

The Bedell/Boyle Lecture 1999

# THE GOOD NEWS IN OUR TIME

Rev. Lucien Accad  
General Secretary of the  
Bible Society in the Lebanon

## Response

Mrs. Clare O'Mahony

NATIONAL BIBLE SOCIETY OF IRELAND

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## **INTRODUCTION**

### The Bedell/Boyle Lecture Series

The National Bible Society of Ireland has inaugurated an annual lecture series known as the Bedell/Boyle Lecture. It is intended that the series will provide an opportunity to promote the Bible and the effective use of the Holy Scriptures. Each year a speaker of stature will be asked to lecture on a topic relating some aspect of the Bible to current developments. It is hoped to publish each Lecture.

The Lecture series is named in honour of William Bedell (1571-1642) Bishop of Kilmore and Ardagh, because of his commitment to the translation of the Bible into Irish. Linked with Bedell's Irish Bible, published for the first time in 1685, is Hon. Robert Boyle (1626-1691) who ensured the publication of Bedell's Bible. Boyle was very committed to Bible distribution and he was a distinguished scientist known for Boyle's Law. Thus key elements of modern Bible Society work — translation, publication and distribution — were foreshadowed by these two men.

The 1999 Lecture was given by the Rev. Lucien Accad on September 18th 1999 in Emmaus Retreat Centre, Dublin. Mr Accad is General Secretary of the Bible Society in Lebanon.

The Response was given by Mrs Clare O'Mahony, a member of the National Board of the National Bible Society of Ireland. Mrs. O'Mahony is a member of the Executive Committee of the United Bible Societies and also serves on the Europe Middle East Committee. She is a former President of the National Bible Society of Ireland.

We are pleased to publish the complete text of the Lecture and the Response and believe that this will aid our reflection and response to the living Word of God in the Holy Scriptures.

Judith Wilkinson

**THE BEDELL-BOYLE LECTURE 1999.**

**THE GOOD NEWS IN OUR TIME**

*After John was arrested, Jesus went to Galilee and told the good news that comes from God. He said, "The time has come! God's Kingdom will soon be here. Turn back to God and believe the good news!"*

Mark 1:14 &15 (CEV)

*Long ago in many ways and at many times God's prophets spoke his message to our ancestors. But now at last, God sent his Son to bring his message to us.*

Hebrews 1:1&2a (CEV)

*But when the time was right,  
God sent his Son,  
and a woman gave birth to him.  
His Son obeyed the Law,  
so he could set us free from the Law  
and we could become God's children.*

Galatians 4: 4-5 (CEV)

*In the beginning was the one who is called the Word. The Word was with God and was truly God. From the very beginning the Word was with God. And with this Word, God created all things.*

John 1:1-3a (CEV)

This year 1999, just before the end of this century and millennium, I think the subject suggested to me by the Bible Society in Ireland, Mark 1:15 is very appropriate. *"The time has come! God's Kingdom will soon be here. Turn back to God and believe the good news!"* 2000 years after the revelation of the Good News of Jesus Christ Our Lord, the majority of the 6 thousand million people living on this Globe still ignore the reality of this truth. The Bible Societies, since the modern start of their institution through the BFBS in 1804 have tried to contribute to the distribution of the written Good News for nearly two Centuries. They have provided the tools that should allow His Church to announce this Good News in every country, tribe and language of the World. However we are still very far from having accomplished this task.

- (a) What is the situation when it comes to translation, printing and distribution of God's Holy Word in our World today?
- (b) Is the Church aware of the tremendous needs when it comes to translation, printing and distribution of His Word? And what is the Church doing about it?
- (c) What are the Bible Societies doing in this domain?

My presentation will particularly concentrate on the part of the world I'm coming from, the Middle East and Lebanon my beloved home country. As we are approaching the end of the Century and Millennium it is the right time for us to remember that the Good News was announced geographically in Bethlehem, not very far from where we live. The incarnation of "God the Word" took place there and as the Apostle John says in his first epistle,

*"The Word that gives life was from the beginning, and this is the one our message is about. Our ears have heard, our own eyes have seen, and our hands touched this Word".*

1 John 1.1. (CEV)

The message spread from our part of the World and went to all the other parts where it was giving life to all nations where it was preached. Today we are praying that it would come back to the Middle East and revive our people again. Some time ago I was visiting Iraq with a team from the Bible Society and we were in a monastery that asked us for portions of the New Testament for distribution to the pilgrims who were visiting their place in big numbers. The Chaldean (Catholic) priest who was speaking to us said: "We have so many people who come here for encouragement and many of them are Muslims who feel they can get a special blessing from this old monastery. Can we give them something better to bless them than the Gospel?" Then he added: "Our Church was a missionary-minded Church during the first centuries. We've reached India, China and Taiwan with the Gospel, but later some of this enthusiasm disappeared. We would like from now on to recover our missionary vision".

