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## EDITORIAL

### CHRISTIANITY IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

The four papers presented in this issue of the *Bulletin* were given at the Scottish Evangelical Theology Society conference in April 1999 under the title 'What kind of Christianity for the twenty-first century?'

Christian churches around the world are engaged in a process of self evaluation, asking themselves: 'who are we?', 'where are we heading?', 'how well are we built?'; and at times wondering 'shall we make it?'. We stand at the 'threshold of the future'<sup>1</sup> facing the certainty of constant change within our contemporary culture, and yet with a confidence that God, whose very nature is a burning oven of love (Martin Luther), has covenanted to be with his people. Of course, the grace of God does not bypass our human response and responsibility, as God's 'fellow workers', to be faithful to our identity as the church, the body of Christ, Christ's human presence in the world. In this we find our identity and purpose.

One of the ancient metaphors of the church is that of a ship at sea. A ship is not built to stay in the harbour, sheltered from the storms of life. A ship is built to ride the waves and brave the storms. A ship with no substance breaks, and a ship that stands still will be beaten to pieces by the breakers. Yet the church has often sought the comfort of the harbour and refused to brave the seas in a spirit of adventure. At its best, the church has always become deeply involved in the whole of human life, sharing the message of redemption, justice and peace in a lost and lonely world. We are people of hope, believing in the 'Coming of God',<sup>2</sup> confident that one day his purposes will triumph, God will be all in all, and that 'the kingdoms of this world will become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever' (Rev. 11:15).

The articles in the *Bulletin* will help us to understand many of the challenges that the church faces at this particular moment in human history, critiquing our failures, as well as providing guidance as to how, as the church, we might recover our vision and be renewed in faith, hope and obedience to the purposes of God for his world.

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Riddell, *Threshold of the Future* (London, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God* (London, 1996).

# WHAT KIND OF THEOLOGY FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY?

(FINLAYSON MEMORIAL LECTURE 1999)

DAVID F. WRIGHT

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Although delivered almost on the eve of the twenty-first century, this lecture is inevitably a somewhat risky undertaking. Such is the helter-skelter pace of change in Britain at the turn of the millennia that only the early years of the next century can be in view. Furthermore, diagnosis is more the order of the day than prescription. So there will be more about shape than content, more the theological task than theological exposition – a programmatic exercise.

## 1. A Missionary Theology

What is called for is a theology for a church in an explicitly missionary mode, as it faces a situation in Scotland that calls inescapably for missiological categories of discussion. Since relatively little attention has been paid to missiology for Western culture – the late Lesslie Newbigin being a distinguished exception – we shall increasingly depend on missiological wisdom garnered in cross-cultural mission overseas.

The recognition that Scotland is missionary territory, in some sense analogous to that now somewhat old-fashioned usage, ‘the mission field’, is not inescapable. Even if it is accepted in principle, thinking through its implications and working it out in practice will not be painless. For it is of course not the whole story. Scotland still has a national church – the Church of Scotland. Emblems of the church’s prominence stand on many a street corner in our cities and towns. There is still no lack of evidence in public and local life of the interweaving of Christianity into the warp and woof of Scottish society. As a Catholic writer recently commented on Britain generally,

Christianity is part of the cultural fabric of this country. Like it or dislike it, believe it, disbelieve it or remain agnostic, we cannot ignore the scale by which Catholic Christianity has shaped our country. Much of our public debate has been and continues to be shaped by ideas and arguments that inevitably relate to the Christian tradition, while much of our personal discussion and questioning, to say nothing of our

participation in the arts, takes place in a cultural context shaped now as in the past in implicit or explicit dialogue with Christianity.<sup>1</sup>

One difference between now and the past is that this 'dialogue with Christianity' takes place in increasing ignorance of, and with massive lack of living contact with, the Christian church. A leading Scottish religious historian is preparing a major work entitled 'The Death of Christian Britain'. An opinion poll revealed about half of the younger interviewees ignorant of the link between Jesus and Christmas. The 1998 statistics for the Edinburgh Presbytery of the Church of Scotland reveal a membership less than 47,000 against over 112,000 in 1968, admissions 1184 against 5912, and baptisms 832 against 3323. In 1998 eighty-nine congregations welcomed between them only 332 new members by profession of faith. These figures cover enormous local variation. One congregation in a housing scheme had only one male member under the age of forty.

It is hard to escape the conclusion that galloping deChristianization is the order of the day. The Scottish people need to rediscover Christianity, to be re-evangelized, which prescribes a missionary task made all the more taxing by Scotland's historical experience of the church over a millennium and a half. The dialogue, implicit or explicit, may assume, or at least ineluctably reflect, that Scotland has in a true sense for long been a Christian country, but it is now for the most part dialogue with a government and a culture which accord Christianity no privileged status or recognition.

Herein lies huge potential for disagreement, confusion and inactivity. No part of Britain is virgin mission territory, like much of Afghanistan or even areas of India. Any number of factors could be cited in defence of the maintenance of traditional patterns of Christian ministry, in the pastoral mould, to a population still in some degree pervasively Christian. If the membership of the Kirk is down to some 600,000, as large a number again, and probably more, were infant-baptized in the Church of Scotland. Such figures provide a platform for campaigning groups, whether churches or Christian bodies like the Evangelical Alliance, to seek to make the public face of a nominally Christian society more authentically Christian.

But the assumptions undergirding this strategy look increasingly unsafe. Residual folk-Christianity is not nothing, but it looms larger as an

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<sup>1</sup> Father Brendan Callaghan, quoted (p. 4) in 'The Media and Religion', a lecture delivered in November 1996 as Gresham Professor by Madeleine Bunting, religious affairs editor of *The Guardian*.

obstacle than a stepping-stone. For most of Scotland the pressing need is for a missionary strategy, and so I identify a missionary theology as the first desideratum. Such a theology believes in the Great Commission and the Great Pentecostal Empowering as fundamentally constitutive of the church's vocation. It is still the God-given, and God-resourced, responsibility of all Christians to communicate the Christian gospel to all. The presence in Scotland of small communities of adherents of other major religions is irrelevant to the validity of our missionary calling.

This insistence not only distinguishes Evangelicals from broad-church folk who are at best uncertain about an abiding commitment to converting mission, but also sets us apart from much traditional ecclesiology of Protestant and Reformed provenance, which had little or no explicit place for mission. Lesslie Newbigin's writings made much of the gulf that has traditionally yawned between ecclesiology and mission, typified in his ecumenical experience in the separate existence until 1961 of the World Council of Churches and the International Missionary Council. Their merger in that year can hardly be credited with reshaping the WCC in a missionary image.

A missionary theology for the twenty-first century will be a theology focused on and critically fashioned by the gospel character of Christian faith, a theology organised around the good-news centre. This I contrast with a theology determined systematically, or confessionally. Most Reformation confessions originated in the need to set out the distinctives of one understanding of Christian doctrine over against one or more others. The Westminster Confession is largely devoted to resolving differences between divergent Christian interests in pursuit of national uniformity in religion. Systematic theology is often designed to show the inner coherence and rationality of Christian beliefs, perhaps in relation to a controlling centre or an organizing principle (*e.g.* covenant) or to a dominant philosophy or ideology, or in terms of certain criteria (*e.g.* the traditional Anglican threesome of Scripture, tradition and reason).

A gospel-shaped theology will spell out core Christian convictions in such a way as to give the fullest expression to the message the church is entrusted with for the unbelieving or wrongly-believing masses. The contrast is not to be overdrawn but may in part be illustrated by the difference between the Scots Confession of 1560 and the Westminster Confession of 1647 marked by none other than Edward Irving in 1831.

The Scottish Confession was the banner of the church, in all her wrestlings and conflicts, the Westminster Confession but as the camp-colours which she hath used during her days of peace; the one for

battle, the other for fair appearance and good order.... [The former] is written in a most honest straight-forward manly style, without compliment or flattery, without affectation of logical precision, or learned accuracy, as if it came fresh from the heart of laborious workmen, all the day long busy with the preaching of the truth, and sitting down at night to embody the heads of what they continually taught. There is a freshness of life about it.<sup>2</sup>

Irving has accurately captured the urgent haste with which the Scots Confession was compiled, contrasted with the months and years over which the Westminster Assembly of Divines honed every word of their documents. It could be claimed that a developed, rounded orthodoxy is a function of a settled church, not necessarily a formally established one, but not of a church engaged in primary mission.

It is not the character of missionary theology merely to repeat the ABC of the gospel but to show how all revolves around and issues from and returns to the kerygma of Christ – the proclaimed message about Christ. The eternal purposes of God, the economy, the dispensations, the covenants, the decrees, the testaments, revelation general and special – all must serve first and foremost to set forth the gospel, good news for human beings about Jesus Christ. So Evangelicalism is to be defined by its allegiance to the evangel. ‘Evangelical’ seems to me increasingly an appropriate designation for nascent Protestantism, when in the early years of the Reformation rediscovered Scripture meant rediscovered grace and faith and Christ – the great gospel centralities.

A missionary theology has a different set of priorities, partly because it assumes nothing in the recipients. It will therefore be a theology sensitive to the social and cultural world – but not assuming anything in that culture as part of the gospel. The noble Christian past of Scotland is not part of the gospel. A missionary theology does not visualize its task as a return to a lost golden age, whether the heady days of the early Reformation, the heroism of the Covenanters, years of revival, the courageous clarity of the Disruption, the powerful impact of the first Billy Graham campaign (1955). A missionary theology cannot bank on revitalising a forgotten Christian heritage. One of the seductions of a national church that loses its missionary vision is to become a branch of the heritage industry.

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<sup>2</sup> Edward Irving, *The Confessions of Faith and the Books of Discipline of the Church of Scotland...* (London, 1831), pp. xciii-xciv.



Apart from anything else, what the Christian past delivers to the present may be a problematic legacy, not a fruitful platform or point of contact. It is difficult to resist the conclusion that too much in earlier Scottish Presbyterianism (for such has been most Protestantism for most of the time) has bequeathed an almost instinctive association in contemporary minds between Christianity and duty, morality, obligation, oppressive legalism, disapprobation, censorship, kill-joy repressiveness, *etc.* A large dose of caricature may be mixed in, but the message is clear: we today and tomorrow have to work mighty hard to let the gospel attractiveness of Christianity be heard and seen again in Scotland. This will not be a sentimental softness, a kind of church-hosted love-in, but grace above law, joy above solemnity, gratitude before demand, freedom rather than prohibition, forgiveness purging guilt.

## **2. An Apologetic Theology**

Until recently, apologetics was a named professorial responsibility in the Free Church of Scotland College, but ceased to be so decades ago in the University Divinity faculties. The next century will be marked by so much misrepresentation, hostility and perhaps discrimination-cum-persecution of Christianity that theological teaching will have to be pervasively apologetic in tone and ethos.

Apology covers various tasks. As early as the second century it was essential to correct perverted notions of Christian faith and practice. Hence it is in the writings of apologists that we find invaluable accounts, in straightforward explanatory terms, of what Christians believed and what they did when they met together. The increasing need for this corrective presentation ties in with a missionary priority – basic teaching in the face of overwhelming ignorance. Here lies the extraordinarily wide appeal of the Alpha course, but other approaches may serve not less well, such as groups for enquirers and catechisms for adults.

This point is also relevant to the vogue for Christian deviations that only too easily get fastened on mainstream Christians. How embarrassing it was recently for the England football manager's Glen Hoddle's strange notions about reincarnation and the like to be placarded as the beliefs of 'born-again' Christians. (I wonder how many pulpits seized those weeks of publicity as an opportunity to present corrective apologetic teaching.) There is, alas, no shortage of nuttery among the born-again, not least of the charismatic tendency.

Another important role of apologetic is to strengthen the faithful, arming them to give a reason for their Christian confidence. Most

apologetic writings are read not by hostile opponents and sceptical outsiders but by insecure insiders – believers made to waver or totter, neither sure themselves nor capable of standing up to criticism or exposure of alleged Christian folly.

We may not meet many persons outspokenly hostile to the Christian faith, but we live in a world in which the media are unremittingly unfriendly to traditional, orthodox Christianity. I am much indebted to a revealing lecture on ‘The Media and Religion’ by Madeleine Bunting, the religious affairs editor of *The Guardian*. Getting things right here is critical, for we are increasingly a media-made people – and media-made often insensibly, unknowingly. If ministers doubt that this is true of church members (I certainly do not), then it is unquestionably true of those we seek to reach. Bunting writes as a Catholic, with particular reference to the media’s battering of her church by exposures of episcopal and priestly immorality.

What I think is unarguable...is that there is an inherent bias in the media in Britain against religious institutions and religious expression. Most believers I’ve spoken to – of whatever faith – find the mainstream news media unrelentingly hostile. They are frustrated by the predominant tone of contempt and ridicule. Sometimes they are angry, more often, they are resigned.<sup>3</sup>

For this lamentable state of affairs, Bunting lists five causes:

- the loss of deference – a cultural phenomenon which affects all institutions and professions which claim authority – monarchy, political process, police, teachers, doctors
- an inevitable conflict between the values of the news media and religious faith which is being exacerbated by tabloidisation of broadsheets
- the ingrained hostility of a secular media elite
- a fundamental clash between religion and the nature of modern media
- a clash between religious faith and the illusions of the consumer culture which modern media is designed to promote<sup>4</sup>

When she unpacks the third of these, she paints a picture which portrays the intellectual climate in which the Christian mission today has to be conducted.

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<sup>3</sup> Bunting, ‘The Media and Religion’, p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> Bunting, p. 2.

There is a bias in the media against understanding, even trying to understand, or allowing the possibility of the legitimacy of religious belief or spirituality. The media is dominated by a secularised elite whose scorn, contempt, derision of belief is an unquestioned orthodoxy. Faith is presented as essentially absurd. I think the media which serves up this message firmly believe it's what their readers and listeners/viewers want to hear. It is part of a post-Darwinian consensus that the truths of Christianity are utterly implausible, that the Bible is a collection of tribal myths and the proposition that it is the revelation of divine truth is ludicrous. The development of cultural relativism, as anthropologists and comparative religion have opened up the enormous sophistication of other belief systems, makes of Christianity's exclusive claims on truth an appalling imperialistic arrogance. Religion is like a dinosaur, is a widespread perception, the decline in belief in this is evidence that in time it will wither away altogether. Belief has been discredited and along with it, the whole idea that human beings might have a spiritual capacity, that it might be possible to know something called God, is belittled. At the risk of slightly exaggerating the point, I quote from George Orwell's original *1984* which contained an appendix called 'The Principles of Newspeak' in which he said that Newspeak was 'not only to provide a medium of expression for the world view and mental habits proper to the devotees of Ingsox (English socialism) but to make all other modes of thought impossible'. The secular media virtually achieves this.<sup>5</sup>

To fill out the picture, we will also note the seven points of contrast between the value of the media and religious faith listed by a notable American Catholic theologian, Avery Dulles, whom Bunting quotes.

1. The Church's message is a mystery of faith. The press is investigative and iconoclastic, it revels in exposing what is pretentious, false and scandalous...
2. The message of the Church is eternal, seeks to maintain continuity, cherishes stability and shuns innovation; the press lives off novelty, thrives on the ephemeral, it accents what is new and different...
3. The church tries to promote unity, the press specialises in disagreement conflict. A story needs a struggle between contending parties and the press gives the impression that the church is divided into warring factions.

