**HOBART LECTURE**

# The Return of the Hidden God: Renewing our Partnership in the Gospel

**by**
**The Rt. Rev. Dr. Richard Chartres**
**Bishop of London**
**at**
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Bishop Sisk, Thank you for having taken the risk of inviting me to deliver this 7th Hobart Lecture.

You are increasingly well known in London since your photograph now decorates the hoarding around St Martin's-in-the-Fields. You are looking over Trafalgar Square, habited in rochet, chimere and hard hat which may be a parable for the Anglican Communion in our time.

We are grateful to you for having presided at the turning of the first sod at the beginning of one of the most thrilling signs of renewal in the Diocese of London. I visited the site last week and with the Rector stared into the great pit out of which will emerge new facilities for rough sleepers, a new social service unit, a new education centre beside the 18th century church of St Martin itself which will be repristinated.

We serve cities New York and London which have many similarities. We are both set in a cosmopolitan context, the home of international organisations, a hub of communications and centre of financial services in the global economy of our wired up world. With a renewed sense of the challenge and opportunity which confronts us both, we are already in so many ways deepening our friendship and I want to take this opportunity to reflect on our common task as a contribution to renewing our partnership in the gospel.

Your invitation has brought the added benefit of introducing me to Bishop John Henry Hobart.

In the record of his work in the excellent Diocesan History written by James Elliott Lindsley there are many themes which resonate with the challenges and opportunities facing both our Dioceses today.

Hobart found a somewhat introverted church composed of old colonial families and left it the church of the growing American people. He found 28 clergy in the Diocese in 1811 but when he died there were 127.

He revived confidence in the apostolic character of the church. Already in 1804 he had published a communicant's seven day preparation course for receiving the sacrament of the altar extracted from the work of "divines of the Church of England who imbibed their principles and their piety at the pure fountain of the primitive church".

This was an eccentric view in 1811 when Hobart was consecrated at a service which Bishop Provoost nearly boycotted on discovering that his co-consecrators were not intending to wear episcopal wigs. By the time of Hobart's death in 1830, however, the Church was secure in its apostolic identity and with confidence in its title deeds, it grew.

He cared passionately about education. He fostered the growth of Columbia and saw General Seminary firmly established in New York before his death. This is the bicentennial of his foundation in 1806 of the Protestant Episcopal Theological Society at Trinity Church, "to advance its members in theological knowledge, in practical piety and in all those principles, duties and dispositions which would fit them for being orthodox, evangelical and faithful ministers of the Protestant Episcopal Church". [1]

His passion was, in his own words, for the "Church of the Living God, exhibiting evangelical truth united with apostolic order."

[He was perhaps more of an Anglophile before he paid us a visit in London during his European tour of 1823-25. There is nothing like travel for narrowing the mind. On return to beloved New York he preached a downright sermon severely critical of Church of England, the effects of establishment and the patronage system. A genuine friendship ought to enable us to say critical things to one another.

According to the Secretary of the American Legation, he was certainly annoyed with the canonical bar on his preaching in London during the episcopate of my predecessor William Howley – "Isn't it extraordinary that I can preach in the City of Rome and yet not be allowed to preach in London." The Canonical bar was later removed by Act of Parliament and you are welcome any time.

Although he was met on return to New York with every token of respect he was disgusted with the stale platitudes of esteem offered to him by the Diocesan Convention. "Men know what I stand for and what I fight for and if those principles are not worth recognition and I am not to be recognised as their champion, let me at any rate be spared the indignity of colourless resolutions."]

Hobart was a missionary who went beyond the frontiers of his own community to embrace the remnant of the once powerful Iroquois nation still living at that time in the state of New York. To introduce them to sound church principles he ordained Eleazar Williams supposed by some to be the missing Dauphin, the son of the murdered Louis XVI.

So Hobart is an inspiring patron of this series. He built and extended the church on the basis of the faith uniquely revealed in Holy Scripture but scripture studied in company

with the saints of the primitive church rather than interpreted simply by reference to our own provincial point in space and time. He was a man of passion but committed to sound learning and the best theological education of his time.

When Hobart arrived in New York it was by no means obvious that "evangelical truth united with apostolic order" was to have such a future. History is always a mystery and only despair results from believing that decline, war, poverty and injustice are inevitable.

