be able to

creatively and imaginatively call such people to account rather than just accept their actions as inevitable. William Stringfellow, whom we mention briefly in the book, is a good example of someone who did this very well in his US-context in the middle of the 20th century.

Thirdly we need to allow these contemporary cultural issues to collide with the biblical story and see what the prophets like Jeremiah and Amos have to say about corporate greed and the lack of trust that destroys public institutions from the root up. A prophetic imagination requires a prophetic indwelling of the whole biblical story, not just orientation to some personal and often overly spiritualized, favorite texts or bible passages.

*Finally we need to create a new ecumenism among our churches where together in our local areas we can find more realistic and faithful ways of **performing** the biblical story and more credible and convincing ways of being church together.*