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<sup>5</sup> Bunting, p. 7.

## WHAT KIND OF THEOLOGY?

4. The main work of the church is spiritual, which gets overlooked by the press who concentrate on more tangible phenomena...
5. The press...imports democratic criteria into its assessment of any organisation. It has great difficulty in appreciating a hierarchical structure. The press have a built-in bias against the authoritative teaching of popes and bishops. The disobedient priest and dissident theologian are lionised as champions of freedom.
6. The teaching of the Church on matters of belief and moral practice is complex and subtle. The media are hungry for stories that are short, simple and striking. They slur over nuances and subtlety.
7. The Church believes in the truth of revelation. Media reports facts in such a way as accessible even to unbelievers...<sup>6</sup>

This searching analysis demonstrates incontrovertibly why theology taught and preached at the turn of the millennia must have a corrective, rehabilitative, damage-limiting function. This is how the issue is put by George Hunsberger, an American missiologist, in a tribute to Newbiggin:

In an atmosphere where it is no longer true that all good people are supposed to believe (that is, they ought to, and it may be presumed that deep down they already do), preaching can bolster little of what is socially expected. Instead it invites, welcomes and enables people to believe things that are at odds with the going versions of reality. It participates in the inner dialogue between the gospel and the assumptions of one's own culture and cultivates a community for whom conversion is the habitual approach.<sup>7</sup>

Bunting's brief lecture is most helpfully suggestive about the issues on which this kind of apologetic theological work must bite. They will be obvious to most of us who have kept our antennae receptive.

Anthropology, the understanding of human being, is an obvious case in point. What would we identify as the two or three controlling assumptions of the media about the nature of humanity? One would surely be the sexual nature of men and women. Intrinsic to fulfilled human existence is a fulfilled sex life, which warrants a fair measure of sexual freedom, as a basic human right. Where in our church theology does such

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<sup>6</sup> Bunting, p. 5.

<sup>7</sup> George R. Hunsberger, 'Renewing Faith during the Postmodern Transition', in *The Bible in TransMission*, special issue (1998), pp. 10-13, at p. 11.

an assumption receive biblically wise correction? Perhaps the task is too seldom undertaken precisely because it is not a simple one. It is made trickier by the church's reputation for being obsessed with sexual morality, which in Scotland is certainly not undeserved. Christians address the distorted anthropological assumptions of the day with this damaging history dogging their efforts. As if the challenge were not taxing enough because of the tension between given fundamentals of biblical teaching, between the one-flesh complementarity of male and female by creation and the vocation to singleness or celibacy, which the example of Jesus places beyond exegetical uncertainty.

But if 'continuing conversion' is the objective, the task cannot be shirked. The designated teachers of God's truth among God's people, who exercise in my view a dispersed function as the church's magisterium, must grapple with these controlling axioms of our culture. Our remit is not satisfied by simply expounding Scripture and leaving the faithful to make the connexions between 'the two horizons'. Applied theology of a low-level apologetic kind is a high priority.

Bunting's lecture contains some pertinent reflections on hypocrisy: 'in our late 20th century lexicon there are few sins worse than hypocrisy'.<sup>8</sup> It is of course one of the vices targeted by Jesus in some of his opponents (at least according to the traditional translation of the Greek), so that a biblical occasion for considering this particular issue is available. Jesus found it highly reprehensible, so that it is an uncomfortable charge when levelled against his followers.

It hinges on the interesting fact that, when outsiders assess Christians, they generally do so by reference to goodness. They are presumably aware that Christians are religious (essentially, they go to church), but they evaluate us in moral terms. Most Christians would not identify the heart of being a Christian as a matter of morality, but then holiness or godliness or faith in Christ are more elusive categories for most non-Christians to apply. Nevertheless, this preoccupation with behaviour and with whether it matches profession may reflect a failure of Christian communication – so that others instinctively think of Christianity as decency or kindness rather than knowing God in Jesus – or may point to the dominant image of humanitarian goodness which the broad church projects.

Hypocrisy has been an easy charge to advance when a church nails its colours to a particular mast, such as priestly celibacy in the Roman Catholic Church. But lapses from sexual propriety are in general a soft

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<sup>8</sup> Bunting, p. 3.

target, because churches are commonly assumed to teach a strict line in sexual mores. One false response to widespread inability or refusal to observe inherited standards is to relax them. Richard Holloway, the Episcopalian bishop of Edinburgh, is the most notorious contemporary British exponent of this tactic, but I judge that it has served as an influential sub-text in much of recent official church reflexion on sexual ethics.

Allegations of hypocrisy would surely be less viable if Christians were known more widely as forgiven sinners living by grace in gratitude and penitence. Luther's wonderful insight that every one of us is throughout life *simul justus, simul peccator, simul penitens* – at one and the same time always justified, always sinful, always penitent – reminds us of emphases in our biblical-theological repertoire particularly appropriate for carping critics. How much better if we projected a clearer image of what constitutes our identity as Christians! We claim not to be better people but to be forgiven, and for that eternally humble and grateful.

There is, however, another dimension to this preoccupation with hypocrisy as a popularly recognized sin of Christians, and this is the dimension of the churches' past. As Bunting puts it, 'Media coverage of religious affairs in this country is, at a profound level, a dialogue of the secular/vestigially Christian present with its Christian past.'<sup>9</sup> Our Christian past in Britain has been one of power and privilege. In an age when, despite continuation of the national Church's formal status, all authority-bearing institutions are suffering from 'loss of deference', Christians are paying for our privileged and tainted past. This needs to be heavily underlined. Understanding this is very important for a realistic appreciation of the position of mainstream Christianity in Britain today. The Christian past may be for us a reservoir of inspiration, challenge and gratitude but the mere fact that the Christian church has for so long ruled the roost makes us fair game to exposure, ribald caricature and blasphemous parody in a manner that cannot apply to newer religions among us, like Hinduism and Islam. 'Calvinism' is a highly-favoured object of attack, because of its alleged long-term repressive, sex-obsessed, philistine, censorious hold over Scottish life.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Bunting, p. 3.

<sup>10</sup> For some salutary correctives, see the essays by R. D. Kernohan and Donald Macleod in Kernohan, ed., *The Realm of Reform. Presbyterianism and Calvinism in a Changing Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1999).

On a broader front, patriarchalism damns us in many feminist eyes, and in some makes our faith irredeemable. Then come the Crusades, persecution of homosexuals, longlasting toleration of slavery and so on – a fearful litany indeed. Truly the sins of the forefathers are being visited on us their children.<sup>11</sup> Liberated post-Christendom secularism will no longer listen to a magisterial church with a record like this. *The Scotsman's* editorial the day after the House of Commons voted to lower the age of consent for homosexuality to sixteen scornfully dismissed the considered position of most Scottish churchpeople. Opponents of the change motivated by 'bigotry, ignorance or religious belief' insisted on 'an impossibly narrow definition of what is normal'.

Strip away the cant and the prejudice, put aside the religious inhibitions to which few these days subscribe, and we are left with a question of civil and human rights...

Salacious moralising these days begins and ends with the juvenile elements of the tabloid world and a minority afflicted by an imperfect understanding of Christ's love.<sup>12</sup>

When Cardinal Thomas Winning, leader of Scotland's Catholic community, clarified the lowly position of the use of contraception on the scale of sins, the same paper gave space to a withering attack on such 'A Cardinal irrelevance':

Cardinal Winning and his opponents...can go on playing their boys' game of liberalism, conservatism, subtle shifts in the tone of the voice of authority, for as long as the Church survives. But out here, increasingly, women will not be listening. Now, we are slowly learning to shape our own definitions of freedom and fulfilment. And they lie nowhere along that old, narrow continuum between male prohibition and male permissiveness; but on another path entirely, where men and women walk as equals, and where, almost by definition, old all-male hierarchies like the one Cardinal Winning represents will find it impossible to follow.<sup>13</sup>

Loss of deference with a vengeance. Whether or not these particular issues are ones on which one would choose to go into battle, it is a powerful formative factor in the context in which the church has to forge

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. Bunting, pp. 3-4.

<sup>12</sup> *The Scotsman*, January 26, 1999, p. 14.

<sup>13</sup> Joyce McMillan, *The Scotsman*, April 16, 1999, p. 23.

an apologetic theology. As Newbigin expressed it, we are called to 'Christian witness in a culture that has rejected Christendom'.<sup>14</sup>

The past sometimes requires apology in the commoner sense of the word. An Italian author has produced a book translated under the title *When a Pope Asks Forgiveness: the Mea Culpa of John Paul II*. It assembles documents in which pope John Paul II has on no fewer than 94 occasions acknowledged the failings of the Catholic Church – on racism, anti-Semitism, crusades, war, treatment of women, persecution of Galileo, and so on. Not all Catholic thinkers have been happy, since as a divine entity the church cannot sin, according to Roman Catholic dogma. Nevertheless, as Richard John Neuhaus sums up, 'John Paul II is convinced that, if Christians are to walk upright in the next millennium, they must cross the threshold of the year 2000 on their knees.'<sup>15</sup> Others may reckon that the pope has not yet gone far enough, but it seems that his *mea culpa* has more in store.

Our God is one who forgives and forgets. Christian triumphalism is not in order as we celebrate the new millennium. Nor is there much mileage in attempting to deny responsibility for the abuses and outrages of earlier Christian ages – although we could be ready to cite some of the pluses.<sup>16</sup> It is almost as if the church is having to earn the right to be heard all over again, just like the first servants of the gospel in a pioneer missionary setting.

### 3. A Congregational Theology

The new century will need a strong ecclesiology of the local church as not only carrier but also embodiment of the gospel. A recent book-title spoke of the church as *The Public Face of the Gospel* (by J. L. Houlden, 1997),

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<sup>14</sup> Quoted by Wilbert R. Shenk, 'Lesslie Newbigin's Contribution to the Theology of Mission', in *The Bible in TransMission*, special issue (1998), pp. 3-6 at p. 3.

<sup>15</sup> Luigi Accattoli, *When A Pope Asks Forgiveness: The Mea Culpa of John Paul II* (New York, Alba House, 1998), noted by Richard John Neuhaus in *First Things* 87 (Nov. 1998), pp. 74-5. See Avery Dulles, 'Should the Church Repent?', *First Things* 88 (Dec. 1998), pp. 36-41.

<sup>16</sup> See the review in *First Things* 87 (Nov. 1998), pp. 42-50 of Thomas Cahill, *The Gifts of the Jews: How a Tribe of Desert Nomads Changed the Way Everyone Thinks and Feels* (New York, Doubleday, 1998).



which is not a characteristic evangelical affirmation. We have tended to stress faith in Christ, not the church, even faith in Christ despite the church.

One of Lesslie Newbigin's much-quoted emphases depicts the congregation as 'a hermeneutic of the gospel', 'an interpretive lens through which onlookers gain a view of the gospel in the living colours of common life'. For Newbigin this perspective answers an identity crisis which afflicts so many churches in a secular culture, unlike an earlier day in which they 'served the chaplaincy needs of a Christianised civic order'. If the question is asked 'Why the church?', Newbigin would answer: 'The authority to witness is its authority to exist: the only adequate witness is one that iterates what is visibly and truly embodied in a community of people embraced by the message.'<sup>17</sup>

Kevin Vanhoozer picks up Newbigin's tag in his solid study *Is There a Meaning in this Text?* If Jesus Christ is the pre-eminent interpreter of God's self-communication, the unique and definitive embodiment of God's self-communicative act or 'Word', then the church, Christ's body, is a secondary and derivative embodiment.

The way we live is also our 'interpretation' of the texts we read. Just as a musician interprets a text by performing, so the church is a communal performance of the Scriptures. The church – the sum total of those who bear the name of Christ – bears the responsibility of bearing, of doing, indeed of *being* the Word of God. Intended meaning must be continually extended – embodied in the words, deeds, and lives of its readers.

He develops a play on the double meaning of 'martyr', as witness whose 'martyrdom' attests the meaning he or she embodies.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Hunsberger, 'Renewing Faith', *The Bible in TransMission*, p. 13.

<sup>18</sup> Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Leicester, 1998), pp. 440-41. Cf. the pertinent comment by George Hunsberger: 'People today are not looking for a better argument that God exists and that the gospel is true. Rather, they are looking for a demonstration that life can be lived this way. Can you show me what this would look like in living colour? Is it possible to live this way in today's kind of world? Is it imaginable that I could put all my eggs in this basket and survive? Who is doing that and how? Show me. In other words,

The church in view in this paper is unambiguously the church local, partly because I believe that in the twenty-first century the national dimension of church will be less and less significant, especially in sustaining the gospel. It will have a lower profile and, at least in the mixed mainstream denominations, be increasingly confused and confusing as it seeks to accommodate pluralism. The sharply decreasing enthusiasm for church union schemes reflects a growing coolness towards national church bodies.

For the credibility – and audibility and visibility – of the gospel the local church will be the key. We probably need to think harder in the evangelical community in Scotland about the implications of this. We have majored on the ministry of the ordained, especially as expositors of the word. Are congregations simply extensions of, helpers of, the ministry of the ordained? When wise voices have been raised on the need to move on from the ministry of the word to get the shape of the congregation right, they have not always been welcome.

I want to focus here on the openness of the church, its open-textured character that allows entry at different points, without conditions. Newbigin's Indian testimony illustrates what I mean:

[F]or my first twelve years as a Bishop I was normally conducting worship in the open street – all the services of the Church without exception. My picture of the Church formed in those years is deeply etched in my mind, the picture of a group of people sitting on the ground and a larger crowd of Hindus and Muslims and others standing around listening, watching, discussing; and, thank God, when one came back a few months later some of those would be in the group in the front. So you get the sense of the Church not as something drawn out of the world into a building, but the Church sent out into the world.<sup>19</sup>

The big question is this: if the congregation in some sense is the gospel, because it must embody it, what will this entail for the ordering of its life and work? Most churches are so utterly non-transparent, which has

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the church's mission includes playing out in public view a community that lives by the patterns of the alternative regime called the reign of God.'; 'Features of the Missional Church: Some Directions and Pathways', *The Gospel and Our Culture* 25 (summer 1999), pp. 3-6, at p. 5.

<sup>19</sup> Newbigin, 'On Being the Church for the World', in Giles Ecclestone, ed., *The Parish Church? Explorations in the Relationship of the Church and the World* (London & Oxford, 1988), pp. 25-42, at p. 32.

much to do with another legacy of the past – unsuitable, badly sited buildings.

Facing us here are searching questions about the congregation's cultural setting and sensitivity. I was struck recently by some comments by Crawford Mackenzie from the Mains of Fintry Urban Ministry Trust project in Dundee:

[I]n many ways it is easier for us to send missionaries to the other side of the world than to be missionaries where we are and get to the folk on our doorstep. Like the Pharisee and the Levite we are blind to the man who lives on the other side of the road and he won't hear because we have never spoken his language. Our dominant culture like an obese elephant crushes his way out of existence and we are oblivious to it.