In contemporary North Western Europe perhaps more than in the U.S. as a whole, God for the moment is largely hidden from our view. Continental Europeans to a greater extent than we island folk sometimes actually worry that God has too much prominence in American public life. Dominique Moisi, a special adviser at the French Institute for International Relations has recently argued that "the combination of religion and nationalism in America is frightening. We feel betrayed by God and by nationalism which is why we are building the European Union as a barrier to religious warfare" [2]

The hiddeness of God is a phenomenon which is unremarkable for many West Europeans but it is still strange for most of world's population outside our own appendix to the Eurasian landmass and our exceptionalism has recently been brought home to us by the arrival of so many immigrants in our cities.

But there may be good reasons for the contemporary occlusion of God. Europe has been the battleground, in a way not true of the U.S., of lethal civil wars in which "god" was invoked on both sides. Our West European Enlightenment emerged out of horror and disgust at what religious fanaticism had done to our part of the continent. It is no coincidence that during the final decade of the especially ruinous Thirty Years War [1638-48], Galileo published his "Dialogue concerning Two New Sciences" and Descartes his "Principles of Philosophy". Newton was born during the same period.

Richard Tarnas in his fine book "The Passion of the Western Mind" sums up the legacy of this era thus, "The fragmentation brought about by warring Christian absolutisms argued the need for another type of belief system more rationally persuasive and less controversially subjective."

Moreover, in much of Europe God was identified as the ally of obscurantism and the patron of various absolutist regimes. In consequence the revolt of the many against the single will of the ruler was often accompanied by a rejection of the theological underpinning of absolutist ideology. Wherever a part of the church achieved a near religious monopoly and went into alliance with the status quo [which was what happened in France, Italy, Spain, Prussia and Russia], then one of the consequences was the formation of a mass membership anti-clerical or even atheist opposition.

[Incidentally the failure of any one part of the church in England to achieve a religious monopoly [which Puritans, Prelatists and Papists alike desired] and the leadership given by Christians in the struggle to revise the political and economic status quo in the 19th

century explains why in the U.K. the membership of the British Communist Party has at no point equalled that of the Lord's Day Observance Society.]

The God who had been enrolled as the underwriter of tyranny had to be deposed. At the same time the mode of reasoning classically expressed in the philosophical method of Rene Descartes progressively relegated God from being the Subject of creation, the "I am" who encountered Moses, to the position of an object in our minds. Very soon this "god" too was perceived to be redundant.
The Cartesian method involves a disengagement from the world and our own bodies and the assumption of an instrumental stance towards them.

The concept of truth which attracted Descartes understandably in view of the violent controversies which racked his own day involved a process of making secure deductions from what is present and unconcealed to the attentive mind, "*quae menti attendenti praesens et aperta est*". Therefore whatever claims to be beyond doubt like the idea of God must be present in me.

Anyone trained in this mode of reasoning, as we all are to some extent, becomes less and less aware of the truth taught by the Book of Genesis and Darwin alike that we are creatures formed from star dust; less and less conscious that we are participants in the web of life in an animated universe. Instead we become more prone to regard everything other than ourselves to be mere matter to be used to realise our desires. In other words we are led surreptitiously to put ourselves in the place of the little god we have dethroned.

The true and living God is hidden but this is not without precedent. The prophet Isaiah laments "There is none that calleth upon thy name that stirreth up himself to take hold of thee for thou hast hid thy face from us". [3] *Deus absconditus*, the hidden God but you will notice that the prophet asserts that it is God as subject who has hidden himself. The true and living God has been so defamed in the past of our North West European culture that he has largely hidden himself from our consciousness.
But the eclipse of the true and living God has brought about starvation of the soul and stale worship. It is interesting how the prophet of atheism, Nietzsche spends very little time deploying philosophical arguments against God rather he deplores the joylessness of so many Christians in his day and says "what is decisive against Christianity is our taste, no longer our reasons".

But the absence of God is itself very eloquent and a human society living without any rooting in God and attempting instead to possess fullness of life by accumulation soon exhibits symptoms of distress.

