'In *God in Public*, Tom Wright draws on his years of experience as a member of the House of Lords and as one of our most exciting biblical scholars to produce a compelling book that speaks to everyone who wants to engage, biblically and intelligently, with some of the most pressing issues, both national and international, of our day.'

Baroness Cox, House of Lords

'The "return" of God to public life – some of us think he never actually left – has taken many people by surprise, and produced a great deal of nuanced analysis (as well as a fair share of nonsense). What we have been lacking until now, however, is a robust and thoughtful biblical critique of this phenomenon: what it means and how we should respond. Few could have done this with the depth and fluency of Tom Wright and those familiar with his work will not be disappointed. *God in Public* is essential reading for those who want to navigate our changing landscape by drawing on, rather than ignoring, the map and compass that the Bible offers us.'

Nick Spencer, Director of Research at Theos, the Christian think tank

'Religious illiteracy leaves us badly prepared for a world in which billions believe in and "do" God – and where religion can be used as a powerful force for good or ill. *God in Public*'s hard-edged realism never lapses into backward-looking nostalgia, providing charts and maps for treacherous and dangerous waters. Tom Wright's message is authentic and urgent. Whether you come from a secular or believing background, *God in Public* has important things to say to you.'

Lord Alton of Liverpool, House of Lords

Tom Wright is Research Professor of New Testament and Early Christianity at the University of St Andrews. He is the author of over seventy books, including the For Everyone guides to the New Testament and, most recently, *Creation, Power and Truth*, *Finding God in the Psalms*, *The Meal Jesus Gave Us*, *Surprised by Scripture*, *Simply Good News* and *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (all published by SPCK).

GOD IN PUBLIC

How the Bible speaks truth to power today

TOM WRIGHT

SPCK

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To Andrew and Lis Goddard

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Preface

As I look back over the last twenty years, I find that I have increasingly been concerned with the question of how to speak about God in the public forum. Much of my early training and formation had taken it for granted that my task as a biblical scholar and priest would be to teach the church how to read the Bible and live Christianly, and the only thing to say to the 'outside world' would be a summons to repent and believe in Jesus.

The middle years of my ministry – first as a dean in a busy cathedral, then as a canon of Westminster, then as Bishop of Durham with a seat in the House of Lords – compelled me to address all sorts of questions about faith and public life. These had not, up to that point, impinged very much on my thinking, let alone on my reading of the Bible – though my study of Jesus in particular had paved the way. Once you start to understand what he meant by the kingdom of God, these questions cannot be put off much longer. This book is a small sample of the things I have found myself saying as a result.

There is a sense in which these pieces, too, are about the call to repent and believe in Jesus, but in a much larger sphere and sense. They have to do with society and culture as a whole rather than simply the challenge to individuals. (Despite what I sometimes hear said, I firmly believe that every single person must face that challenge for themselves. We cannot hide behind a societal or corporate vision.) Jesus warned his contemporaries to read the signs of the times; his message was addressed to whole cities and his whole culture, not just one person here and another there. This is either a message for the whole world or it is meaningless. Jesus claimed, at the end of Matthew's gospel (28.18), that 'all authority in heaven *and on earth*' had been given to him. I have been trying to discern – and express – something of what that might mean in our own day.

One of the 'signs of our times' is precisely that addressing the wider world with the Christian message is difficult and contentious. We have lived for a long time in an implicit split-level universe where 'God', if there is such a being, is detached from this world, leaving us to fend for ourselves (and perhaps go and visit him on Sundays).

People sometimes speak as if this split is the inevitable result of modern scientific knowledge, but that is simply a mistake: the idea of a split-level world, with God or the gods a long way away, is ancient Epicureanism, revived for other reasons in modern Western Europe and then used as a frame by some scientists (not all) to display their findings. All that is a topic for another time, though it is important to see how something which our culture often takes for granted is itself the product of special interests and, often, special pleading.

My point here is, the pieces that make up the present book are some of my varied attempts to bring together the message of Jesus – in its larger biblical context – and the challenges of the contemporary public and political worlds. In some cases I was speaking to fellow Christians *about* this task and what it might look like. In some others – such as the lecture at the London School of Economics – I was actually trying to *do* it. In several cases I think it was a bit of both.

A book like this is bound to repeat itself. One could, indeed, turn it into a different sort of book, taking the various themes that overlap and recur and expounding them systematically, but that would then require a larger framework and the joining of a good many dots. I hope the effect will be that of adding more and more clarifying layers by covering similar topics, but from different angles. I hope, too, that the sense of a vivid, immediate presentation will come through. I have lively memories of all the different occasions and am very grateful to those who invited me to address them, organized the occasions and provided hospitality (a full list is given in the Acknowledgements at the back).