I was hearing about a group who were being trained in radio programming – they were about to set up a new Christian Broadcasting Station. The leader of the seminar started with an icebreaker 'Tell us, what stations do you listen to?' 'Oh we don't listen to the radio', was the unbelievable reply. What about the papers? 'Oh we don't read these papers.' This group didn't know what people listen to or what they read but they wanted to preach! Before we can preach we have to learn the language. Before we can be missionaries we have to transpose the Gospel....

They say that revival often follows a recent translation of the Bible into a new tongue.... Maybe revival will follow the physical translation of the living and lived Gospel in the life of the Church into a culture that people understand in a way that has never happened before.

It is easy to assume that, because we speak the same language (approximately!), we do not face a problem of 'translation'. Implicit here are both the literal meaning of the word and its extended missiological use to denote the whole task of cross-cultural transplantation and indigenization of the gospel.<sup>20</sup>

Crawford Mackenzie wrote of the special challenge of the UPA – the 'urban priority area' of multiple deprivation. Yet every congregation in a secularizing media-made society confronts a task of the cultural translation of the gospel. The gospel itself may not be variable, but the terms in which it is communicated, the resonances it assumes, the cultural forms in which it is embodied, the style, the vocabulary, the music – all these and

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<sup>20</sup> Cf. Lamin O. Sanneh, *Translating the Message: the Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, NY, 1989).

much more are adaptable. I judge that we would benefit from a sharper perception of the difference between the givenness of the faith and the infinitely variable ways in which it may be expressed.

Most of us have an uncomfortable sense of extraordinarily rapid change in our social and cultural environment. Perhaps we exaggerate, by a subtle version of self-importance. But we feel ourselves to be caught up in the midst of a decade or two of a tumultuous avalanche of change. Behaviours, lifestyles, artistic creations, media representations, patterns of human relationships – all manifest an almost revolutionary propensity for change. By contrast, much evangelical congregational life in Scotland has remained constant not just for decades but for generations.

A stronger theology of the congregation should help us to discriminate between the non-negotiable and scope for freedom to change, if only because of the extraordinary difference between the contexts in which congregations are set, socially, economically, educationally and so on. The same meeting of the Superintendence Committee of Edinburgh Presbytery had before it reports on two parish churches in the city. In the five years under review, one had baptized 178 babies, the other five; one had admitted 97 new members on profession of faith (the key statistic for the future), the other nine; one received in 1998 total givings of £172,000, the other £6000. I make no suggestion here that one has been more faithful, even more successful, than the other – but simply emphasize that, in respect of the ministry of the gospel, they are as different as chalk from cheese. Only a congregational approach – a vigorous theology of the congregation and its mission – will avail. Indeed, in some localities it is almost a pre-congregational mission that is needed. Some parish churches serve communities that embrace stark internal contrasts.

I recently examined a doctoral thesis on mission strategy in the Free Church of Scotland after Thomas Chalmers' adventurous example in Glasgow and Edinburgh. In some areas, one issue was how to provide for those who stayed away from church because they did not possess Sunday-best clothes. The solution was to hold special services for them alone, with bouncers at the door to exclude the well-dressed. Is respectability still a deterrent for some?

Madeline Bunting draws out one particular feature of the ethos and mentality that the media are shaping.

[T]he media increasingly focuses on people as a way of covering stories. For example, in politics a difference over policy is translated into a battle between two politicians. It is people, not issues or an institution which grab the reader's attention. What motivates that

person? What kind of person are they, what is their family background – our media shows a deep and increasingly invasive curiosity about the person. The media likes nothing better than a news story which essentially has the plot of a soap opera. That's why the monarchy over the last five years has been such a huge story; man is unfaithful to wife with old flame; woman is unfaithful to husband and is betrayed by lover...this is *Brookside* but with the added thrill of being real-life.... This presents a particular dilemma for the Christian churches which believe their message and purpose overarches the fallibility and dwarfs the significance of the individual personality.<sup>21</sup>

Traditional Evangelicalism has been strong in abstract thought-forms – doctrine, theology, creed, principles. How does it communicate the gospel to people with little or no capacity for theory? With the tabloidization of the quality papers, this incapacity is increasingly true of a growing number of people. Britain is experiencing a shift towards a more populist cultural level (with government encouragement, it often seems), which poses an immense challenge to our bookish evangelical tradition.

A number of factors combine to create a fear that congregations, particularly of a gathered kind, may develop into ghettos, as a way of coping with an increasingly uncomfortable moral environment. The monastic option may have been banished by the sixteenth-century Reformers, but it continues to exercise a subtle fascination for embattled Christians. Within the walls, we have no linguistic problems, we sing to the same hymn-sheet (note the metaphor!), we can handle a thousand-page book, listen to a half-hour address, we are at home, having turned aside, come apart, from the world. Needless to say, such a tendency magnifies the gulf between church and non-church, aggravates the difficulty of outreach, intensifies the sense of alienation on the part of the unchurched.

The haven-church stands, I suppose, at the opposite end of the spectrum from the missionary congregation. Lesslie Newbigin always emphasized 'the church's essential missionary identity'. At the same time, he was unhappy with an ecclesiology that could accommodate denominations.

[T]he denomination is the visible form that the Church takes in a society which has accepted the secularization of public life and the privatization of religion, so that the variety of denominations corresponds, if you like, to the variety of brands available on the shelves of the supermarket. Everyone is free to take his choice.

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<sup>21</sup> Bunting, p. 6.

The denomination, either singly or together, cannot be the bearer of the challenge of the Gospel to our society, because it is itself the outward and visible form of an inward and spiritual surrender to the ideology of that society. And, therefore, if we are to recover the sense that the local church is the Holy Catholic Church for that bit of the world in which God has set it (and that is the parish principle) then we have to challenge this whole acceptance of the denominational principle as being the normal form in which Church life is expressed. I find this both a necessary and a frightening thought!<sup>22</sup>

Newbigin's concern can be developed in different directions. From one point of view, he is affirming the principle of localism – the calling of the local church to be the church catholic with a parish, i.e. area, function expressive of the claim of the Lordship of Christ over the whole of a community's life. It is an emphasis worth pondering. The broader evangelical constituency in Britain has in recent years witnessed a spate of new-church formation and an epidemic of switching between congregations or denominations. Consumerism reigns, and mission to the congregation's neighbourhood suffers. Such trends expose the weakness of evangelical ecclesiology for generations. I advocate for the next century a congregational theology.

#### **4. A Modest Theology**

Reference has already been made to Cardinal Winning's recent clarification that use of artificial contraception was for Catholics a far less serious sin than adultery, rape and the like. Similar media interest attended his statement that abortion, although a grave failing, was nevertheless open to forgiveness. On both occasions, a somewhat chastened Catholicism publicly clarified the relation of two commonly berated positions in its moral teaching to first-order, or higher-order, issues of Christian faith. Contraception is 'very, very small' compared with the great demands of 'justice and truth and love and peace'. Abortion, although truly reprehensible, is not beyond the reach of pardon.

I would generalize from these incidents, to propose that a certain modesty or humility is appropriate not only (if I may say so) to a Roman Catholic Church battered by sensationalized exposés but to other mainstream churches with a patchy past and an unimpressive present. My argument links up also with the earlier emphasis on the basic missionary task now facing the church in Scotland. For it is a mark of a missionary

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<sup>22</sup> Newbigin, 'On Being the Church for the World', pp. 41-2.

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mode of churchly presence that some issues which rightly engage extended and intense concern in the heyday of Christendom loom much lower on the scale of priorities. Most Evangelicals would view abortion as a weighty matter. (The Christians of the very first missionary movement from Jerusalem into the Graeco-Roman world uncompromisingly condemned abortion.) But contraception ranks much lower – and other issues, such as Sunday observance, likewise.

In part, this differentiation between priorities is a matter of economy of effort. When energies are needed to transpose the church and the theology into a missionary key, secondary objectives have to be left aside. In part, it may arise from a recognition that protesting or campaigning, as a minority, on concerns of personal or public behaviour that affect the majority, is not a promising strategy in respect of winning an opening for the gospel. In such a context, law does not pave the way for grace. In part, it reflects the acknowledgement that, although Christianity remains the national religion, the actual strength of the Kirk on the ground makes trading on that special status inappropriate. A church that patently is making such a poor fist of its most fundamental task – making others disciples of Jesus Christ – has little right to be holding forth on the ordering of public policy and social life.

Intrinsic to the consumerist mind-set which now looms large in our attitude is testing claims made for products, whether comparatively, in *Which?*, or singly. So a church whose advertising promises a miracle a week (according to recent reports) exposes itself to scrutiny and challenge. What will Jesus Christ assuredly deliver? Will he deliver health, wealth and prosperity, as one false gospel holds out? If not, perhaps happiness? 'I am H-A-P-P-Y.' 'Peace, perfect peace, in this dark world of sin'? We must beware of overselling the gospel, or to put it another way, we must be crystal-clear what it is that the gospel promises.

Ecumenical documents have an infuriating habit of using indicatives when other moods of verbs would be more appropriate. 'Bishops are guardians of apostolic faith and unity' is easily falsified; 'bishops are called to be, ought to be guardians...' at least merits consideration. When applied to the sacraments, indicatives often give the impression that they are effective *ex opere operato*. My interest in baptism hinges partly on the fact that, perhaps uniquely, theological statements about it are open to empirical verification. If baptism is incorporation into Christ in his body the church (a common enough affirmation), there has to be an outcome that is visible, identifiable in some way – unless the church is wholly

invisible. If baptism is initiation, which includes the element of beginning, there ought to be evidence of continuation.

Making theological claims conditional, or suspending them on disproof, is scarcely a feasible alternative. The situation of the church in most of the West, post-Christendom and afflicted with sharp decline and grave internal pluralism, counsels a measured judiciousness, a caution in our confidence – in fact, the very opposite of triumphalism. By our fruits we shall be known, so Jesus taught. It is a radical test, which others who do not know Jesus or his teaching, are sure to apply. Hollow facades will be stripped away, sham exposed, cover-ups exposed.

It is one of the oddities of living in this post-Christendom world that many of the unchurched know something of the reality that we should be displaying. Bunting puts her finger on it with uncanny precision:

There is a powerful voice in secular society which has exacting standards of how the churches should be matching up to the Gospel and the Sermon on the Mount.<sup>23</sup>

This voice is not infallible. Popular pressure which purports to know God's will better than the teachers of Scripture must not be allowed to stampede us into compliance, which is a basic instinct of broad-church liberalism. But it is uncomfortably true that opinion-leaders outside the church have sometimes led the church into a deeper understanding of its own Scriptures.

As we move into the twenty-first century, Christian theology must be careful to avoid maximalist hype. This should not entail any dilution of our true convictions. It requires us to know the times – mindful of the church's not-always-glorious past which lives on to dog our steps, determined to make our way in the disturbing present, preparing for an uncertain future.

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<sup>23</sup> Bunting, p. 9.



# WHAT KIND OF GOD FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY?

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Strictly speaking, the title of this paper is over-ambitious. Consider the following:

*A hundred years is a long, long time in the realm of prediction.* Forty years ago ‘empowerment’ was barely discussed and the word ‘sexism’ hardly known. Thirty years ago we did not even have the microchip. Ten years ago the Personal Computer was still a luxury and only five years ago the World Wide Web, e-mail and the Internet belonged in academic, elitist enclaves, as did the term ‘postmodernism’. Many predictions for the twentieth century had not, after all, been fulfilled. There was *not* global peace. The world was not, in the end, ruled by communism. We have not achieved a colony on the moon or had manned trips to Mars as scientist and futurist Arthur Clarke had expected.

So what this paper really does is ask questions about the Christian God, relevant to the turn-of-the-century.

*There will be many kinds of experiences of the new century.* One short paper cannot tackle the meaning of God in the new century for every kind of person everywhere on the planet. In spite of globalisation and culture-standardisation, the world still contains some contrasting cultures, economies and settings. This implies a variety of starting points for talking from Scripture about God. Liberation theology, for example, challenges us to begin all theology ‘with the 30 million hungry people in the world.’<sup>1</sup> Western theology had never thought of starting there. Again, the anxieties of a rural farmer in Rwanda might pose different questions for a doctrine of God than those prompted by the angst of a Philadelphian lawyer. Neither does a CNN live report about refugees flooding out of Kosovo admit us as deeply as we think into the suffering of a people whose horrific experiences, so inexpressible – and different yet again from Rwanda. This all tells us that the world is still ‘multichrome’ and that western theology must never forget it.

All the same, the western world needs attention too. Western theology must take its own prescription. We must translate God to our own culture (‘contextualise’) and so make a contribution to clearing up its creeping individualism, cynicism, pessimism and self-destruction. Hence, this short

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<sup>1</sup> The theme taken up by J. Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy. Taking the Crucified People from the Cross*, (Maryknoll, 1994).

paper restricts itself to some local, critical issues about God but in the presence of other cultures and dilemmas on the planet – cultures which simply cannot afford our luxury of navel-gazing.

*God is not a utility.* If we are going to be pedantic, it is, strictly speaking, open to misunderstanding in *Christian* theology to have a title like *What kind of God for the Twenty-first Century?* God is not one more of capitalism's market commodities, there to be recycled and repackaged so as now to be a God *for* something new, yet again. A suitable tuning of the question in the title, therefore, could be 'What kind of God *to* the twenty-first century?' The preposition *for* could suggest God's being manufactured for us, if not actually by us. The preposition 'to' suggests divine initiative, movement – in other words, it suggests *grace*. The question is: how does the God of Jesus Christ come to us at the millennium-beginning, in divine grace? How does God come to this western society, and how does he connect, in grace, with some of its distinctive, turn-of-the-century, struggles?

### **The challenge of the approaching century**

We have already seen that futurism, the art of looking through the new-decade keyhole, is a bit of a gamble. But even if some current predictions are only partially correct the future is not for the half-hearted. As an example take *reproductive technology and genetics*. The cloning of human parts and the Genome Project together offer visions of an anthropoid hypermarket, daily trading in cultured human parts and genetic cosmetic. This murky vision falls into place alongside the continuing argument about the meaning of the self, the brain and the mind – and so of the precarious, fragile nature of human identity in a secularist world. And the precariousness of human identity darkly raises the prospect of a precarious God – and vice versa. *Micro-technology*, indeed, has an eye to taking over from God altogether. There is talk of a day coming soon, when memory could be downloaded into our brains, perhaps into bodies already cloned from our own, so proving reincarnation to be a surprisingly viable kind of belief after all. Seemingly, a resurrecting God is *not* needed for life after death.

How might God come to a world where we could all, one day, carry microchip implants in our heads and access the internet and other visuals through tiny screens on the cornea? In this world, wars might be bloodless, carried out by micro-craft, tiny synthetic insect-warriors in the air, cheap,

barely visible and deadly.<sup>2</sup> And how might God come to a world where multi-national financial institutions may establish total continental monopolies (a serious prospect for Europe in, say, insurance and banking). What is God to such a world where the powers have so completely and invisibly eroded the status of individuals and minority cultures?