The situation of most countries of the world at the end of this century is one of ignorance, indifference or rejection of the Message of the Gospel. A few days ago in Lebanon I was visiting His Holiness Aram the First, Catholicos of Cilicia. He is the Patriarch, actually the Pope of the Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Church of Cilicia and the President of the World Council of Churches, and he told the group from the Bible Society who were visiting him:

"Our world today at the end of this twentieth century suffers from three illnesses,

- (a) Growing egocentrism where God is forgotten or marginalised;
- (b) A new value system, different from the other previous ones, and confusing to most people; and
- (c) Moral decay of our society".

Then he added a fourth burning problem illustrated by the Kosovan war, where the church has been part of the conflict and added: "How can the church be part of the solution when they have been part of the problem?"

Most parts of Europe had their chance of receiving the Message and great numbers of the people, after centuries of Christianity have now opted for other messages. They seem to be mainly interested in materialism, comfort and pleasure. Most homes have more than one copy of the Scriptures but is the message lost to most people?

Africa which has been the target of a lot of Christian Missions during the past decades, is now under much pressure from the present very poor economical situation. The Christian Message which often came alongside with Colonialism and often also with some sort of oppression from white and richer people, does not always seem deeply rooted in the heart and the daily life of the nations. Tribal old religions and hatred have recently reappeared in many countries. Many wars have contributed to the very poor conditions of most people.

North America has a variety of situations, from the deepest commitment to the Message to a profound rejection of it. Where schools have decided to remove prayer and the Bible, in the name of secularism and 'freedom', violence has crept in. It is now necessary to have metal detectors at the doors of the schools to keep weapons outside. Is it possible to summarise all of this, when people are so much immersed in materialism and the teaching of Christian prosperity?

Christianity in South America seems to take new shapes and achieves in many places spectacular advances with a strong taste of emotion. Recently we had a meeting of UBSEC in Brazil. At the airport in Sao Paulo, before boarding the plane for Iguazu Falls

three men sitting next to me, one after the other, shared with me their faith in Jesus Christ. They were from different churches. On the plane leaving that airport the same day, the man sitting next to me also tried to witness to me. He was a pastor.

Asia is the least evangelised part of the world and during 2000 years many have never heard the Good News. Less than 10% of the total population has responded positively to the Good News. In South Korea and some other countries there have been some 'revivals', but so much remains to be done. I should not forget that the Middle East is part of this continent. It has witnessed the birth of the Message but Christianity, which has resisted centuries of persecutions and hardship is hardly able to survive. Some sceptics have started asking whether the Christian presence will still be visible during the next Century.

Other parts of the world could be mentioned but how can we describe religion for most people today, when news travel so fast and when nothing remains hidden from the media. Many wars seem to have some form of religious fanaticism and show a high degree of intolerance. Can't we say that the Twentieth Century despite all the high hopes at the beginning, has seen the most devastating wars, the most ugly massacres of innocent people and the most terrible forms of intolerance?

My country Lebanon has survived 17 years of war but today, 9 years after the end of the fighting, re-construction is far from completed. The re-building of infra-structures is amazing but the healing of all the wounds in the hearts of the people who have been through war is very difficult to achieve. Lebanese families have been dismantled and dispersed all over the world and today those who remain in the country are in dire need of assistance of relatives from abroad to be able to survive. Different religions have always co-existed and there is a tremendous effort being made to build bridges of communication between the different communities of the country. Are 14 centuries of poor communication between Islam and Christianity a reason to discourage us and make us think that our message is unacceptable to the majority of the people around us?

Under centuries of misunderstanding or persecution the Church has very often taken the position that survival is of greatest importance. Proselytism or evangelism outside the church buildings has been prohibited in several countries of the Middle East. Worship within the walls of the existing churches has often been permitted and in some countries only tolerated while to our regret in some countries it is not permitted to have any kind of Christian worship even in homes. Teaching of the Christian doctrines within the communities has been very difficult to transmit from generation to generation and we must admit that often indoctrination and forced conversion to Islam through all kinds of pressures have considerably reduced the number of Christians. The policy of many Christian communities has been to try to have the lowest profile possible in order not to 'provoke' adverse reactions. Today and even at the end of this Century the same situation continues to prevail. Freedom of worship and belief is still very different from country to country of the Middle East. The pressure is not always coming from the legal authorities, it is often the result of fanaticism of smaller groups of fundamentalists and extremists.