This book is dedicated to Andrew and Lis Goddard. Friends and colleagues over several decades, they have helped me to see the many ways in which the gospel has an impact on both public and private life. Their fellowship and support have meant a great deal to me and my family.

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Paul and the Bible in tomorrow's world

Three images bring into focus the question of 'God in Public'.

First, I think of Prime Minister Tony Blair in the aftermath of September 11, 2001, hastily reading the Qur'an to find out what was going on. Better late than never, you might suppose; but if we were to imagine the opposite picture, of an Iraqi or Afghan leader reading the New Testament to find out why the 'Christian' West was bombing his country, we might realize that things are a little more complicated than that.

Second, take the controversy in the UK a few years ago about the government's decision to do away with funding for second degrees if they were not at a higher level than the first. That might look innocuous: a technical detail tidied up, you might think. But among the many unintended consequences of such a move was that candidates for the ordained ministry, who were intending to study theology as a second degree, would not be eligible for funding, thus putting a sudden large burden on the church. The bishops naturally protested about this; but the public reaction was the really interesting thing. Some Christians said that ministers don't need to study theology; they just need to know their Bibles and to be inspired by the Spirit, and that academic theology would just confuse them and their flocks. Some non-Christians have said that theology ought not in any case to be taught at universities. Some expressed surprise that it was still regarded as a serious subject, attributing its continuance to the inertia of the long-outdated Establishment.

Third, I think of the stridently secular British weekly *New Statesman*. Remarkably enough for such a publication, in 2009 it commissioned a special report entitled 'God: What Do We Believe?' (This followed a similar special issue of *The Economist*.) Sadly, most of the articles were trite and obvious. The only overtly Christian contributor was the Conservative politician Ann Widdecombe, and she was only allowed

three sentences. In much of the material one got the sense that the *New Statesman* knew there was a question there to be addressed but wasn't quite sure what it was. There was, however, one thoughtful piece, by Sholto Byrnes, pointing out that our new moralities of scientific certainty, human rights and ecology, just as strident and self-righteous as any puritan preacher, constituted a secular form of an earlier vision of God and his purposes, and that without that vision they were actually baseless.

We could go on. One of the great traditions of English cities is the ringing of church bells. In many places this is simply taken for granted (though newcomers sometimes protest). But not long ago a controversy raged in Oxford about whether the Muslim call to prayer should also be allowed to echo around the dreaming spires. If churches can wake people up with their bells, why not mosques with their chanting? But, more widely, it wouldn't be difficult to argue that the crisis in Western democracy is itself a symptom of a deeper malaise. (If you don't think there's a crisis in Western democracy, pause for a moment and ask yourself what actually goes on in Westminster . . . or, for that matter, what on earth is going on in the United States, as billions of dollars are spent on obtaining votes in an arcane system which can be cynically manipulated – and all this when the UK and USA are trying to suggest to the rest of the world that if only they all became liberal democrats like us then everything would be all right.) There is a deep uncertainty about who we are and what we're here for, and I suggest that this malaise is directly linked to the banishing of God from the public square two hundred years ago. But before we pursue all this any further, we need to call a witness from the ancient home of democracy.

In Acts 17 we find St Paul, a highly intelligent Jew who believes that Jesus of Nazareth is the Lord of the world, standing before the highest court in Athens. He's been in Athens a few days and he's made a dangerous impression. People think he's been talking about 'foreign divinities', because he's been going on about Jesus and the Resurrection, *Iēsous kai anastasis*, and they think that *Anastasis* is a female divinity, perhaps the consort of this Jesus. But that's not simply a curiosity; it's a potential capital charge. As everyone knew, the two charges against Socrates were that he was corrupting the young and that he was preaching foreign divinities. So it isn't merely intellectual curiosity that has caused Paul to be dragged to the Areopagus

and told to explain himself. Foreign divinities, and chattering his strange and possibly subversive ideas in the marketplace to all and sundry! This is serious stuff. And already I can hear echoes in our very different but strangely similar world, as our new moralities have translated into secularizing law. Famously, a few years ago, an airline worker was sacked because she insisted on wearing a cross. Meanwhile, her Muslim counterpart in France was prohibited from wearing her headdress. This goes closely with the strident polemic of people like Richard Dawkins, who has declared that to bring a child up 'religious' is worse than physical abuse. Religion – at least religions within the Abrahamic traditions, that make uncomfortably absolute claims in a world where the one thing we can't tolerate is intolerance – is a disturbing presence, perhaps a dangerous presence. Perhaps, people think, it should be banned altogether. So it was with Paul's new ideas in Athens. He faced being run out of town, or quite possibly worse.