But much else is also at stake – in the esoteric world of cultural and critical studies where suspicion of authors and mistrust of texts throw ideas, like a pack of cards, into the air. This prompts an even more fundamental question: how might God come in grace to the West through the clouds of its self-questioning and uncertainty? What kind of God is going to encounter some of those critical voices steadily shaping the outlook of our western world. We are cautioned on every side not to make bland generalisations about this phenomenon of ‘postmodernism’ as if it always implies relativism, provisionality and individualism. So let’s just say that it *seemingly* and *usually* does! In addition, I like to make a distinction, not, alas, shared by any expert I know of. This is a distinction between *postmodernism* (an academic philosophical debate of a high esoteric order) and *postmodernity* (a related web of popular culture and thinking in economics, media and the arts). Which drives which, or whether the relationship is symbiotic, is still an open question. *Postmodernism* in this distinction sometimes smacks of the self-indulgence of a bourgeois culture with too much time on its hands. However, both words, *postmodernism* and *postmodernity*, support a culture that condemns dogmatism – although they both do it in a dogmatic tone! Both encourage the art of suspicion (if not indeed cynicism), and both champion embodied, experienced reality over against claims to pure mind, the so-called scientific and objective realities. Both engender diversity. So what kind of God comes in grace with a voice to both these versions of our culture? Several answers spring to mind.

### 1. A God above suspicion

Out of Marxist analysis in particular came the extension of critiques of power into many corners of human and social practice. All around us, analysts have turned over polished flagstones to find underneath the ugly, wriggling world of self-interest, manipulation and control. Whilst this process began with analysis of written texts as instruments of hidden manipulation and control, the probe has reached to the indictment of

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<sup>2</sup> All from *The Guardian Saturday Review* 16 January 1999.

education, government, science, religion and all grandees of morality whoever they are.

Some of the results have been devastating for institutionalised religion. And fully deserved, too, given recent catastrophes stretching from televangelists, through the *9 O' Clock Service* to reports of child abuse and spouse abuse by church leaders. Views of Christian leadership which have emphasised the authority of the leader have had to face afresh the Reformed doctrine of human depravity and delve into both motive and method in their Christian leadership. Even now, many are reluctant to meet that challenge. But, more to the point, the analysis of power as abuse is provoking a fresh look at what it means for our doctrine of God. We find diverse responses.

*Jurgen Moltmann, as well as the more radical critique of Feminist theologies, has led the way.* Moltmann declares that he has found an unhealthily patriarchal picture of God in the Old Testament particularly.<sup>3</sup> We should not be totally put off our stroke by this. Tony Thistleton helpfully reminds us of Ian Ramsey's rule that the best practice with models of God is to balance one model by the others, rather than isolating one and making it supreme.<sup>4</sup> Moltmann's complaint would be final if we made the patriarchal God of the Old Testament the single, controlling model. But the metaphor is balanced, for example, by such images as the Shepherd, the Gardener, the Bridegroom, the Sacrificial Husband, the Nurturer, the Defender *etc.*

This balancing becomes yet more pronounced in the New Testament, where the Father is also the vulnerable protector running out to the prodigal. He likes to party and throws a feast, welcoming the riff-raff to it, so turning power structures upside down in order that the first may become last. *God's* power, even in the Old Testament, means much more than just an intense form of the human power found in the human world.<sup>5</sup> Jesus himself signals this. He bars his disciples from the form of power which lords it over others. He himself submits to his persecutors. By word and

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<sup>3</sup> The accusation that all religion is a power-bid is handled with great caution and competence by Anthony C. Thistleton, *Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self. On meaning, Manipulation and Promise*, (Edinburgh, 1995), pp. 28-32.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>5</sup> We note, for instance, the contrast drawn by Thistleton between the Hebrew description 'Almighty' (God's having power over all things) and the late scholastic title 'Omnipotent' (being able to do all things), *Ibid.*, pp. 29-30.

action, Jesus critiques power many centuries before Derrida and Foucault find their way on to the scene! To be 'imitators of God', his servants have to renounce all forms of manipulative action, speaking and writing (e.g. Matt. 23:7, 33; 1 Cor. 1:18-2:5; 2 Cor. 4:2; 6:4-7; 11:13, 15, 20 with 11.30, 33). The equality of male and female reaches doctrinal status (e.g. Gal. 3:26-29; Eph. 5:21).

*A surprising response has emerged on the more adventurous wing of American evangelicalism.* In the collaborative work *The Openness of God*, Clark Pinnock and others have returned, although they do not say so, to Augustine's conundrum: why does God not destroy evil? Either because he will not (therefore is not all-good) or cannot (therefore is not all-powerful). The end of the twentieth century seems the right time to these writers, to take the plunge and trade in the omnipotence of God. The new approach advocates a kind of pre-incarnation self-emptying (*kenosis*). God voluntarily disempowers himself in providence before there is a *kenosis* of the Son in redemption. Although the writers strongly deny any identity with process theology, the similarities are more striking than the differences. In both views God cannot guarantee outcomes. In process theology God *struggles* a little more, but in both views God cannot guarantee the final outcome, the eschaton. It is only *probable* that God's good purpose for creation will prevail in the end. The motive for this paradigm shift is altogether worthy. It is responding to the slur that the God of Jesus Christ is static and closed to the creation, lacking vulnerability and openness and therefore lacking genuine love and personality. God is now truly a postmodern. His ends are provisional only. He is listening, tolerant and responsive to other voices. Prayer, quite literally, changes his mind and his action. A quotation catches the flavour of this very well, arguing that, 'love rather than almighty power is the primary perfection of God...God does not overcome his enemies (for example) by forcing but by loving them. God works, not in order to subject our wills but to transform our hearts. Love and not sheer power overcomes evil – God does not go in for power tactics.'<sup>6</sup>

We note in the statement some interpretative glosses on the traditional view of divine power. For instance, it assumes that all power has to be that which 'overcomes' someone and does so 'by forcing'. It speaks of 'sheer' power and of 'power tactics'. These are perfectly valid ways of

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<sup>6</sup> Clark Pinnock, 'Systematic Theology' in C. Pinnock *et al.*, *The Openness of God. A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God*, (Downers Grove, 1994), p. 114.

describing the operations of *human* power as they are being critiqued today – and as we actually know them operating in the world. But, as we have seen, Jesus is clear in condemning such marks even of human exercise of power. However, it is an unproven assumption that the operation of *divine* power necessarily carries such connotations too. Perhaps that very divine power, and not just divine love, can *set free*, rather than ‘overcome’, or ‘force’. It certainly does so in the Bible. After all, the advocates of the ‘openness of God’ do not deny *all* power to God. For them, God has usually delegated out, or shared, the divine power but might still personally exercise it when so choosing. So, one asks, when God acts with a power formerly held in reserve, what kind of power is it? Is it a forcing, coercive power? If it is not such a kind of power on these special occasions it does not need to carry such dark connotations in the traditional view either.

Once committed to embarrassment about the divine power, a descent down the slippery slope picks up nicely. The writers, almost all Wesleyan, find themselves saying much that would make Wesley take up the foetus position in his grave every bit as much as Calvin would in his. I can’t help wondering what Wesley would have made of words like these: ‘But we all [the authors] agree that it is, at least, quite reasonable to view petitionary prayer as a means whereby *we grant God the permission* to influence our...states of mind and share with us...insights...that will help us better live out our Christian commitment’<sup>7</sup> (italics mine). On this view, true, we certainly need not fear a manipulative and power-broking God!

But also skidding down the slope, for the authors, is God’s knowledge of the future. Pervasive to the *Openness of God* writers is the view that God’s knowledge is limited. Very limited. God cannot know the outcome of God’s own actions, and certainly does not know the outcome of human actions, even though divine wisdom and knowledge can ensure a good stab at divine prediction. The reason for this jettisoning of foreknowledge is that it implies determination – in other words, coercion, a forcing, interventionist power.

In the redefined ‘open God’ we have a God eminently suited to the year 2000. A good intention – can we be sure that this God is not a designer construction and is indeed the God of Jesus Christ and of revelation? We should not criticise *The Openness of God* writers without taking seriously

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<sup>7</sup> David Basinger, ‘Practical Implications’ in Clark Pinnock *et al*, *The Openness of God*, p.162.

these concerns and seeking to emulate their efforts in tackling them. So first, some positive points:

1. The idea of the 'open God' does right to emphasise God's love as the heart of Christian thought, drowned as this message is, so often, in a sea of legalism and cold intellectualism.
2. The idea of the 'open God' effectively brings out the fact that God takes on a vulnerable embodiment and communicates through incarnation and weakness.
3. The idea of the 'open God' rightly rejects classical Greek notions of God as a remote being, one who is static or timeless ('stable but not static', as someone once said).
4. The idea of the 'open God' rightly attempts to counter the taunt that the God of the biblical texts is manipulative, power-obsessed and coercive.
5. The concern for an 'open God' is right to reject any notion of prayer in which the pray-er is somehow superfluous.

However, some initial cautionary comments also seem appropriate:

1. As indicated already, we avoid a God of *sheer* or *coercive* power, by balancing the power-model with other models. Then the power is not 'sheer' or coercive at all. It is in balance with God's role as shepherd of his people (indeed shepherd of creation, as Ps. 104 has Jahweh), the *ruach* (breath) of nature, builder of the church, defender of the weak, and most of all incarnate servant in solidarity with humanity.
2. If the 'open God' is modest, so ought we to be. Gerald Bray is severe on the authors of *The Openness of God* at this point: 'It is hard to believe that in the late twentieth century a few radicals have arrived at a truth which has escaped generations of sincere searchers.'<sup>8</sup> In fairness to the writers, some similar objection was directed at Martin Luther by the church authorities. And those advocating an 'open God' may not be as few as Gerald Bray suggests. Yet they are few enough. Certainly a minority within their own constituency, and within the broader tradition of conservative Christianity. It is, after all, nearly 100 years since Edwin Hatch wrote his book about the Greek influence upon Christian theology<sup>9</sup> and few conservative theologians have found this, ever since, a reason for denying divine power, providence and foreknowledge or for casting doubt

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<sup>8</sup> Gerald Bray, *The Personal God: Is the classical understanding of God untenable?* (Carlisle, 1998), p. 4.

<sup>9</sup> Edwin Hatch, *The Influence of Greek Ideas and Usage upon the Christian Church*, London, Williams and Norgate, 1901 (from Hatch's original Hibbert Lectures given in 1888).

upon the sureness of the end-times. Even a theologian as freewheeling as Jürgen Moltmann considers the future hope sure and compatible with genuine human actions.<sup>10</sup>

3. If, as I suggest, it is right to be suspicious of a straight analogy of divine power with human power, then it may not be necessary to resort to such reckless remedies as that recommended in *The Openness of God*. Should we not draw back from assuming that all forms of power must include the clumsy and coercive ways of human manipulateness? That means that God's almighty freedom is of a different order than human exercise of power. It includes endless, loving respectful humility to achieve its ends. A phrase that I heard at a recent conference discussion captures this well – it goes something like: 'When God foreknows an event, he foreknows it as contingent and in its contingency.' Contingency here refers to the free and natural functioning of non-human nature.<sup>11</sup> But translated into human actions it might say something like: 'when God foreknows an event involving human action, he foreknows it in its full integrity as a (relatively) free action'. If God did this only once then the compatibility of divine foreknowledge and human freedom is secured in principle. But in fact most scholars of the Pinnock school would readily agree that it has happened at least once. They would agree that it happened in the work of redemption, predicted unconditionally by the prophets even though involving free actions of good and evil humans alike (returned to in next section).

4. We could be bold here and turn *the Openness of God* proposition on its head. If foreknowing does imply an inevitability then, on the case just made, it implies the inevitability of human freedom in the human event foreknown by God. Divine foreknowledge, thus, is not only compatible with human freedom but positively guarantees it, perhaps is even indispensable to it. But let's just say that a congruence of definite foreknowledge and free human actions should not be simply ruled out by the analogy of human willing and causing, particularly by fear of

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<sup>10</sup> In an exchange at a lecture for the Society For the Study of Theology in April 1999, he suggests that the good deeds of the faithful are 'remembered' and incorporated into the 'eschaton'. Another way in which free actions of humans converge with the divine will!

<sup>11</sup> Colin Gunton, *The Triune Creator. A Historical and Systematic Study*, (Edinburgh, 1998), p. 176 for the distinction. My extension of this principle into human actions should not be attributed to him, of course.



coercion.<sup>12</sup> The Bible, to which the authors of the *Openness of God* usually appeal, seems to envisage just some such congruence of divine and human freedoms. Is this not what is implied by Peter's claim that 'This One, by the set will and foreknowledge of God, was given up by lawless hands to be killed by crucifixion' (Acts 2.23)? We leave aside here the unresolved conundrums of just *how* 'set will and foreknowledge' might not infringe human freedoms, any more than *how* the OT unconditional predictions of redemption, (welcomed by *The Openness of God*) would certainly come true without infringing freedoms. It is merely a case of caution: jibes about a control-freak God should not set off theological panic-selling: such as denying foreknowledge and the unshakeable foundations of God's redemptive purpose. There need be no provisionality at all concerning the eschaton and the final hope. However, there *is* a case for 'refreshing' (to deploy a computer term), or re-stating, the notion of power when applying it to God. We shall see later why this is so important. Incidentally, not all see non-coercion as the absolute virtue. Sometimes the right to life outweighs the right to choose, *e.g.* physical intervention to forestall suicide attempts. Equally, in the right caring environment, many lives have been saved by invasive force-feeding of young people with eating disorders. In these cases the patients, the young people themselves, mainly approve these actions afterwards.

The essence of God's humility seems to be, not that God divests God's own self of power, but that God exercises it with infinite love, sensitivity, humility, wisdom, tenderness and faithfulness to covenant. The purpose of

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<sup>12</sup> Colin Gunton is right to oppose Platonist views of divine omniscience in which eternal (timeless) static forms and ideas fix the flux of created events. However, not all views of foreknowledge need to be 'Platonist' and, as Gunton wisely comments, 'there is much yet to be said about the concepts of time and eternity'. *Ibid.*, p. 85. Science, for example, is exploring more radical thought about the non-linear nature of time, and theoretically conceptualising time travel. Does the 'time traveller' necessarily affect the free agency of the events that he visits and can therefore later predict when returning to the past?

For a skilled defence of compatibility between omniscience and human freedom see W. L. Craig, *The Only Wise God. The Compatibility of Divine Foreknowledge and Human Freedom* (Grand Rapids, 1987). See also D. Macleod, *Behold Your God* (Fearn, 1995), pp. 208-12. A respectful but more cautious view appears in B. Davies, *Philosophy of Religion. A Guide* (London, 1998).

divine power is always wise and loving, the exercise always modest and respectful of freedoms given, the working always mysterious. But no more mysterious than the Trinity, for which the *Openness of God* authors have a lot of time.

5. A biblical view of God will want to carry this convergence of human freedom and divine power right into the realm of prayer. Prayer remains a free human action that evokes a response from God, altogether foreknown but still free – answered because it is itself nurtured and encouraged by the Holy Spirit.<sup>13</sup> It will still be validly human and yet capable of an answering – both a freely offered prayer and a confident prayer.

We mention, in closing, one other (unlikely) source which replies to the accusation that God is a power freak: none other than John Calvin. Luther and Calvin are often blamed for the dark and tyrannical views of God which are the legacy of much Western Christianity, especially in Scotland. They are not totally free of blame, perhaps. But in fact they mainly offered a challenge to the fear and dread that marked doctrines of purgatory and judgement and where the keys of death and hell lay delegated in the hands of men. But more important, Calvin laced his work with a sense of God's accommodation and identification with human weakness. The metaphor of God's revelation as 'God babbling' in baby talk in order to communicate with us is well-known. For Calvin, the power of God frequently, though not always, works with endless patience and indulgence with human stupidity. God's power is never 'sheer' power but the working of an ever-benign wisdom.