In the Middle East today announcing the Good News is therefore not the top priority for most established Churches. Missionaries who since the 19th Century have been coming from western countries to evangelise Muslims have in most cases quickly changed their policies and decided to win disciples from within the historical Christian communities and bring them to their own denominations.

In all of this situation the Bible has played a vital role. If in the past the Bible was often a cause of division and conflict between the different churches today there has been a

perceptible change. The largest inter-denominational groups love to meet around the Bible and its message. During the 19th century four Arabic translations of the complete Bible were achieved. The Chidiac translation prepared by an Arabic scholar. The Protestant Boustany-Van Dyck around 1860, and the Jesuit translations produced in Lebanon. Also the Dominican Fathers' translations made in Mosul, Iraq.

Since the 9th century the Arab Christians have been translating the Scriptures into Arabic. Several remarkably good translations as such. Nowadays revered by scholars! It might surprise you but Islam has a very great respect for the Bible although many of the Muslims consider that our present book has been 'corrupted'. This concept is not backed by Quranic texts. On the contrary the Quran has many verses that praise the Bible and affirm that the Word of God can't be falsified. (Quran 6/34, 115:10/64:18/27: 33/43 and 48/23). The Quran also confirms the Bible and invites the faithful Arabs to know it better and study it more. There are many passages of which I will mention two here:

*"Say, (O Muslims): 'We believe in God, and in that which has been sent down on us (The Quran) and sent down on Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac and Jacob, and the twelve tribes, and that which was given to Moses and Jesus and the Prophets, of their Lord (Bible: Torah, Zabur and Injil): we made no division between any of them, and to Him (God) we surrender'". Cow 2:136*

*"And We sent, following in their (the Old Testament Prophets) footsteps, Jesus son of Mary, confirming the Torah before him; and We gave to him the Gospel, wherein is guidance and admonition unto the God fearing" Table 5:49*

At the beginning of a new Millennium it is high time the Bible Societies sharpened their vision in the light of their past experiences. Their mission has always been to provide a clear message of the scriptures in languages that are simple and close to the heart of those who hear or read it. They are providing this message for the edification of the believers and to help in the witness they have to the world of today and tomorrow.

In the context of the Middle East, the cradle of the three main Monotheist religions, where the Christians as well as the Jews are called People of the Book by their neighbours the Muslims, we have noticed in recent years that most Middle Easterners are interested in reading the Bible. In recent years the number of book exhibitions has increased considerably. The Bible Societies have been able to distribute the Scriptures in many of these and to their amazement the Bible has often been the best seller among thousands of books, both religious and secular. The availability of a new inter-confessional Arabic translation of the Bible in modern media Arabic since 1994 is greatly contributing to this success. Already after 1978 when the New Testament of this translation was available, many of the historical churches, still using much older translations, were refreshed and revitalised by this very dynamic and simple text made understandable and accessible to ordinary readers. It is interesting to note that one of the secrets of the survival of the Arabic churches is the fact that from the 9th century the churches have continuously translated the text of the Bible until our modern times. In other parts of Christianity, the churches who were using Hebrew, Aramaic, Ancient Greek, Syriac, Sahidic (Coptic language of Upper Egypt), Bohairic or Ramphitic (the language of lower Egypt), Gu'iz (language of the Ancient Abyssynian Empire), Georgian, Armenian and Latin. Most Europeans started their modern translations in their own languages only from the 15th century. These translations into the language of the people contributed to a more dynamic Christian life, rooted in the comprehension of the Scriptures. It helped the believers to go back to the roots of their faith and the life of the early church.

But today and for tomorrow, with the problem of illiteracy still plaguing our lands and when most people watch television instead of reading books, the Bible Societies are actively involved in translating the Bible for the Media. The most popular video sold in the Cairo Book-fair last year and this year has been the one of the life of Jesus according to the Gospel of St Luke. People who had only very little knowledge, and sometimes with a distorted view of the person of Jesus Christ were suddenly confronted with a dynamic translation of the life of our Lord Jesus Christ. Can this exposure to the Gospel have any impact on the life of people?

I would like to give one example amongst many that shows how the seeds of the message can always bring a harvest for the Kingdom of God.