The framework for our question is not, obviously, the same as it was for him. But let's pause anyway, and contemplate where we are and how we got there, before letting the apostle have his say. Today in the Western world we are living with a major stand-off between what we might loosely call fundamentalism and secularism. The events of September 11, 2001 precipitated the particular form of this stand-off, as the secularists have been able to point to horrible things done in the name of 'religion'. But the religious can give as good as they get on that one, with the horrors of secularism stretching from the guillotine in Paris to the Soviet Gulag and beyond. And in fact these are only small symptoms of the ways in which Western society has split apart. This has been going on ever since the Enlightenment banished God into the private sphere, like a demented elderly relative confined to the attic: we can visit him from time to time, but he mustn't be allowed to come downstairs and embarrass us, especially when there are visitors present.

That split between religion and real life has been written into the constitution of some countries, such as France and the United States of America, albeit with radically different results; and there are many in our own country who wish we could not only make the split absolute ourselves but also, by some form of ideological euthanasia, get rid of the old boy upstairs altogether. And, from having spent half my adult life in academic institutions, I wouldn't be altogether surprised to learn that there are some who might like to turn university

and college chapels into concert halls, to stop teaching theology, and to banish all signs of God from public student life, much as in the USA some people are trying to erase the words 'In God We Trust' from the dollar bill.

Part of the heat in the secularist agenda comes from the frustration that the secularization myth hasn't run according to plan. Religion was supposed to have withered on the vine by now, but not only is Islam growing and in some cases threatening, but Christianity is making a come-back – not just in far-off lands where we can patronizingly suppose the locals to be less civilized, less 'enlightened', than ourselves, but also in the UK. The secularists love to quote statistics of decline in church membership, but they can't understand why attendance at major services such as Christmas has been steadily growing. Postmodernism, in deconstructing all big narratives, has deconstructed the secular one as well, and suddenly people who'd been starved of spirituality for far too long are rediscovering it, albeit often without being able to explain what it is they want or how it relates to the classic claims of the Christian faith. This puzzle is one of the major forces shaping tomorrow's world. If we are to have anything to say in that world we must learn to think and speak clearly about it.

Two other things are going on in our world which feed off one another and help create the climate within which the ancient question of God in public must be addressed today and tomorrow. I'm just going to mention them briefly here, because they are both whole subjects in themselves; but I don't think we can understand where we are without them. Very briefly, they are Gnosticism and empire. (I discuss this more fully in *Creation, Power and Truth* (London: SPCK, 2013).) For Gnosticism, think of Dan Brown's famous novel *The Da Vinci Code*, and ask yourself why it has been so massively popular. It's all about conspiracy theories, one within the next like a series of Russian dolls. In fact, in the book, history itself, and indeed the church itself, turns out to be a conspiracy, with the 'hidden truth' about Jesus and Mary Magdalene suppressed by the church and now emerging from 'freshly discovered ancient documents'. And this 'hidden truth' then points back to supposed hidden truths about ourselves: that the secret of the universe is within us, that we have a spark of the divine deep down inside, and the aim is to be true to that spark, to follow that star wherever it leads, to reject outward forms and

historically grounded faith and to escape the constraints of the world into a timeless spiritual sphere. Some people even suppose this is what true Christianity is all about, but in fact it is very nearly its opposite. It is, however, the religion of at least a third of the movies made in Hollywood. You only have to hint at it to have people buying your books by the barrowload.

And Gnosticism flourishes within empire: because when people sense that the world is run by very rich and very powerful people, and there's nothing they can do about it, they tend to shrug their shoulders and suppose they'd better turn inwards, away from the public sphere. And, naturally, empires want people to do that. To that extent, Marx got it spot on. Religion (of a certain sort) is there to keep the masses quiet, to assure them of spiritual peace in the present and spiritual bliss in the future, so long as the rich and powerful can go on carving up the world to their advantage. The irony is that it is now our supposed Western democracies that are dividing up the world and making a large profit, as they pursue the rhetorical agenda of freedom, justice and peace by the age-old means of enslavement, bullying and war. (If you think that is overstating the point, or that I am merely collapsing into a left-wing rant, think again.) And the rhetoric of democracy itself conveniently masks the reality of tyranny: we are (so we suppose) the enlightened ones; we vote every four or five years; so we claim the moral high ground from which we can exploit, harass and ultimately bomb to smithereens those who haven't attained our level of civilization, and who, conveniently, haven't yet attained our level of weaponry (and we use high-flown moral arguments to tell them they're naughty to want to). Tomorrow's world will be dominated by these confusions, and if the Christian gospel can bring not only clarity but a fresh sense of direction we should all be grateful.