## 2. A God of Hope

It is now widely observed that whilst postmodernity brings freedoms and affirms minorities, the downside can be a disappearance of stability and hope. There is some truth in the claim of the authors of *The Openness of God* that modern people no longer value the Platonist virtue of changelessness. Stability is boring. Change is exciting and interesting. But are there dangerous undercurrents here? We know that 'change' is still the greatest stress-maker in the industrialised world. Change of job or of established relationships are stress chart-toppers. The new postmodern virtue of fast change is a mixed blessing. Thistleton cites the perceptive observation of David Lyon: 'Here is one way of seeing the postmodern: it is a debate about reality. Is the world of solid scientific facts and purposive history...mere wishful thinking? Or worse, the product of some scheming

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<sup>13</sup> Gunton, p. 234.

manipulation by the powerful?...What are we left with? A quicksand of ambiguity... artificial images, flickering from the TV screen, or joyful liberations from definitions of reality.’<sup>14</sup> Thistleton comments: ‘The new reality seems to be the “virtual” reality of electronic or simulated constructs.... But what, in these circumstances would count as a “real” thing? ... Is anything “solid”?’<sup>15</sup>

We greatly underestimate the stress, aimlessness and, ironically, the self-generating boredom that thrives on this strange, fluid, unstable culture. We are repeatedly told of the liberation that it brings to our world, while at the same time we find ourselves living in a Prozac society.

But this is not all. One reason offered for today’s lack of commitment to church, or to anything else, is that people lack an *identity* with which to make that commitment. In the fluidity of our postmodern culture we are only a series of masks and roles. We are functionaries. We do superman and wonderwoman changes of functions at high speed daily: now employee, now learner, now spouse, now parent. The *self*, the *constant*, disappears as we become merely passive conduits of endless information. Descartes is dead, his ‘Cartesian dualism’ finished. The ghost in the machine has been busted. We are, after all, only electrical particles charging away in response to stimuli. The ‘self’, we are told, is an illusion – even though, by the same token, it has to be an illusion who writes books and shares with us these insights. ‘Today the self is an animal with cultural inscriptions [signs] written over its skin.’<sup>16</sup> There is no soul, no self. So there is no private self and no privacy guaranteed. But still the ‘illusion’ of the self just won’t go away. Close circuit television and sound surveillance is growing particularly in the workplace, not excluding washrooms and toilets. But we cannot complain about this if no self exists. We are just processors of a local culture, there is no self left to be respected.

What does this say about the kind of God who comes to our world today? Well, if there is no ‘self’ we cannot speak any longer of ‘God’.<sup>17</sup> The loss of self always threatens to bring the loss of God, both in tortured experience and in theology. But what if God actually *restores the self* (Ps. 23 – he restores my ‘soul’, my ‘self’)? What if there is a God who holds

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<sup>14</sup> Thistleton, p. 132.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Don Cupitt, as ever, taking the curse to its logical conclusion, as cited by Thistleton, p. 106.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 105.

selves in being, loves them and saves them? Does not such a God affirm everlasting worth, which means everlasting self? Yes, and even the God who pronounces judgement is affirming a human self to be judged, a morally responsible being, implying the highest dignity and the greatest compliment that God could pay such a being. The death of the 'ghost in the machine' may slay simple uncomplicated dualism, but it does not require the premature death of the self. It may only point to the holistic nature of the self, as the doctrine of the resurrection has for centuries.

Moltmann's turn earlier this century towards eschatology in *Theology of Hope*<sup>18</sup> is now showing itself to have been remarkably perceptive. If anything, the subject is more pressing today than when he first breathed new life into it. For a God who ensures the future speaks hope into a present widely perceived as aimless fluidity and shapelessness. The notion of a future hope is not, of course, without its problems. Admittedly, it is not always the case that belief in a 'second coming' gives shape and purpose to people's lives. Apocalyptic can actually inspire withdrawal or world-denying escape, as is the case in some 'fundamentalist' quarters.<sup>19</sup> The certainty of hope can induce complacency and non-activism. But the alternative is worse. What is the implication of a God who might yet stumble at the last hurdle, as in process theology, and arguably even in the 'open God' theology? Certainly such a God cannot give any reason why 'those who have this hope within them' should 'purify themselves as he is pure'. The reason that we paused earlier to consider the *Openness of God* was to secure the reliability of God in this matter of a 'sure and certain hope'. There may be all kinds of 'provisionality' in *our knowledge and faith*, but it is suicide to the whole idea of a God of hope, to extend that provisionality to the *object* of faith and knowledge, God himself.

### 3. A Trinitarian God

Globalisation and internationalisation are still contributing to the alienation of the self in western society. Individuals are swallowed up in conglomerates and bureaucracies. We are being warned that with the increase of European unity we may expect there to be much more of this amongst financial institutions especially. No-one seems to have given much thought to the impact that this kind of financial power has upon

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<sup>18</sup> J. Moltmann, *Theology of Hope* (London, 1967).

<sup>19</sup> Sobering candour may be found on this throughout Ulrich H. J. Kortner, *The End of the World. A Theological Interpretation*, (Westminster, 1995).

democracy and ability of individuals to contribute to shaping their own lives. Alienation and isolation are on the increase with the collapse of permanent relationships, and of families or other small community units. This observation leads us to the phenomenal revival of theological writing about the Trinity.

In one sense, the doctrine of a social trinity might actually resonate for postmodern people. Postmodernism, after all, holds only to community-bound knowledge. There is no objective court of appeal above that community. All experience of knowledge is really the product of a 'local' cultural community. It is therefore only a local, culture-bound knowledge and local 'truth'. That is, it is 'true' only in the sense that it is held to and lived out by a number of people. There is no such thing as an 'individual' Cartesian knowledge. The Trinity, on this understanding, could be taken as the *supreme* example of such a culture. All divine knowledge is the knowledge equally possessed by Father, Son and Holy Spirit in the Trinity's intra-divine and exclusively enjoyed life. *There is no objective knowledge above the Trinitarian community knowledge.* And no other intelligence may possess that knowledge as each of the three and the three in community possesses it. Postmodern insight into the dynamic and communal nature of knowledge still has to do business with a Christian epistemology – one in which there *is* an absolute knowledge, that of the divine Trinity.

However, the doctrine of the Trinity may also contain a deeper contradiction of the critical postmodern theory of knowledge. The Christian tradition has usually held that Trinitarian knowledge is, in principle, something that the Three stoop to share reliably with another culture – the culture of the community of human sinners. 'He became human that we might become divine' that is, be drawn into the fellowship of the divine Trinity. So the cultural knowledge of a knowing community, the Trinity, *can* be shared! It is not entirely local after all, not even though there is the widest of culture gaps – that great gap between a holy, infinite God and his rebellious, selfish human creation. Theologians have expressed it in many different ways, such as God taking humanity into the divine,<sup>20</sup> or adopting humanity into Trinitarian community or love. This is a God who has the postmodern virtues (*e.g.* humility, persuasion and tolerance) without the postmodern problem (unknowability). Moreover, the knowledge shared is not just bland, scientific transfer of intellectual content, but that richer kind

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<sup>20</sup> See, for example, David S. Cunningham, *These Three Are One. The Practice of Trinitarian Theology*, (Oxford, 1998), p. 8.

of knowledge praised by postmodern pundits – participative knowledge. For ‘we are called into...participation within the Christian community because of that community’s bond with Christ...we are called into an intimate bond and mutual participation with Christ by the mutual participation that always characterises the very being of God’.<sup>21</sup>

The postmodern world also strives to preserve plurality against the onslaught of uniformity and bureaucracy. The divine Trinity, too, stands for diversity, richness and life over and above standardisation and the almighty scientific Reason. We all know of the famous claim of Karl Rahner that the western Church has virtually got on with its life as if it were really purely monotheist at heart rather than Trinitarian. An exaggeration and partly unfair to be sure, but perceptive all the same. One way in which this tendency pushes through the surface is in the somewhat boring way that we have described God. I once found a theologian from Eastern Orthodoxy with a copy of Louis Berkhof’s *Systematic Theology* conspicuously placed on a bookshelf behind his head. Surprised, I asked him what he thought of it. He made the customary complimentary comments, and then said something like: ‘The trouble with Reformed doctrines of God is that they treat God primarily as if he is pure Mind.’ Reformed theology’s favourite ways of describing God *are* highly noetic and individual: foreknowledge, will, predestination, unknowability: they all predominate. Too much of Reformed Theology may indeed seem to resemble the solitary God sitting, thinking, decreeing and pronouncing (the ‘Counsel of Redemption’ is a possible exception and ironically the least biblically signalled). In the full flush of reformed, scholastic schematisation God looks as if made in the image of the Enlightenment, the God of rationalist modernity – one that Calvin would not have recognised. It is significant that Berkhof has very little to say of the Holy Spirit. Now it is Calvin’s turn to be found in the foetal position!<sup>22</sup> The very critics of Reformed Theology, like the writers of *The Openness of God*, tumble into the same trap too, in their preoccupation with divine determinism and knowledge.<sup>23</sup>

Hence, our theologian from Eastern Orthodoxy opted for a God who, though drawn from the writings of the early Fathers, could also take the virtues of postmodernity: unpredictable, rich, diverse, immanent and

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 186.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>23</sup> Gunton sees the idea of the Trinitarian mediation as the answer to this sort of thinking.

relational, so that bare reason is just one part of a much broader relationship with creation including embodiment or incarnation. Above all, this God is Trinitarian so that God's *essential* nature is community. Over-private people, weak on listening skills, and on human relationships, tend to be bores, preoccupied with their own mental interests. Highly sociable people tend to be interesting and full of unexpected anecdotes and wisdom. The Trinitarian God is not grey, predictable and with no further ideas than the ones we see. He is a God of fireworks (the pillar of fire, Sinai's lightshow, a bush that you can't put out) and a God of waterworks (the flood, the water out of the rock, the parting of a sea here and there). Some have envisioned an eternal 'dance' of the Trinity, others the music of the Trinitarian relationships.<sup>24</sup> Moltmann has forced us to think of a God with a future not just a distant and timeless present. The Trinity in this conception speaks of 'divine sociability' and condescension, just as Calvin did, hundreds of years ago. This is the answer to our question at the beginning: what kind of God to the century-beginning? How does God come in grace to the distinctive struggle of this turn-of-the-century western society? The answer certainly includes this – that God comes in Trinitarian welcome, crossing the culture-gulf and inviting us through the crucified Son to identity, hope and divine society.

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<sup>24</sup> Cf. Cunningham, pp. 129-35, 156-9. See Colin Gunton's use for exploring the incarnation, in, *Yesterday and Today. A Study of Continuities in Christology* (London, 1983), pp. 115-17, 121.

# SPIRITUALITY FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

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## Introduction

There is a phenomenal interest in 'spirituality' in our contemporary culture. David Tracy, the American theologian describes what he calls the 'strange return of God' to our secular society.<sup>1</sup> The concept of 'spirituality' which many have adopted is not limited to the Christian religion. Indeed, the 'widespread decline in traditional religious practice in the West runs parallel with an ever-increasing hunger for spirituality'<sup>2</sup> because Christianity is not always associated with spirituality. Thus many people adopt a 'pick-and-mix' approach to religion in general, taking a little bit of this and then a little bit of that from this and then that religion, without becoming committed to any religion in particular. Roszak, in a study in 1976, commenting on the rising curiosity in the West for mystical experiences, condemned it as being 'the biggest introspective binge any society in history has undergone'.

Yet, the hunger is real and the challenge this movement offers our churches should not be lightly dismissed as a passing fad. If Augustine was correct in saying 'Thou hast made us for thyself and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee' then the fascination which our postmodern culture has for 'the sacred' may well be viewed as an expression of God's relentless longing to share his life and love with those who are created in his image. Some years ago, Harvey Cox commented

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<sup>1</sup> David Tracy, *On Naming The Present: God, Hermeneutics and Church* (London, 1994), pp. 42-5. Kathleen Norris' book *Cloister Walk* (London, 1999), an account of life in a Benedictine Monastery, was originally published by Riverside Books in America and surprised its publisher by selling over 200,000 copies and appearing on the *New York Times* best-seller list. The Third International Multidisciplinary Conference on 'Spirituality and Health', held at Durham Castle from 29 September to 1 October 1999, explored the relationship between spirituality, health and healing and contained workshops on movement and art therapies, meditation, shamanism, Buddhism, Christian Mysticism and Taize singing.

<sup>2</sup> Philip Sheldrake, *Spirituality and Theology: Christian Living and the Doctrine of God* (London, 1998), p. 5.



that humankind 'thirsts for mystery, meaning, community and even for some sort of ritual'.<sup>3</sup>

I approach this subject with some trepidation with the warning of P. T. Forsyth ringing in my ears: 'no one ought to undertake [writing or speaking about prayer] who has not spent more toil in the practice of prayer than on its principle'.<sup>4</sup> Yet I also sense an affinity with F. B. Meyer's comment that the 'remedy for all our ills is a deeper spirituality'.<sup>5</sup>

### **Evangelicals and Spirituality**

I'm also aware that as evangelicals we have not been good at stressing the importance of spirituality. McGrath speaks of evangelicalism as the 'slumbering giant in the world of spirituality'.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, living our lives in the midst of a secular culture we may have imbibed a much more materialistic approach to life than we realise. Craig Gay, in a book which analyses the *Way of the Modern World*, suggests that the essence of worldliness is not to be found in personal morality but rather to 'go about our daily business in the world without giving much thought to God'.<sup>7</sup> As such, the secularism of our society has led to the 'eclipse of God' within our lives and we are more interested in the momentary illusion of personal well-being, of success, than a hunger and thirst for God and his righteousness.

As evangelicals we are faced with the challenge of rediscovering those 'roots that refresh' within and without our own theological and spiritual tradition because 'despite its many strengths, some sense that the [evangelical] movement can too easily become dry and cerebral, lacking any real spiritual vitality'.<sup>8</sup> For those of us engaged in theological education and the spiritual formation of God's people, we desperately need to set spirituality at the centre of our curriculum. Far too many ministers have left theological colleges with yawning gaps in their spiritual

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<sup>3</sup> Cited by John Macquarrie, *Paths in Spirituality* 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (London, 1992), p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> P. T. Forsyth, *The Soul of Prayer* (London, 1916), p. 9.

<sup>5</sup> *Christian World*, 16 December 1920, p. 4.

<sup>6</sup> A. E. McGrath *Evangelicalism and the Future of Christianity* (London, 1994), p. 142

<sup>7</sup> Craig M. Gay, *The Way of the Modern World : Or why it's tempting to live as if God doesn't exist* (Carlisle, 1998), pp. 4-5.

<sup>8</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *Roots that Refresh: A Celebration of Reformation Spirituality* (London, 1992), p. 1.

development. Overwhelmed by the day to day ministry of local congregations, their evangelical activism has often left them sensing the barrenness of a busy life. With little awareness of the rich resources of Christian spirituality down through the ages, they have been unprepared to offer direction to the 'soul hunger' of many in their congregations who are looking for someone to guide them in their journey into the vast landscape of spirituality.