In 1936 the leader of an Arab Bedouin tribe had just raided another tribe, looting and destroying as it was the custom of his tribe for generations. That night this Sheikh had a dream. Jesus appeared to him and called him by name. Sheikh Abdullah did not know who Christ was but he had the impression that his face looked sad and angry. He asked: "Who are you and why are you angry". The Christ of the vision told him: "I am Jesus Christ and I'm sad and angry because of what you have done today, your life does not please me". "My ancestors have always behaved like this and I don't know your ways and your Message. What should I do?" said Sheikh Abdullah. The Christ of the vision answered: "Go to Jerusalem and there I will show you the way".

The next day this man took his horse and started in the direction of Jerusalem. He still needed two hours' horse-riding to reach the city. When he reached the place he suddenly realised that he did not know where to go. "Am I crazy?" he asked himself. "How can I just obey a dream?" Tired of the ride he stepped into a small tea-shop and asked for a glass of tea. Sitting at a small table he suddenly over-heard two men who were arguing passionately. One was saying: "He has cornel" and the other "No he hasn't". The discussion was loud enough for the Sheikh to realise that a Christian and a Jew were arguing about Christ. The Jew was very upset and left while shouting at the other man who stood up and was also leaving the place. Sheikh Abdullah decided to follow the latter one and ask him some questions but did not know how to start the conversation. The man reached a house and entered it but

Sheikh Abdullah was too shy to talk to him. Standing at the door he walked around the house and saw from a window a picture of Christ that looked like the man of his dream. It encouraged him to knock at the door but the lady who opened saw that big man with his horse, a dagger and a rifle. She got scared and shut the door, went in and explained to her husband what she had seen. The man understood from her description that there was a Bedouin at his door. Because he was a Palestinian evangelist to the Jews and the Bedouins, by the name of Abraham, he knew their customs and said to his wife, "Get this man in and prepare a cup of coffee for him. If he drinks it this will mean that he is coming in peace. If he doesn't, call me and I'll escape through the window". Sheikh Abdullah was surprised to see the lady reappear but he had waited at the door unable to leave the place. When he was offered a cup of coffee this added to his surprise and even more when the lady shouted: "Abraham, he is drinking!"

When the evangelist entered the room and was told about the vision he was able to share the message of the Gospel with the Bedouin chief who decided that he wanted to follow Christ. They became friends and because Sheikh Abdullah was illiterate and all the members of his tribe as well, both Abraham and people from the Bible Society were asked to visit the tribe regularly to read the Scriptures to them and explain them as well as answering their questions. The Bible Society in Lebanon had also been involved in these visits and many friendships had been established. But the Lebanese war had

separated the two groups from each other and twenty years later people in the Bible Society were different from those who knew the tribe.

One day in September 1998 the wife of a Bible Society staff was told that a school far from the capital whose students were partly Bedouin, were asking for a Bible teacher. Realising that apparently all the area where the school is located is a Muslim area the lady was surprised. During her first visit to the school she discovered that the Principal is the daughter of Sheikh Abdullah. She was the first child of her tribe who learned how to read. The story of her meeting with Jesus Christ is also a great witness to the Love of God. But the most amazing part of the story is the personal commitment to Jesus Christ of a number of people who are still considered by both Christian and Muslim communities, as ethnic Muslims.

Can't we conclude at the end of this true story that the written seed of the Scriptures has an amazing power of life in the heart of the people. The 'soil' received the 'living seed' and although the 'workers' were not very active God through his Holy Spirit is giving now, a harvest after many years.

The distribution of scriptures among Catholic churches of Lebanon, especially since 1978 when the first edition of the New Arabic Inter-Confessional translation of the New Testament was published is another story of special blessings. During a difficult period of civil war people from these churches discovered the comfort, the security and the real Life in the midst of war, killing and hatred. After the publishing of the complete Bible in 1994 these churches continue to enjoy the reading and study in groups of this newly found source of Joy and Peace. It has contributed greatly to new life in the churches and parishes.

The time has come when all our churches and the Bible Societies have to rediscover the Scriptures' wonderful life-giving power in different soils. Nothing can replace the Word of God in the life of the believers for their spiritual growth and in evangelism for our witness. Human words cannot convey the same promises as God's and certainly not yield a similar rich Harvest.

The time has come for new efforts in spreading the message, which was incarnated 2000 years ago.