Some of them have their amusing side. There is an astonishing new credulity supporting the contention of C. S. Lewis that when people cease to believe in Christianity, they do not come to believe in nothing rather they will believe anything. The Economist had a story the other day about a tabloid newspaper and its astrology column. The official astrologer did not turn up one morning so a rather cynical hack was drafted in to compose some suitable predictions. To relieve the boredom he wrote under Cancer – "All the ills

of yesteryear are as nothing to what will befall you today". It was just a bit of fun but the switchboard was jammed with panicking readers and he had to be sacked.

But there are more serious aspects of the hiddeness of God. By abstracting ourselves from the field in which we are growing we have developed the idea that we are as Descartes put it "masters and possessors of the earth". Without respect let alone reverence for matter we have become exploitative and wasteful in way that has left the earth scarred and polluted and threatens to imperil the eco-system upon which we in truth depend.

In the UK the church has just launched a campaign to shrink its own ecological footprint as part of raising consciousness about the autism which we seem to exhibit towards creation. We have been heartened recently by statements from leading American Evangelicals affirming the link between Christian faith and care for creation.

The strain which results from trying to live without God in the world is also obvious in other directions. Last year we celebrated the sixtieth anniversary of the publication of the U.N. Charter at the San Francisco Assembly. The energy which created the Charter was informed by the horrifying experiences of World War II and the social spiritual capital of Western culture. It seems to me, however, that the rhetoric of human solidarity which has been such a blessing to the world and which was incorporated in the Charter is losing its power. Mere appeals to ethical fraternity do not seem to evoke the energy which sustains civilisations. Simple ungrounded assertions about human dignity when all sense of the sacred and reverence for the other outside my immediate individual consciousness is fading, seem more and more to be "sad, slight useless things to calm the mad."

We can all admire the austere faith of atheism whose adherents stand before a meaningless world with courage and lucidity making a meaning out of life for themselves. But as a matter of fact the meaning for human life that has been constructed recently seems a very frail basis for happiness, creativity or sustained fruitfulness. Our problem now is not so much believing in God as believing in humanity.

[Do we really believe in our heart of hearts that this civilisation in its present form is going to endure much longer? Our societies are so very complex that they are highly vulnerable. They are especially vulnerable if individualism breaks down any strong sense of neighbourly solidarity and the rich simply save themselves. You will tell me whether or not this was one of the lessons of the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.]

We are just waking up to what is happening and I believe that a new openness to God will be part of the healing which will follow the ills which we have wished upon ourselves. But we must be careful not once again to confect a god out of our own anger and condemnation of others. There are many politically correct people who desire a revolution and sometimes even do so in the name of God but who exhibit the control freakery and the lust for domination which brought discredit on the old notions of God and against which there has been a legitimate protest. The truth about God is a life or death matter and theological errors are literally deadly.

I was speaking recently to some young lawyers at the Inner Temple about the place of religion in modern society. On this occasion I was singing from the same hymn sheet with the Chief Rabbi and the Cardinal but still an anxious young man pleaded with the audience not to let religion back into the daylight world. "Don't let them back into the house," he said in an unconsciousness quotation from the New Testament because religious people had caused so much suffering in the past. For reasons which I hope that I have explained, the young man's protest stirred some sympathy in me; even though the dogmatic terms in which he spoke reminded me uncomfortably of some fundamentalist Christians.

It seems to me however that the time has come for what is called in the New Testament metanoia – a turn around and a going beyond our present mindset because we are confronted with such evident distress arising from the absence of the true and living God. But in making this shift and opening ourselves to the possibility of God we should keep close to the humus, humble and mindful of the huge damage that religious people have done in the past.

Because the young lawyer has a point, in this period of spiritual destitution, we are also confronted by a fanaticism which has its roots in pseudo-religion, in an idolatry which has confected a God out of human anger and a desire for revenge. We have ample evidence of the danger of false and self-regarding religion. This is why the great prophets spent so much energy in denouncing idolatry but what follows from this recognition? Are we to ban religion of all kinds from the public square, to seek to relegate it to the margins of life where the credulous and fanatical can speak in words of fire to one another without challenge until the cauldron of their anger boils over? Or will Western Europe read the signs of the times and come to understand that the hidden God is exercising a gravitational pull on our time and that it is time for him to return not as the absolute ruler whose will was annexed to justify the tyrants but as the God of love who showed his power in vulnerability and who is the God of promise and hope? No one has seen God at any time says St John but he has made himself known in the life death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

We have a lot of unlearning to do because spiritual truth is not accessible by the way that Descartes has mapped out. We do not so much think ourselves into new ways of living. It is more the case that we live ourselves into new ways of thinking. We do not so much resolve the God-question in our heads. It is resolved in us when we agree to bear the mystery of God's suffering in the world and God's ecstasy in the world.