One of the most unfortunate reactions of many evangelicals to the resurgence of interest in Christian spirituality is that of scepticism. There is the feeling that the whole issue is far too 'Catholic'. The cumulative impact of this caricature is the massive ignorance of our spiritual tradition. Christianity, East and West, has given birth to an immense range of spiritual wisdom, much of which we share as Protestants and Catholics. As Christians we need to dig deeply into the common heritage of spiritual wisdom which we can discover across the barriers of time, space and even theological controversy so that 'with all the saints' we might 'discern the length and breadth, the height and depths of the love of Christ and be filled with all the fullness of God'.

### **Spirituality: A Definition**

But what is Spirituality?<sup>9</sup> Although the word is commonly used it is difficult to define. Geoffrey Wainwright speaks of a 'combination of praying and living'<sup>10</sup> which tends to limit our understanding of the spiritual life to what 'we do' although it grounds spirituality in personal experience and in daily living. Philip Sheldrake describes spirituality as 'the whole of human life viewed in terms of a conscious relationship with God, in Jesus Christ, through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and within the community of believers'.<sup>11</sup> Sheldrake helpfully sets the concept of spirituality within a Trinitarian and ecclesial framework which rejects any

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<sup>9</sup> For a discussion on Christian Mysticism see Martin Henry, 'How Christian is Christian Mysticism?', *Irish Theological Quarterly* 64 (Spring 1999), pp. 29-54 and Mark A. McIntosh, *Mystical Theology: The Integrity of Spirituality and Theology* (Oxford, 1999).

<sup>10</sup> Geoffrey Wainwright, *The Study of Spirituality*, edited by C. Jones, G. Wainwright and E. Yarnold (London, 1986), p. 592.

<sup>11</sup> Sheldrake, p. 35. Macquarrie states that 'fundamentally spirituality has to do with becoming a person in the fullest sense.' *Ibid.*, p. 40.

mere privatisation of spirituality, along with a concentration which many place on an interiority of personal experience.<sup>12</sup>

At the height of the Great Awakening, a young woman convert wrote to Jonathan Edwards to seek help as to 'the best manner of maintaining a religious life'. More than 250 years later we face an equally daunting task of developing a spirituality that will enable the people of God to 'grow in grace and in the knowledge of God'. What kind of Spirituality do we need for the twenty-first century?

### **Spirituality and Theology**

First and foremost we need a Spirituality that is theological and a theology that is spiritual. Theology is meant to be lived. Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said that 'God [is] not on the boundaries, but at the centre...in the middle of the village.'<sup>13</sup> Theological reflection and spiritual renewal are, ideally speaking, intended to be a seamless whole. Theology was always meant to be more than an intellectual exercise, a matter of belief and behaviour, of heart and of head. It was William Perkins who said that 'Theology is the science of living blessedly forever.'<sup>14</sup> A theology that is not intimately related to spirituality will inevitably become removed from the realities of daily discipleship and life in the world. On the other hand, spirituality needs theology so that it doesn't descend into a narcissistic quest for personal fulfilment, and so that some sort of theological criteria of evaluation and interpretation can be given to our experience.<sup>15</sup>

Some writers have traced the change which took place in the twelfth century when scholars such as Peter Abelard (1079-1142) began to treat theological reflection as a process of intellectual speculation. Whereas Anselm's *Proslogion*, a theological treatise that plumbs the mystery of

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<sup>12</sup> Andrew Louth suggests that the move towards subjectivity took place around the twelfth century. See article on 'Mysticism', in G. S. Wakefield (ed.), *A Dictionary of Christian Spirituality* (London, 1983), pp. 272ff. Mark McIntosh agrees that 'Eucharistic piety and confessional practices both began to alter by the later eleventh century from a corporate piety towards a more private and personal devotion.' *Ibid.*, p. 64.

<sup>13</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (London, 1971), p. 282.

<sup>14</sup> William Perkins, *Works* (Courtney Press, 1970), p. 177.

<sup>15</sup> McIntosh suggests that 'spirituality without theology becomes rootless, easily hijacked by individual consumerism'. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

God's existence, was set in the form of a deeply moving prayer, the rise of the 'Schools' led to a more analytical and speculative theological enterprise. At around the same time, centres of intellectual enquiry began to move from the monasteries, which drew their inspiration from the traditional meditative reading of Scripture to new cathedral 'schools' which stressed academic disputation. According to von Balthasar, by the end of the 13th century Western Christianity saw 'the disappearance of the 'complete' theologian...the theologian who is also a saint'.<sup>16</sup> Mark McIntosh maintains that 'coinciding with the growth of scholasticism, medieval spirituality's intensifying focus on individual experience and affectivity gave rise to a spiralling mutual distrust between spirituality and theology that lingers even today'.<sup>17</sup> The Eastern Orthodox tradition continued to avoid any distinction of spirituality from theological reflection, maintaining that 'he who is a theologian prays and he who prays is a true theologian'. In a similar way, Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* are essentially to do with spiritual theology.

The history of evangelicalism over the second half of the twentieth century can hardly be accused of anti-intellectualism. Our love of doctrine, our commitment to expository preaching, our emphasis on rational analysis in apologetics at times implies the very opposite. We have to remind ourselves that knowledge alone does not determine our relationship with God. As one writer observes 'great scholars do not necessarily make the greatest lovers'.<sup>18</sup> Our apprehension of God takes place at a much deeper level than our intellectual comprehension. If this is so, then spirituality has as much to do with feelings, with religious affections, as with thinking. Richard of St Victor stresses that it is useless to know about God unless we have a passionate longing for him, because 'it is vain that we grow in riches of divine knowledge unless by them the fire of love is increased in us'.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, 'Theology and Sanctity' in *Word and Redemption: Essays in Theology* (New York, 1965), p. 57.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63. See Martin Henry, *ibid.*, pp. 41-3.

<sup>18</sup> W. Durrant and A. Durrant, *The Age of Louis IV* (New York, 1963), p. 673.

<sup>19</sup> Richard of St. Victor, *Selections from Contemplation* (London, 1957), p. 161.

**Trinitarian Spirituality**

Secondly, not only will we seek to develop a spirituality that is theological but one which is rooted in a Trinitarian understanding of God. Sheldrake makes the comment that 'the doctrine of the Trinity...is absolutely essential to the coherence and cogency of any Christian spirituality'.<sup>20</sup> Traditionally, theologians have distinguished between the 'economic' Trinity and the 'immanent' Trinity. The former expresses the works of God as Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier, focusing our attention on what God does, stressing his transcendence. The latter speaks of the eternal relationship of love and joy which are expressed and experienced between the three persons of the Trinity. The re-emergence of a relational model of the Trinity, with an emphasis on mutuality and partnership not only as essential aspects of God's inner relationship as Father, Son and Holy Spirit but also in his dealings with humankind, gives more attention to God's immanence. Our theology of God will inevitably affect our spirituality. Those who emphasise the 'economic' Trinity tend to understand their spirituality as one of 'doing' whereas those who stress the 'immanent' Trinity conceive of spirituality more in terms of 'being'.

The social model of the Trinity, espoused by theologians from a wide spread of theological traditions, such as Moltmann, Torrance and Pinnock, clearly directs our thinking to a view of spirituality which is relational and grounded in our commitment to the life of the Church. Evangelicals have not always had a strong doctrine of the Church and thus our understanding of spirituality has tended to be individualistic and sometimes pietistic. We have normally portrayed the Christian life as a solitary spiritual quest for personal holiness and peace, whereas the New Testament would emphasise an expanded capacity for communal life, selfless love and identification with the needs of others.

Some years ago Peter Berger suggested that the concept of the 'autonomous individual' was the central characteristic of the modern Western world.<sup>21</sup> The modern hero of western society is the entrepreneur, the self-made individual because 'self-realisation and self-gratification have become the master principles of modern culture.'<sup>22</sup> The individual has become 'deified' in contemporary culture as we have forgotten that we

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<sup>20</sup> Sheldrake, p. xi.

<sup>21</sup> Peter L. Berger, 'Western Individuality: Liberation and Loneliness', *Partisan Review* 52 (1985), p. 324.

<sup>22</sup> Gay, p. 192. Gay also quotes Niebuhr as adding self-glorification (p. 196).

were created in the image of a Trinitarian God who lives in a joyful relationship of love as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Sadly, because we have lost the concept of the essence of the church being that of community, we have very little to offer to a culture of impersonality and loneliness.

One of the very great challenges which postmodernity is posing society is precisely in the area of radical individualism. Andrew Walker encourages the church to become an 'icon' of the Holy Trinity, a community which will demonstrate the story of the Triune God of love in the midst of a world crying out for spiritual reality.<sup>23</sup> The character of God should shape the behaviour of all his children who long to indwell a community of mutuality, of co-operation, of forgiveness, of unity which experiences peace in the context of a genuine diversity of unique individuals who find their fulfilment in living in the unity of the Spirit.

Many of us live and minister in churches where there are far too many broken fellowships, broken hearts and broken lives, where believers have set up rival groups and anathematised each other. Is this an 'icon' of the Holy Trinity? Although we must avoid the danger of reducing our understanding of the Trinity to a question of relevance, it is evident that the social model of the Trinity speaks powerfully to the needs of the church as it approaches the twenty-first century. We need to deal with those attitudes and actions that divide and destroy community and to live in communion with the Triune God of eternal self-giving love.

### **Christocentric Spirituality**

Thirdly, we will develop a Spirituality that is Christocentric. A deep devotion to Christ has marked the lives of God's saints from all Christian traditions. Ray Palmer's translation of a twelfth-century Latin hymn reflects the piety of an early medieval period:

Jesus, Thou joy of loving hearts  
 Thou fount of life, Thou light of men  
 From the best bliss that earth imparts  
 We turn unfilled to Thee again.

In the seventeenth century, Richard Baxter wrote his great work *The Reformed Pastor* and said 'if we can but teach *Christ* to our people, we teach them all'.<sup>24</sup> John Wesley in the eighteenth century travelled around

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<sup>23</sup> Andrew Walker, *Telling the Story: Gospel, Mission and Culture* (London, 1996), p. 200.

<sup>24</sup> Cited by John Stott in *Life in Christ* (Eastbourne, 1991), p. 111.

the country 'offering Christ'<sup>25</sup> and in the nineteenth century Andrew Bonar wrote in his diary 'my soul's cry is still for more acquaintance with the Lord Jesus'.<sup>26</sup> More recently John Stott<sup>27</sup> claimed that if 'the Christian faith and the Christian...are to be authentic' then they 'must be 'focused on Christ'.<sup>28</sup> Stott uses the numerous prepositions which 'portray the richness of a Christian's relation to Christ' to encourage the believer to 'love Jesus Christ more and more until he becomes indispensable to us, and life without him would be inconceivable'.<sup>29</sup>

A Christocentric spirituality will also be Incarnational, stressing the whole theme of embodiment. Far from ignoring the body in the Christian life, or thinking of it negatively, Christian spirituality must be strongly incarnational and engaged with the world of materiality. Spirituality is not a flight from the reality of daily life, an attempt to escape this world. A spirituality that is disengaged from the world fails to appreciate the gift of creation in which 'God has given us all things richly to enjoy.' An incarnational understanding of spirituality will enable us to appreciate George Herbert's view of domestic spirituality that relates us to God in all of life so that he could describe prayer as 'heaven in ordinary'.<sup>30</sup> The shape of our spirituality must have some correlation to our world and the distinctive features of our daily lives, relevant to the whole of human life, lived out in our own distinctive cultural contexts.

Evangelicals, Romans Catholics as well as Scottish Calvinists often struggle with the strong ascetic suspicion of enjoying the world. Even such harmless activities of recreation and relaxation have often been viewed as distractions from the activism of personal devotion and Christian service. We have forgotten that the immediate purpose of God in giving the gift of 'Sabbath' was for enjoyment. Thus Jurgen Moltmann's small book *Theology and Joy*<sup>31</sup> seeks to reflect on the place of play in the Christian life, suggesting that in play and in games we may well be reflecting the

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<sup>25</sup> See Franz Hilderbrandt, *I Offered Christ: A Protestant Study of the Mass*, (London, 1967).

<sup>26</sup> Andrew A. Bonar, *Diary and Life* Edited by Marjory Bonar (London, 1960), p. 288.

<sup>27</sup> Stott, p. 8.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>30</sup> See Noel-Dermont O'Donoghue, *Heaven in Ordinarie* (Springfield, IL, 1979).

<sup>31</sup> Jurgen Moltmann, *Theology and Joy* (London, 1971).

## SPIRITUALITY FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

activity of God as Creator. Moltmann criticises the 'modern achievement-centred society...[where] people have lost their capacity for leisure; they no longer know how to do nothing'.<sup>32</sup> If David Bebbington is correct in seeing 'activism' as one of the defining characteristics of Evangelicalism<sup>33</sup> then we need to expose the danger of the exhausting treadmill of hyperactivity which is so characteristic of the life of the church. The first biblical creation story reaches its zenith, not with the creation of human beings who find their fulfilment in work, but in Sabbath time which is 'the climax of living, not an interlude'.<sup>34</sup> Martin Luther anticipated the life to come as a time when people will 'have their fun, love and joy, and shall laugh with thee and thou with them, even according to the body'.<sup>35</sup> Thus, although the Christian life will include elements of self-denial, renunciation and discipline, the gifts of God in creation are not to be despised and our bodies, with all their potential for sensory enjoyment are not to be despised.

Our appreciation and enjoyment of creation does not mean that we have to adopt the popular notion of 'Celtic Christianity' as the most authentic form of spirituality, one which 'was environment-friendly, embracing positive attitudes to nature and constantly celebrating the goodness of God's creation'.<sup>36</sup> Thomas Clancy and Gilbert Markus believe that 'sheer delight in nature, and the way in which such delight elicits praise of God, is no more Celtic than Hebrew or Roman-African'<sup>37</sup> and cite the example of Augustine of Hippo who was moved to ecstatic praise by the mere sight of a lizard catching flies or a spider.

### Life-changing Spirituality

Fourthly, a Christian Spirituality will also be Transforming. Megan McKenna states that 'to hear the word of God is to change. If we do not

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 32, 34.

<sup>33</sup> D. W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain* (London, 1989), pp. 10-12.

<sup>34</sup> R. Akeiba quoted in Abraham Heschel, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man* (New York, 1951), p. 32.

<sup>35</sup> Martin Luther WA XXXVI. 600; XLV. 356

<sup>36</sup> I. C. Bradley, *The Celtic Way* (London, 1993), vii-viii. Bradley rejects this statement in a recent article on 'How Green was Celtic Christianity?' in *Ecotheology* 4 (1998), p. 60.