Let's sum up where we've got to so far. The current stand-off between fundamentalism and secularism is shot through with at least these three other elements, postmodernity, Gnosticism and empire, which bounce off one another. And the question of God in public has to be addressed with our ears attuned to these surging impulses, and to the way in which the issues of our day come with an inescapable God-dimension which, if you try to deny it, will merely return to haunt you in dangerous ways. These are the forces shaping tomorrow's world.

So let's return to Paul in Athens. Athens knew a lot about democracy and empire, and indeed about Gnosticism and other types of religion. Let's see if what Paul said there has resonances which will help us speak wisely of God, and indeed act wisely for God, in tomorrow's dangerous and confusing public world.

Paul has two things to say which echo round the debating halls of Athens and right on into our own day. The first is the existence of *the unseen but present creator God*. This is the foundation of all classic Jewish and Christian thought, and it cuts across ideologies today just as it cut through Athenian philosophies then. Let me tell you, says Paul, about the God you acknowledge vaguely with your 'altar to the unknown God'. That altar was a kind of open end in the Athenian worldview, a question mark amid the confusion of polytheism: perhaps we've forgotten someone, perhaps there *is* something more. Yes, says Paul, there is; and I'm here to tell you about it.

The three main worldview options then were the Stoic, the Epicurean and the Academic (the latter being a type of Platonism, which was itself in flux). The Stoics basically said that God and the world were the same thing, so that what you had to do was to get in touch with the inner *logos* or reason within yourself and the world. The Epicureans said that the gods were totally other than the world, and very far away from it, so that the thing to do was to acknowledge them at a distance and carve out your own life as best you could. That, interestingly, was the basic theme of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, and it remains a prevalent view today. The Academics said there wasn't really enough evidence to be sure about all that stuff, but that we'd better keep the old religious customs going just in case – a position not unknown, alas, within the Church of England. Meanwhile the general populace sacrificed in the temples, kept the festivals, and invoked every god or goddess that they thought might be of some use. It was just as much a complex scene as ours is. Any attempt to flatten out either Paul's setting or our own will make a nonsense of it all.

So watch how Paul navigates the Athenian scene with his Jewish message about the unseen but present creator God. It's clear, he says, that you're a very religious people, but actually all these splendid temples you have – think of them, the Parthenon, the Temple of Nike, and so on, some of the greatest architectural achievements in all human civilization – they're actually a category mistake. The God

who made the world doesn't live in houses like that. Nor does he need people to come and give him dead animals to eat. And then Paul shows, quoting from local poets, that the God who made the heavens and the earth is unseen but present. The Stoics had it half right: divinity is indeed near at hand, there are signs of it all around; but they had it half wrong, imagining that divinity was simply contained within all things. Rather, the creator remains sovereign over, and other than, the world he's made, even though he's filled it with signs of his power and glory. So too the Epicureans had it half right: God is not the same thing as the world. But they had it half wrong, imagining that therefore God and the world were at a great distance from one another. Rather, the creator remains intimately close to the world, and particularly to human beings, 'not far from each one of us', because 'in him we live and move and have our being', and he longs for us to feel out in the dark and find him there.

So what about the Academics? Well, Paul has news for them, and this is where his second point comes in, which is *God's action to put the world to rights*. This God, intimately present though mysteriously unseen, has put down a fresh marker within the world. The Academics too had it half right, in that up to now things have been obscure and uncertain. There has been a level of ignorance. The true God is aware of that, and he isn't holding people responsible for it. But now this same creator God is sending out a message to all and sundry to turn around from the way they were going and come his way instead. He is calling the world to account, promising to put all wrongs to right, to sort out the mess and bring the world into a new harmony. (Notice how Paul is stealing the court's thunder. They think they're the highest court in the land, but Paul is telling them that there's a higher one still, and that they are accountable to it.)

And here comes the point for which they were totally unprepared, the point which explains everything else, the point which still bursts as an embarrassment on to the polite discussions of religion and ethics, of philosophy and government. God has fixed a day, declares Paul, on which he will judge the world with true justice, and he will do so *through a man whom he has appointed*; and he has given assurance of this by raising him from the dead. Jesus and Anastasis, Jesus and the resurrection: *that's* what he had been talking about in the marketplace, that is the announcement which was going to get him into trouble, that is the message that he's now set in its proper context.