This unlearning begins with a return to our bodies and to our creaturely experience. That is why Jesus teaches that the first step in becoming a human being is to refuse to be a little god. This is a hard saying when the Cartesian way of being in the world which ends in our assuming the role of "master and possessor of the earth" does precisely consist in making ourselves little gods. Unvarnished or unspun "What is" - is the great teacher. That is why Jesus refused the drugged wine on the cross and why we so often resort to drugs to

keep our illusions in place. “What is” is the great teacher – which is why Jesus spent thirty years living before his three years of teaching.
Unlearning brings us to the place where we can begin to bear the mystery of God. We can acquire the beginner’s mind and come to know the field in which we are growing as the life of God himself. St Patrick says that the experience of God in Christ points to a God who is with me, within me, behind me, before me, beside me, to win me, to comfort and restore me.

One of the most encouraging signs in the Diocese of London is the recovery of confidence in the vital importance of committed theology which does not lack academic rigour but which is developed and applied in a close engagement with a community context. Two fresh ventures of this kind are due to open their doors this autumn, the Westminster Theological Centre based on St Mary’s Bryanston Square and the institute at St Paul’s Onslow Square. We have 150 people in training for the priesthood in the Diocese and the new institutions will have a special role in preparing young people for more pioneering ministries.

These new centres have different emphases but both owe a great deal to what has been achieved through the Alpha movement springing from Holy Trinity Brompton. Part of its success has been the generosity with which it has been exported and the lack of any proselytising intention. Roman Catholic priests from France have been sent in some numbers by their bishops to study the Alpha approach which has been widely applied across the Channel. There is now an Alpha office in Shanghai and work throughout the former Soviet Union, always as far as possible involving the local church. It is a good example of what Anglicans can do in making contact with a great range of Christian traditions.

As its promoters are aware however, Alpha only takes us so far. It has grown alongside a re-engagement with community ministry and a deeper exploration of the tradition very much in the spirit of John Henry Hobart. Among my most thrilling engagements in the year are seminars at HTB on Maximus the Confessor and other witnesses from the Early Church. It is extraordinary that so many young professionals will give up their Saturday mornings to wrestle with the tradition not in a spirit of mere academic curiosity but in a committed way to extract resources for Christian living today.

Sound learning, deep prayer and self-sacrificing service to the poor of all kinds keeps us close to the humus and close to the beginner’s mind.

The spirit is very different from that sometimes encountered among so called religious people who are so conscious of their spiritual elevation that they are blind to their faults. These faults are even exaggerated by association with a dogmatic view of God and the idea of God becomes a means for the humiliated ego to re-ascend. It is also possible to be so tightly attached to our last conversion experience that we create an obstacle to the next one.

Christianity has often presented itself to the Western world not as a way of seeing all things but as a competing ideology among other ideologies. Instead of leading us to God in new and surprising places it has often attempted to confirm us in our conviction that God is inside our place. Simone Weil has suggested that "the tragedy of Christianity is that it came to see itself as replacing other religions instead of adding something to all of them."

This is an appropriate point at which to look at another theme which unites London and New York. We have both felt the unrighteous wrath of the terrorists.

In the dangerous circumstances we both face mere appeals for tolerance on the basis of our common humanity are not enough and do not generate the energy needed for transformation.

Part of our work as a church must be engagement with other people of faith whose attitudes and values may be alien to us, speaking from faith to faith. I know that the Cathedral here has a distinguished record in this work.

A month ago just after the anniversary of our July bombings on the tube I had a gathering of Muslim scholars and clerics in my house. I was very struck by the description they gave of their community in terms of four generations. Great Grandmother may have lived in the UK for many years but culturally and mentally she is still in the country of her birth. Her daughter is more at home but still observes the old religious customs. Her daughter has given up the practice of her faith and does not see it as relevant. The fourth generation, the great granddaughter at a time of identity confusion and identity shopping has reconnected with an extreme form of the ancestral faith but in a way that is "de-contextualised" and which does not have the wisdom and restraint which comes from practising the faith in a stable community tradition.