<sup>37</sup> T. Clancy and G. Marcus, *Iona: The Earliest Poetry of a Celtic Monastery* (Edinburgh, 1995), p. 93.



change, we have not heard. Indeed, to hear the word of God is...to be radically reformed.'<sup>38</sup> This was one of the strong emphases of Anabaptist spirituality which believed that 'the Word must be received with a true heart through the Holy Spirit and become flesh in us'.<sup>39</sup>

Evangelical spirituality stresses the unconditional nature of the grace of God. Yet the grace of God does not offer consolation without a change of life, without any sense of either dying or rising in Christ. Rutherford's call to 'break off a piece of sin every day' reminds us that 'training in godliness' means unlearning the ways of the old self and learning to appropriate the attitudes and actions of holiness. An unrepentant Christian is an oxymoron. God's purpose in showing us our sin is not to condemn us or leave us in despair. Gregory Jones says that he 'exposes our wounds, both those that have been inflicted upon us and those we have inflicted on others and on ourselves...for the explicit purpose of forgiving us and healing our wounds'.<sup>40</sup>

In a culture which calls for swift results and instantaneous success we need to speak of the Christian life as a journey in which our progress is often impeded by obstacles and is not always easy. Our pilgrimage of faith is meant to move forward but it will not always be smooth or straightforward. It will be what Simon Chan calls an 'asceticism of small steps'.<sup>41</sup> Yet, as a proverb reminds us, 'the longest of journeys begins with short steps'. Spirituality is about growth, sometimes gradual and unseen for like a tree spiritual life grows downwards and upwards. To change the metaphor once again, spirituality is like a lifelong learning process that people are initiated into as apprentices, embracing the entirety of our lives. God is on a time-table very different from our own contemporary culture, seeking not results but a relationship, fruitfulness and faithfulness in the midst of the humdrum realities of daily life.

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<sup>38</sup> Megan McKenna, *Not Counting Women and Children: Neglected Stories from the Bible* (New York, 1994), p. 216.

<sup>39</sup> Hans Hut quoted by C. J. Dyck in 'Hermeneutics of Discipleship' in *Essays on Biblical Interpretation* edited by W. M. Swartley (Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1984), p. 37.

<sup>40</sup> L. Gregory Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis* (Grand Rapids, 1995) p. 146.

<sup>41</sup> Simon Chan, *Spiritual Theology* (Downers Grove, 1998), p. 11.

### Spiritual Disciplines

Fifthly, Christian spirituality will be disciplined. There are no short cuts to godliness. In the words of John Cassian 'there is no arrival unless there is a definite plan to go'.<sup>42</sup> Every human being lives a scheduled life. Unless we create time and space for prayer, Scripture reading, meditation and worship then we will always find reasons to become distracted. However, as Evangelicals we must be careful to recognise that some approaches to the spiritual life were developed at a time of greater degrees of leisure time than is available for many people who live in highly stressed worlds of business, travel, and family life where time and space for reflection is at a premium. Furthermore we must remember that people are different in temperament and in circumstance. A melancholic personality will naturally gravitate toward a more contemplative type of spirituality – no single type of spirituality will satisfy everyone. Furthermore, people are at various stages of physical, emotional and spiritual development. They are profoundly affected by the circumstances of life in which they find themselves. The circumstances of the married differ from those of the unmarried, the young are different from the elderly. While each is called to a life of disciplined discipleship, every person is unique and their spiritual pilgrimage is set within a distinctive context. Peter Adam speaks of a 'spirituality of simplicity' where we develop a 'spirituality of ordinary suburban and urban life'.<sup>43</sup> This calls for a flexible approach to the spiritual disciplines of prayer *etc.* realising that there is no single 'rule' which has to be used for evermore or by everyone. The rediscovery of various traditions of spirituality, with their diverse approach to reading Scripture and engaging in prayer can be liberating to those who have only followed one particular pattern of devotional life.<sup>44</sup>

Indeed, a spirituality for the twenty-first century will be truly ecumenical as we learn from 'all the saints' of different centuries and diverse cultures. We must be willing to listen to voices from continents and theological traditions other than our own. Many Protestants are beginning to discover the classic texts of the long, diverse and fruitful Catholic spiritual tradition. Christians who are intent on discipleship will discover wisdom across the barriers of time, space and theological

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<sup>42</sup> John Cassian, *Conferences* (Paris, 1955), 2:26.

<sup>43</sup> Peter Adam, *Roots of Contemporary Spirituality*, Grove Spirituality Booklet 24 (Bramcote, 1988), p. 3.

<sup>44</sup> See the *Traditions of Christian Spirituality Series*, edited by Philip Sheldrake (Darton, Longman and Todd).

controversy. I think of the spiritual power of African and Latin American Christianity. We will be willing to learn from the 'base Christian communities' of Latin America who emphasise the need for social justice, the quiet mysticism of Asia, the silence of much Catholic spirituality and the joy and vibrancy of Pentecostals and Charismatics with their expectancy of the 'surprising work of God'.

Part and parcel of our discipleship will be a continuing commitment to the Bible as the primary source of our spirituality. Christians have read the Bible assiduously, not merely as a source book of doctrine, but seeking a prayerful encounter, as in the Benedictine tradition of 'sacred reading' which was seen to encourage a disposition of the heart towards prayer.<sup>45</sup> Benedict encouraged a 'holy leisure, during which time' people undertook 'the business of their souls'.<sup>46</sup> The reading was to be slow and prayerful, often linked to memorisation which had the purpose of deepening one's awareness of the presence of God and engaging in 'a conversation with God about one's life'.<sup>47</sup> Thomas Keating suggests that 'listening to the word at deepening levels of attention is the traditional method of apprenticeship to contemplative prayer'.<sup>48</sup> Such reading allows the word of God to take hold of us. Many of us who are so shaped by a rigorous study and analysis of Scripture, seeing sermons in every portion of scripture just waiting to be preached, can find it even more difficult to allow the word of God to be loved and lived out in our daily lives. Richard Hays comments that the 'right reading of the [Bible] occurs only where the word is embodied. We learn what the text means only if we submit ourselves to its power in such a way that we are changed by it.'<sup>49</sup>

Bonhoeffer insisted that such a prayerful approach to Scripture should be part and parcel of ministerial formation for 'the word of scripture should never stop sounding in your ears and working in you all day long, just like the words of someone you love. And just as you do not analyse the words of someone you love, but accept them as they are said to you,

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<sup>45</sup> See Columba Stewart, *Prayer and Community: The Benedictine Tradition* (London, 1998), p. 32.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41. Stewart suggests that such reading 'is impaired by the decline of the art of reading. Both skimming and speed-reading are antithetical to *lectio divina*.' *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>48</sup> Thomas Keating, *Intimacy with God* (New York, 1994), p. 146.

<sup>49</sup> R. B. Hays, 'Scripture-Shaped Community', *Interpretation* 44.1 (January, 1990), p. 51.

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accept the word of scripture and ponder it in your heart, as Mary did. That is all... Ponder this word long in your heart until it has gone right through into you and taken possession of you.’<sup>50</sup>

This aspect of contemplative prayer and meditative reading of Scripture is the very antithesis of the evangelical approach which emphasises the active dimension of vigorous study and endless intercession, thanksgiving, confession and praise. It is only recently that many evangelicals have discovered the art of cultivating silent listening to God in prayer. Yet there is a deep cultural resistance to silence – incessant noise and movement are the accepted and preferred norm.

One of the episodes of the comedy series *The Goon Show* is memorable for its humour, but also for its insight into much of our life. The telephone rings and is answered. ‘Who is speaking? Who is that? Who is that speaking? Who is it? Who is there? Who is speaking?’ When the inevitable pause for breath eventually comes, a rather weary voice replies ‘*You* are speaking’.<sup>51</sup> Howard Rice believes that ‘the most essential requirement for a lively recovery of prayer today, is the practice of solitude, bringing the depths of ourselves into the presence of God’.<sup>52</sup> The way of silence cannot be hurried or haphazardly chosen now and then. Such space for silence in the hustle and bustle of life in the twenty-first century requires discipline and desire, love and leisure, the ‘training of our attention, of our body, of our mind and our emotions’.<sup>53</sup>

A disciplined approach to spirituality will also lead us to a realistic assessment of our spiritual lives and the expectations of the spiritual pilgrimage. T. S. Elliot once made the comment that ‘humankind cannot

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<sup>50</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Way to Freedom* (New York, 1966), 59ff. Henri Nouwen speaks of the problem of academics and ministers coming to Scripture and calls them to come and ‘instead of thinking about the words as potential subjects for an interesting dialogue or paper, we should be willing to let them penetrate the most hidden corners of our hearts...only then can we really “hear and understand”’ Henri J. M. Nouwen *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (London, 1980) p. 124.

<sup>51</sup> Quoted in Kenneth Leech, *Spirituality and Pastoral Care* (London, 1989), p. 17.

<sup>52</sup> Howard Rice, *Reformed Spirituality* (Louisville, 1991), p. 87.

<sup>53</sup> Anthony Bloom, *Creative Prayer* (London, 1987), p. 35.

bear very much reality'.<sup>54</sup> Although the language of sin can become debilitating, self-examination is 'one of the great neglected duties of the Christian life'.<sup>55</sup> One of the features of the contemporary spiritual search of our culture is 'therapeutic, not religious...of personal well-being'<sup>56</sup> and any notion of sin, repentance or confession is explicitly ignored as we view self-realisation and even self-gratification as ends in themselves. As Luther commented '[Fallen human nature] is completely self-centred.... It puts itself in the place of everything else, even in the place of God himself and seeks only its own purposes and not God's. For this reason it is its own chief and most important idol.'<sup>57</sup> Although we may feel that some Puritans overemphasised the need for a daily self-examination which could easily become introspective<sup>58</sup> and self-absorbed in their longing for personal assurance of salvation, unless we have a true understanding of the nature of sin we will fail to realise the rich resources of God's grace to overcome the 'sin which so easily besets us'.

We should also have a realistic awareness of the pilgrimage of prayer which in its early stages can be likened to a honeymoon period where there is little struggle in prayer and prayer is filled with experiences of joy. Yet as the pilgrimage of faith continues we soon discover that prayer becomes difficult, filled with distractions and often dogged determination is the only thing which keeps us praying. In our desire to urge our people to pray we have not always taught them that 'through many struggles we must enter the kingdom of God' and that part and parcel of the life of faith is the discipline of prayer. Teresa of Avila speaks of both the difficulties of prayer and the delight which comes. 'Very often,' she writes, 'I was more occupied with the wish to see the end of the hour for prayer. I used to actually watch the sandglass. And the sadness that I sometimes felt on entering my prayer-chapel was so great that it required all my courage to force myself inside...[but] when I persisted in this way, I found far greater

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<sup>54</sup> T. S. Elliot, *Murder in the Cathedral* cited by Simon Chan, *Spiritual Theology*, p. 132.

<sup>55</sup> William Barclay, *Flesh and Spirit* (London, 1962), p. 72.

<sup>56</sup> Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in a Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York, 1979), p. 33.

<sup>57</sup> Cited by Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia, 1966), p. 147.

<sup>58</sup> Richard Rogers advised that 'everyday we should be humbled for our sins' *Seven Treatises* (London, 1603), p. 316.

peace and joy than when I prayed with excitement and emotional rapture.<sup>59</sup>

One further resource which we have tended to ignore is the role of a 'spiritual friend' who will encourage us in our spiritual pilgrimage and with whom we can be entirely open about the doubts and difficulties, as well as the delights of discipleship. Such accountability may keep us from self-deception with regard to our progress in godliness as well as discouragement and despair. 'If anyone makes himself his own master in the spiritual life,' warns Bernard, 'he makes himself scholar to a fool.'<sup>60</sup> In the words of Bonhoeffer 'a Christian needs another Christian who speaks God's word to him. He needs him again and again when he becomes uncertain and discouraged, for by himself he cannot help himself without belying the truth. He needs his brother man as a bearer and proclaimer of the divine word of salvation.'<sup>61</sup>

### **Spirit-Empowered Spirituality**

Finally, Christian Spirituality will be passionate and Spirit empowered. In his study of Jonathan Edwards' *Treatise Concerning Religious Affection*, Gerald McDermott comments that 'true religion is not a casual preference...it is a passionate affair of the soul – one's innermost being – that is reflected in every part of one's life...true spirituality is powerful and dynamic...a passionate pursuit.'<sup>62</sup> Thus the Psalmist speaks of his soul longing for God. Jesus encourages us to have a hunger and thirst for righteousness. Paul commends the spirituality of those who 'love our Lord Jesus Christ with an undying love'. Edwards indicates that many believers 'don't open their mouths wide enough' in their longing to know God better.<sup>63</sup>

A Spirituality for the twenty-first century will be empowered by the Spirit of God as the 'crucial ingredient of all genuinely Christian life and

<sup>59</sup> *A Life of Prayer by St. Teresa of Avila*, edited by James Houston, (Portland, Oregon, 1983), p. 2.

<sup>60</sup> Quoted in Martin Thornton, *Christian Proficiency* (London, 1964), p. 25.

<sup>61</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (London, 1949), p. 12.

<sup>62</sup> Gerald McDermott, *Seeing God: Twelve Reliable Signs of True Spirituality* (Downers Grove, 1995), pp. 34-5.

<sup>63</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections* (Yale University Press, 1959), p. 379.

experience'.<sup>64</sup> As those who are baptised into the life of the church, we all participate in the endowment and empowerment of the Spirit. Unlike the disciples on the day of Pentecost, we are not waiting for the coming of the Spirit, but we are called to 'walk in the Spirit' and be 'filled with the Spirit'. In this we find a confidence and expectancy in our spiritual pilgrimage because we know that God is 'able to do immeasurable more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us' so that we might 'be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God'.

So we pray:

Come dearest Lord, descend and dwell  
by faith and love in every breast;  
then shall we know, and taste, and feel  
the joys that cannot be expressed

Come, fill our hearts with inward strength;  
make our enlightened souls possess  
and learn the height and breadth and length  
of your immeasurable grace.

Now to the God whose power can do  
more than our thoughts or wishes know,  
be everlasting honours done  
by all the Church, through Christ his Son.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Gordon Fee, *God's Empowering Presence* (Peabody, 1994), p. 897.

<sup>65</sup> Isaac Watts (1674-1748).

# CHRISTIAN FREEDOM, TOLERANCE AND THE CLAIMS OF TRUTH

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## Introduction

The subject of this paper is both vast and difficult. It is also one on which comparatively little has been written from an evangelical perspective. The issues which the topic throws up are, however, of far-reaching significance for the church as we move forward into a new millennium. The aims of this paper are modest – to highlight some of the key issues which need to be addressed in this area and to introduce some of the most useful relevant literature.