You can't fit Jesus and the resurrection into pagan worldviews as though they're just two more miscellaneous divinities. You have to understand them within the essentially Jewish worldview in which there is one single creator God who remains intimately involved with the world, one single God who will at the last put the world to rights. That Jewish worldview has come sharply into focus, Paul declares, in the events concerning Jesus.

And particularly his resurrection. For Paul, the resurrection wasn't (as it is in some systems today, including fundamentalism) a bizarre miracle which shows that God is a powerful supernatural being and that there is a life after death. For Paul, the resurrection of Jesus was the beginning of the new creation, the moment when the creator God revealed that in Jesus the power of chaos, entropy and death itself had been defeated and that a new world of genuine justice and peace was opening up. God was putting the world to rights already, by the message of the gospel opening hearts and minds and communities to a new way of being human, ahead of the time when he would eventually sort the whole lot out in a final act of judgment and mercy. The resurrection of Jesus makes no sense within other worldviews, but within this one it becomes the prototypical event, the thing which reveals what everything else is about, and where it's going. (Resurrection, interestingly, was ruled out, as far as the Areopagus was concerned, by divine fiat. According to ancient legend, Apollo himself had declared, as the court of the Areopagus was being founded, that once a person had died, and their blood was spilled on the ground, there was no resurrection. Oh yes there is, declares Paul, because Apollo doesn't have the last word. The last word belongs to the creator God, the God who will put the whole world to rights, the God revealed in Jesus and his resurrection.)

That is fighting talk, in the first century or the twenty-first. And let's get one thing straight before we ask how this same gospel challenge plays out in tomorrow's world. I've heard people say often enough that we can't believe in the resurrection today because modern science has disproved it. That is ridiculous: we didn't have to wait for Newton and Leibniz, for the Industrial Revolution or the invention of penicillin, to discover that when people die they stay dead. Homer and Plato knew that just as well as we do. What has happened, rather, is that the rhetoric of the Enlightenment needed to be able to say that human history had been blundering along in ignorance

until the eighteenth century and was now at last coming out into the light, justifying whatever Western Europe and North America then wanted to do by way of social ordering and empire. That is actually a parody of the Christian claim Paul makes in his speech in Athens: up to now, it's been shadows and puzzles, but now we have a new revelation! And for the new story of the Enlightenment to stick, the old one had to be got out of the way. There cannot be two climaxes to world history: if it's us, it can't be Jesus. And that in turn gives us the clue to our own question.

For some, to mention the resurrection at all looks like fundamentalism. And certainly the secularist will want nothing to do with it. But the fundamentalist inhabits a dualistic universe, where you reject the goodness of this creation and try to escape to another world altogether, with the resurrection merely as the sign of a supernatural power that helps you to do that. But for the early Christians the resurrection was the launching-point of new creation itself, renewing the world rather than abandoning it, affirming its goodness and beauty and power out the other side of the judgment that falls on its corruption and decay. I have a sense that most Western Christians have yet to wake up to what the resurrection means in practice: those who believe in it don't understand it, and those who don't believe it don't want it. As Jim Wallis said in his book *God's Politics*, the right gets it wrong and the left doesn't get it. (He was writing about US politics, but the same goes for theology, and the two are intimately interconnected.)

In particular, the resurrection challenges those three powerful currents of human life and thought which are shaping tomorrow's world, namely Gnosticism, empire and postmodernity. The resurrection declares that true spirituality is world-renewing, not world-renouncing: God's kingdom is not *from* this world but it certainly is *for* this world. Instead of the escape route of the Gnostic, the private spirituality which detaches itself from the world in the present and seeks to leave it altogether in the future, the New Testament offers the integrated spirituality which knows that when the sign of the cross hangs over the world in its distorted, twisted pain and shame, that is so that the resurrection can bring it to life both in the ultimate future, in the new heavens and new earth, and in the penultimate future, as God's life-giving power is unleashed in works of justice and mercy and healing and beauty and hope already, in the

People sometimes speak as if this split is the inevitable result of modern scientific knowledge, but that is simply a mistake: the idea of a split-level world, with God or the gods a long way away, is ancient Epicureanism, revived for other reasons in modern Western Europe and then used as a frame by some scientists (not all) to display their findings. All that is a topic for another time, though it is important to see how something which our culture often takes for granted is itself the product of special interests and, often, special pleading.

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