The young men who set off their bombs in July last year and left their martyrdom testimonies behind them were not poor or denied a place in their local community. They spoke however in homely northern accents of their total alienation from Western culture and values. Their mentors had spent a great deal of time grooming them in gyms, clubs and mosques and we must be prepared to make a similar effort because the deadly conflict we are engaged in cannot be concluded with Goliath strategies which simply pulverise the opposition. The battlefield is the human heart and mind and while military action is sometimes necessary to secure a breathing space, it is a breathing space in which we have to strive to build a civilisation of love.

We are involved in what an Israeli theorist of conflict, Martin Van Crefeld, calls "Fourth Generation War". What this means even for soldiers and politicians is brilliantly set out in a paper published on the internet which purports to be the draft manual for the "Imperial and Royal Austro-Hungarian Marine Corps" but is in fact valuable reflection on the Iraq experience from within the American Marine corps itself.

The Church obviously has a role to play alongside others. We have to go beyond the Casablanca strategy. You will remember the Bogart film in which when there is a crisis the cynical French police captain Louis says, "Round up the usual suspects". Assembling clubbable religious leaders to make statements about tolerance is clearly a useful thing to do. After the July bombings such was the state of relations between faith leaders in London that we were all able to appear together in Trafalgar Square at the mass rally called by the Mayor and later in St. Paul's to make common statements.

This however only takes us so far and has little effect on the men of violence. We have been trying to make a small contribution to drawing more extreme voices into the conversation through the work of St Ethelburga's Centre.

St Ethelburga's church is a survivor from the 14th century, but it was blown to pieces by a terrorist bomb in 1993. The group responsible was part of the Irish Republican Army so I decided to rebuild the church as a centre for preventing and transforming those conflicts which had a religious dimension. I am particularly grateful to the late Cardinal Hume for his invaluable support.

From the very beginning we wanted the centre to be a place of meeting for people of all faiths as well as those who subscribed to none but who were alive to the challenge we face. I have to say that before 9-11, it was difficult to persuade people in London that we needed such a service and such a place. Now our only problem is the pressure of the demand and we are seeking to relate more effectively to other similar centres internationally and not least in New York.

Thanks to the generosity of a Muslim sponsor we have been able to build a great tent behind the church made of the finest goats' hair mixed with gortex. It has proved to be a place in which even people of extreme views can be accommodated as we seek to build networks which go beyond the usual suspects. Having to remove your shoes before entering the tent is a great leveller especially when as happened to me when invited to address a congregation of young Shi'ites in their mosque, I removed my shoes only to reveal a very large hole in my sock.

A crucial part of our work in the tent is what we call "Scriptural Reasoning" which was originally developed in a university context but which has proved its worth in creating the new networks among young Muslims, Jews and Christians, clergy and others.

I should make it clear that this is in no way a syncretistic exercise. We are not looking for religious consensus or for polemical debate. Instead against the horizon of the challenges which face us all, our responsibility for the planet, our relations with the stranger in our midst, our search for economic justice in the world, participants are invited to go to their own scriptures, Torah, Quran, Bible to identify the resources for engaging with these great themes. There is no fourth position when these believers, Jews, Muslims, Christians, who are in their different ways children of Abraham, meet. There is no covert assumption of the kind which underlies some so-called interfaith work that the religious traditions are simply more or less adequate local editions of universal spiritual truths. I

can only say from experience that “scriptural reasoning” is a method which can permit hard things to be said in conversations which often result in participants deepening their sense of the identity and uniqueness of their own tradition and yet because we speak in company with others and thus accountably the result is at the same time deeper respect for other traditions.

Another result is very often the development of that “second innocence” in our approach to the scriptures about which Paul Ricoeur has written so fruitfully.

In the UK more and more people are defining themselves with respect to religion rather than ethnicity. Religion is once again un-ignorable. If there is a vacuum it will be filled with lethal religion. I do not think there is much mileage in trying to arrive at a lowest common denominator religious consensus.
Rather we have all got to be clearer about what we are prepared to live and die for and do it in company and in conversation.

The Mayor of London, Ken Livingstone has said that in his journeys around the capital two things are obvious - that London is increasingly diverse in its growing population and that it is increasingly religious.