# Response

## Mrs. Clare O'Mahony

I have a very special memory which remained in my mind since March 1992. That year, as a very new member of the Europe Middle East regional committee of the United Bible Societies, I was present in Beirut for a meeting there, the first group to go there after the war had ended. To the eye, the city was a mess; no street lights, the roads potholed from bomb explosions, ruined houses pockmarked with bullet holes. Troops were everywhere. To communicate with the UBS, Lucien had to go up a mountain with a mobile phone. During the war, the Bible House had received a direct hit - in fairness the bomb was aimed at the parliament buildings, but Bible House got it instead! The city itself contrasted sadly with its appearance 17 years before when it used to be called 'the Paris of the Orient'.

But I did say 'to the eye'. For us, visiting the Bible Society of Lebanon was very different. The dedication of its members, the sense I experienced of the way the Christian churches worked together to bring God's Word to people - there was something almost tangible in the warmth and respect shown to each other. It really brought home to me what was said in Acts "See how these Christians love one another". Lucien has told you the story of the Sheikh, I would like to repeat one I heard while in Beirut.

At the height of the Iraqi war, despite bombs falling around, a Muslim truck driver used to drive a lorry load of Scriptures into the city. People said to him, "Are you not afraid?" He said "No, why should I be? I was carrying the Holy Book!"

Again it underlines what Lucien has said, and indeed brought home to me, just how important it is, to be able to meet the demands for Scriptures not alone for those actively seeking the Christian faith, but also certainly in the world of Islam. But these must be of good quality printing and outward appearance, just as the Koran is. To them it shows respect for the contents, otherwise the message goes out that Christians do not value the Holy Book, so why should the Muslims?

Lucien has also underlined the importance of modern translations for new readers. Some of us are so familiar with the 'older' translations - King James, Douai - that it is hard for us to imagine new ways of expressing the Word of God. Our own parish group at home, when meeting to prepare for the following Sunday, listened as I read from the CEV version, and found it a wonderful experience!

The National Bible Society of Ireland, like all belonging to the fellowship of UBS, serves all churches in this country. Thankfully, there is no problem about acquiring a Bible. Religious instruction is part of the school system for those who wish to avail of it, and all pupils can have a Bible. The task for the churches here is to encourage the use of the Bible, in such a way that it becomes a truly life-giving force in people's lives.

But we are privileged. Just think of the need of Scriptures for people seeking comfort, trying to make sense of dreadful situations they find themselves in, be they Christian or non-Christian: East Timor, those suffering in Kosovo, people in Sierra Leone, the recent bombing in Russia, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Turkey, Greece, relatives of the children gunned down at a Church service in Texas, just to mention a few. Some through natural disasters, more caused by human wickedness or greed, while others, as Lucien has said, quoting Aram the First, Catholicos of Cilicia, brought about "by the churches being themselves part of the conflict".

There is to be a synod of Roman Catholic bishops in Rome next month, entitled "**Jesus Christ Alive in His Church, Source of Hope for Europe**". The working document *Instrumentum Laboris* has many rich insights and poses many questions. In paragraph 18, for example, "how can and how ought the church announce the Gospel while acknowledging and accepting all who profess a different faith and avoiding that 'tolerance' degenerate into 'indifference' or 'relativism'?" The document is also a call to an examination of conscience. How can the Church announce, celebrate and serve "The Gospel of Hope" in Europe today.

Lucien has also referred to the barriers that the past has put in the way of bringing the Christian message to the Islamic world. It is said that the people of this island have long memories. Muslims, Jews and those of many other cultures and races may well have painful memories of forcible conversions.

For me to listen to Lucien and to begin to explore just what are the implications of the relationship between the great monotheistic faiths. I have never forgotten the words of a Presbyterian minister who was a missionary in Gujurat in India for many years. When asked how he went about the task of bringing people to belief in the Christian faith where the vast majority were Hindus, he replied "For me the task is to proclaim Christ; then for people to respond". As Paul said "Woe to me if I do not proclaim Christ ..."

That is our task today. We have listened as Lucien has spoken so graphically. We face into the Third Millennium. There are over 6,000 languages in the world, and complete Bibles in less than 400. Can we too be messengers of the Word in this highly developed society, where belief in God is challenged by the materialistic individualistic attitudes of many around us. Perhaps it is time to listen ... to listen and learn from the values often possessed by those who live in other cultures, poor perhaps in the eyes of the world, yet possessing all things. We have much to learn, and then, as followers of Jesus ...

*... spread the good news that comes from God. He said, "The time has come! God's kingdom will soon be here. Turn back to God and believe the good news!"*

Mark 1:14-15