The most spectacular Christian growth has been in black churches. I was invited to address the national Assembly of the Redeemed Church of God in the Excel Conference Centre in Docklands on the occasion of the visit of their prophet Enoch Adeboye from Lagos. It was a Friday night and the festival was designed to last throughout the night. I began to speak at about 11.30 when there were already twenty thousand people in the hall which was so large that I could not see the wall at the far end.

The roots of many of these movements are Anglican and our most hopeful and purposeful oecumenical relations are with them although our oecumenical institutions continue to reflect the world of the day before yesterday in their composition and way of working.

Alongside Christian growth there is of course the presence and the vigour of the other world religions. I visited one of our church secondary schools in North London recently. 70 languages are spoken there from Albanian to Zulu and there is a similar diversity of religious practices.

There is a huge opportunity here and some of the fastest growing churches in the Diocese like our recently formed Korean parish witness to the capacity of the Church in London to reach beyond its East Saxon constituency. In some of the 18 London boroughs we serve ours is a predominantly black church and we are struggling to ensure that the leadership of the church more faithfully reflects the face of contemporary London. We have to confess that we have got a long way to go before achieving this aspiration.

But I am convinced that God is calling us, in the many ways I have described, out of a period of introversion to emulate the outward looking urgency of John Henry Hobart.

Many people have described 1963 as the watershed year when Churchill's Britain gave up the ghost and the Church entered on forty years of introversion. In 1963 claimed the celebrated English poet Philip Larkin – "sexual intercourse was invented". John XXIII died having summoned the Second Vatican Council and C. S. Lewis, the influential Christian apologist also died. The Beatles were catapulted into stardom, and John Lennon was later reported as saying that the band was more famous than Jesus Christ. Bishop John Robinson's book "Honest to God" was also published that year and soon ran into 9 impressions.

In reality, the year only made evident trends which had been gathering momentum for a very long time. The church was bewildered by the speed of social change and we spent our tie fidgeting with the liturgy and fidgeting with structures. Useful work was done but the church grew ever more introverted.

Then came the "Decade of Evangelism". The assumption behind some of the planning for the decade was that if only we could discover the right techniques for getting our message across then the people of England would fill the churches as they had done in the 1950's.

The results were not encouraging and here are some of the changes that took place in the Church of England as a whole during the 1990's [4]

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| Adult attendance | down 14% |
| Child attendance | down 28% |
| Confirmations | down 43% |
| Electoral rolls | down 13% |
| Stipendiary clergy | down 15% |
| Marriages in church | down 46% |

I believe however that this experience was salutary. God is making all things new. That does not mean as Hobart would be quick to point out that God is making all new things. The crucial thing is to be quiet, patient and prayerful enough to receive him in a fresh way.

For Descartes, God may be an idea in our minds but the Biblical God breaks upon human beings from without and announces himself. Abraham, leave your city and your household gods. Moses, see this bush which burns but is not consumed and take off your shoes. Samuel, Samuel, listen to my voice. Zacharias! Mary! God discloses himself and is not dependent upon our thought. Indeed "*si enim comprehendis, non est deus*", in the words of St Augustine. "If you can contain him in your mind then he is not God".

The Bible is full of God's call to all human persons but we have so often narrowed the idea of vocation to mean merely a call to religious orders. Now is the time to recover a sense of the call of God in each one of us but certainly in those who have been called to be his priests. He calls us to reflect on his hiddeness and to recognise our lostness. He gives us lamps so that we can unlearn and acquire the beginner's mind. He teaches us to

look for him in unexpected places and people. He stirs us up to be watchful, to be expectant and to look for His always surprising Advent in this new wired up world rather than in a continuation of the same old trends.
If we approach Christ in this spirit then the God whose human face he is may disclose himself as the God of infinite promise, as the God whose energy is encountered in the darkness of "what is", as the true and living God who is the truth but not a self-serving truth rather He is the God and truth who serves and loves for others, even for those who are his enemies. I believe that this is certain but beyond all words that "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us and we have beheld his glory as of the only begotten from the Father full of grace and truth".

1. Cited in Arthur Lowndes - Correspondence of John Henry Hobart 1911

2. Dominique Moisi quoted in the Economist September 16th 2006.

3. Isaiah XLIV

4. Source Bob Jackson – "Hope for the Church" Church House Publishing 2002.