## 1. Historical Background

From the outset, the church has recognized Christian liberty as one of the most basic privileges secured for her by Christ. 'It is for freedom that Christ has set us free' (Gal. 5:1). This privilege is based on the fact that we are members of God's family and as such, when proper place is given to the lawful exercise of ecclesiastical authority, we are bound to respect the Christ-bought freedom of others. The church also recognized that its freedom was qualified by the lawful exercise of civil power (as ordained by God), but insisted on the right of freedom from political repression as long as Christians carried out their secular duties to the state. Tertullian, for example, ridiculed forced religion, complaining that among the countless religions of the empire only the Christians were to be denied their own. Lactantius argued that worship must be free and voluntary. Likewise, widespread adherence in the early church to New Testament principles in dealing with errant members (non-use of violence and the exercise of discipline in a spirit of charity) enabled the early church 'to win a reputation for charity and non-violence of a kind rarely achieved by later...Christian sects. "See how these Christians love one another", an observation first made in the time of Tertullian, became a commentary on their success and a judgement on their successors.'<sup>1</sup>

With the granting of official toleration to Christians in 313 under Constantine and the church's subsequent increasing alliance of interest with the secular authorities, we witness the beginnings of the long and sad tale of Christian persecution of pagans and of fellow-Christians. The first

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<sup>1</sup> H. Kamen, *The Rise of Toleration* (London, 1967), p.11.



person to demand the suppression of pagan cults, with appeal to Scripture, appears to have been Firmicus Maternus in his *De errore profanarum religionum*, written c. 346.<sup>2</sup>

It is, of course, Augustine's campaign against the Donatists in the late fourth and early fifth centuries that is generally held to mark the critical moment for the church's acceptance of persecution. When Augustine became bishop of Hippo in North Africa in 395, the church in the province was bitterly divided between Catholics and Donatists. He determined to end the unhappy schism by reclaiming the (schismatic) Donatists to the Catholic fold. At first he used peaceful measures, but when the situation deteriorated in the early years of the fifth century his attitude changed. Influenced partly by the persuasion of colleagues, partly by the violence of Circumcellion activity against Catholics and partly by the proven effectiveness of the strategy, he elaborated his 'theory' of coercion in which, as Lamirande says, 'Disciplinary measures against members of the Church as well as compulsory measures against estranged sons and daughters are equally connected.'<sup>3</sup> The formula, 'Love and do as you like', Augustine 'regarded...as providing both a justification for the discipline of the erring and also a principle of great restraint in the manner of that discipline'.<sup>4</sup> Contrary to some later misunderstandings, Augustine hated violence, strongly disapproved of uncharitable talk about Donatists by Catholics and never deviated from his opposition to the use of torture, the death penalty and to the enforcing of belief by physical coercion.<sup>5</sup> Kamen, however, appears to be justified in holding that:

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<sup>2</sup> An English translation can be found in vol. 37 of *Ancient Christian Writers*, ed. C. A. Forbes (New York, 1970).

<sup>3</sup> E. Lamirande, *Church, State and Toleration. An Intriguing Change of Mind in Augustine* (Villanova, 1975), p. 43.

<sup>4</sup> H. Chadwick, *Augustine* (Oxford, 1986), p. 82.

<sup>5</sup> Chadwick speaks of the way in which 'Select quotations from Augustine's anti-Donatist writings enabled some medieval canonists to make him look as if he were justifying the stern measures against heretics adopted in the later middle ages.' He rightly adds: 'Augustine would have been horrified by the burning of heretics, by the belief, found not only among sixteenth-century Protestants and medieval Catholics but even in the medieval world of Byzantine Orthodoxy, that heretical ideas are of so insidious and diabolical a nature that the only available way of stopping them is to exterminate the propagators. In late medieval times people...appealed to texts picked out of Augustine's

by his appeal to the secular authorities for help against the outrages committed by the Donatists; by the way in which he wrested the phrase *compelle intrare* from its context in the parable of the supper (Luke 14:32), so as to make it read as a command to enforce the submission of heretics and unbelievers; and by his intolerant exclamation ‘What death is worse for the soul than the liberty to err?’ – *quae peior mors animae quam libertas erroris?* –; he established a precedent which fortified the practice of repression by the Medieval Church.<sup>6</sup>

It was towards the end of the eleventh century that systematic repression began in earnest. R.I. Moore has argued that in that century, ‘Europe became a persecuting society...’.<sup>7</sup> Certainly from the last quarter of the twelfth century, increasingly rigorous measures were directed against heretics. These were given support by Aquinas in his *Summa Theologica* in which he compares heretics to counterfeiters of false money. If the latter could be put to death because of the seriousness of the crime of corrupting the currency, those who committed the even more serious crime of corrupting the faith deserved no other fate.<sup>8</sup> The brutal methods of the Inquisition in rooting out heretics were seen by medieval people as a right and necessary safeguard for Christian society.

### **Towards a Modern Basis for Tolerance**

The sixteenth century gave birth to a new historical situation out of which religious liberty and tolerance began to emerge. The Protestant

works to justify severity, and ignored the numerous places where he wholly opposed torture and capital punishment or any discipline that went beyond what a truly loving father might administer to an erring son.’ Chadwick, pp. 81-2. It is significant that for over six hundred years, from the time of Augustine, there are no records of executions on religious grounds.

<sup>6</sup> Kamen, pp. 13-14.

<sup>7</sup> R. I. Moore, *The Formation of a Persecuting Society: Power and Deviance in Western Europe, 950-1250* (Oxford, 1990), p. 5.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 2/2, Questions 10-11. On the other hand, Aquinas argues that the parable of the wheat and tares in Matt. 13 applies to Jews and infidels. True faith is exercised willingly; coercion is wrong because it produces hypocrisy. As Kamen observes: ‘On this basis, Catholics could and did co-exist peacefully with Jews and Muslims in several parts of the Mediterranean world.’ See Kamen, p. 20.

Reformation did not espouse toleration as such and 'in Protestant countries, those who did not accept the authority of the established Church were excluded also from the political community with which the Church was identified. Protestantism was not tolerated in Catholic countries, and Catholicism was not tolerated in Protestant countries. The right of religious dissent was politically prohibited. Nonconformists were persecuted as heretics of the church and traitors of the state.'<sup>9</sup>

During the savage Wars of Religion, dissenting groups in various countries found themselves undergoing persecution. Each sought toleration for their own beliefs not, at first, out of devotion to religious liberty as such, for it was simply taken for granted that the ruler had the right and duty to punish religious error. It was just that each group firmly believed that it alone held fast to the truth.

In the seventeenth century, some Puritan writers began to argue for religious liberty for all, not just toleration for one group.<sup>10</sup> Of particular significance are some writings of John Owen<sup>11</sup> and Roger Williams' *The Bloody Tenet, of Persecution, for Cause of Conscience* (1644). In the latter

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<sup>9</sup> J. E. Wood, 'Tolerance', ed. W. A. Elwell, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids, 1984), pp. 1098-1100.

<sup>10</sup> In Scotland, the defence of religious toleration as a fundamental principle was slow in coming. Samuel Rutherford's influential *A Free Disputation against Pretended Liberty of Conscience* (1649) was described by Bishop Reginald Heber as 'perhaps the most elaborate defence of persecution which has ever appeared in a Protestant country'. Quoted in ed. D. G. Mullan, *Religious Pluralism in the West: An Anthology* (Oxford, 1998), pp. 141-2. Chapter Four of Rutherford's *A Free Disputation...*, 'The State of the Question of Compulsion of Conscience, and Tolleration', is found in Mullan, pp. 142-52. Bruce and Wright chart the slow and painful movement in Scotland on this issue. For example, they show that, 'Despite having begun as firm believers in religious coercion, the Secession and the Free Church gradually came to argue for religious toleration, first in defence of their own rights, then of the rights of dissenters generally, and finally in defence of the value of the general principle.' S. Bruce and C. Wright, 'Law, Social Change, and Religious Toleration', *Journal of Church and State* 37 (1995), p. 107.

<sup>11</sup> See his 'Indulgence and Toleration Considered' (1667), *Works*, vol. 13 (London, 1850-53), pp. 517-40, and other writings in the same volume.

work, Williams argues 'that no man should be prevented from worshipping as his conscience directed him'. Neither should anyone 'be compelled to worship against his conscience or to contribute to the support of a worship his conscience disapproved'.<sup>12</sup> As Clements comments: 'Tolerance for them was a virtue born of confidence in the ability of the Truth to vindicate itself without instruments of state coercion. It reflected too their high view of the dignity of man and of the trans-political nature of the kingdom of God.'<sup>13</sup> This Puritan understanding was not, however, destined to provide the basis for the modern policy of toleration in the West.

One of the most seminal figures in the emerging modern world was the English philosopher John Locke (1632-1704). Along with other thinkers like Spinoza and, later, John Stuart Mill, he developed the metaphysical dualism of Descartes. According to this view there are two absolutely distinct realms of existence: that of the subject (mind or soul) and that of the object (matter). The latter is the realm 'out there' which operates according to rational objective principles while the other (subjective) realm is private, invisible and inaccessible. The individual person who is a unique union of these two distinct realms is the basic unit of the liberal world-view. As far as politics is concerned the individual mind and its contents are one's own concern; while the external, visible physical body is an objective political concern. According to Locke, we have to accept the dualism of the external (political) realm of power and the internal religious realm of faith in which compulsion had no place. This distinction between the objective public sphere and the subjective private sphere is the foundation 'of all liberal religious toleration and religious liberty'.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> E. S. Morgan, *Roger Williams: The Church and the State* (New York, 1967), p. 137. For chs. 28-34 of *The Bloody Tenet...* see Mullan, pp. 136-41. Exceptionally for a seventeenth-century Protestant, Williams was prepared to grant toleration even to Roman Catholics: 'It is the will and command of God that (since the coming of His Sonne the Lord Jesus) a permission of the most Paganish, Jewish, Turkish, or Antichristian consciences and worships be granted to all men in all nations and countries.'

<sup>13</sup> R. Clements, 'Can Tolerance Become the Enemy of Christian Freedom? Part I', *Cambridge Papers*, vol. 1, number 1 (1992), p. 2.

<sup>14</sup> Paul Morris, 'Judaism and Pluralism: The Price of Religious Freedom', in ed. Ian Hamnett, *Religious Pluralism and Unbelief* (London, 1990), p. 181. Morris states: 'The public aspect of the individual's life was as a rational citizen of the state.... The individual was free to organize his

Another important brick in the modern foundation of tolerance was laid by John Stuart Mill. His case for tolerance was based on arguments which Ian Markham has demonstrated to have a relativistic tendency, 'in that they question our capacity to achieve total and final truth'. Markham says: 'For many contemporary secularists Mill's mild and implicit relativism becomes more overt and anti-realist: truth is inaccessible; quest for Truth (with a capital T) is doomed to failure; there are only different perspectives on the world; each is as valid as the other.' Markham offers the example of Michael Creuzet's *Toleration and Liberalism* in which 'He argues explicitly that toleration is possible only when one accepts that there are no absolute truth-claims.'<sup>15</sup> On the fatefulness of this move, A. F. Holmes comments: 'Theism had provided a transcendent locus for universally valid truth, in the wisdom of the eternal, self-revealing God. Without an adequate substitute for its divine locus, truth is dislocated and becomes relative to changing natural conditions.'<sup>16</sup>

Almost all modern democratic constitutions reflect this liberalist understanding of tolerance, based on the freedom of the individual and the separation of church and state. In this century, and since the Second World War in particular, there have been countless affirmations of the right of freedom of thought, conscience and religion by religious and political bodies alike.<sup>17</sup>

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private life according to his will, as long as there were no public implications.' Morris believes that: 'The single most significant factor in the history of modern religions is that religion was thus included in the private sphere.... The nineteenth century saw the almost complete "privatization" of religion in Europe and the United States...'. *Ibid.*, p. 182.

<sup>15</sup> Ian S. Markham, *Plurality and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge, 1994), p.16.

<sup>16</sup> A. F. Holmes, 'Relativism', ed. S. B. Ferguson and D. F. Wright, *New Dictionary of Theology* (Leicester, 1988), p. 575.

<sup>17</sup> As, for example, the World Council of Churches' Declaration on Religious Liberty (Amsterdam, 1948), the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and the UN's Declaration on the Elimination of all Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination based on Religion and Belief (1981). Easy access to these and some other post-World War II Declarations, including Vatican II's *Dignitatis Humanae Personae*, is provided by Mullan, pp. 317-45.

Before passing on, we should note that one of the most remarkable affirmations of religious liberty this century is that of the Vatican II decree, *Dignitatis Humanae Personae*, passed with something near unanimity on 7 December 1965. It was remarkable because, as recently as 1953, Pius XII in his 'Allocution on Tolerance' had reaffirmed the traditional position of the Roman Catholic Church which rejected religious freedom, 'basing himself on the primacy of truth over freedom and repeating the traditional opinion that only truth had rights, but not error.'<sup>18</sup> *Dignitatis*, to the complete contrary, affirms the right of every individual to religious freedom and finds the foundation of that right in the dignity of the person – a dignity disclosed in its full dimensions in the Word of God. As Mullan says, 'The declaration represented a reversal of centuries of official intolerance by the church both in its own right and in its support for state action against Christian dissent. As such it is one of the landmark documents in the history [of the West].'<sup>19</sup>

If this hasty survey has revealed anything, it is the sheer tortuousness of the route by which we have arrived at the current situation in respect of tolerance and religious freedom. It is a situation, it has to be acknowledged, which owes far less to the churches and the theologians than 'to the modern state, the jurists and the rational law of nations'.<sup>20</sup> And in light of what we have seen it is maybe not surprising that the assumption of increasing numbers of people is that the Christian faith is inherently intolerant of other religions and simply cannot be looked to to provide a solid foundation for religious tolerance as we move into an, inevitably, pluralist future. We need to look more closely at the contemporary challenge to the notion of Christian tolerance.

## **2. Contemporary Challenges to the Notion of Christian Tolerance.**

### **Christianity and Other Faiths: Three Options**

During the last generation or so it has become widespread practice to present the relationship between Christianity and other religions in terms of three major options: those of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism – representing in that order, it is generally believed, increasing levels of

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<sup>18</sup> H. R. Schlette, 'Religious Freedom', *Sacramentum Mundi* (London, 1970), vol. 5, p. 295.

<sup>19</sup> Mullan, p. 329.

<sup>20</sup> Schlette, *Ibid.*

tolerance. *Exclusivism* is widely held to represent the least hopeful basis for religious tolerance (indeed one finds it not infrequently written off completely in this respect) while *pluralism* to a great majority represents the most, possibly the only, truly tolerant perspective.

What positions do these terms describe?

*Exclusivism* (an unhappy term because of its immediately misleading and question-begging connotations of arrogance and bigotry) is the position of historic Christianity. While accepting that some claims of other religions may be true and that Christians can learn from adherents of other faiths, this stance is nevertheless rooted in distinctively Christian beliefs. These are helpfully summarized by Harold Netland as four propositions:

(a) Jesus Christ is the unique Incarnation of God, fully God and fully man; (b) only through the person and work of Jesus Christ is there the possibility of salvation; (c) the Bible is God's unique revelation written, and thus is true and authoritative; (d) where the claims of Scripture are incompatible with those of other faiths, the latter are to be rejected as false.<sup>21</sup>

On the intolerance-tolerance spectrum, this position is generally viewed as being at the extreme intolerant end.

*Inclusivism*, like the exclusivist position, accepts that the central claims of the Christian faith are true. It adopts, however, a much more positive attitude towards other religions. According to D'Costa the twentieth-century roots of inclusivism go back to the Protestant missionary John Farquhar and his book *The Crown of Hinduism*.<sup>22</sup> Inclusivists believe that Jesus Christ is the definitive revelation of God and central to God's provision of salvation for humankind but they believe that God also reveals himself and provides salvation through other religions as well.

Famously, the inclusivist position was the one adopted by Vatican II and in the post-conciliar period Karl Rahner has been its major Catholic proponent. Associated with Rahner is the phrase 'anonymous Christian' by which he means 'a non-Christian who gains salvation through faith, hope and love by the grace of Christ, mediated however imperfectly through his or her own religion, which thereby points towards its historical fulfilment in Christ and in his Church.'<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> H. A. Netland, *Dissonant Voices. Religious Pluralism and the Question of Truth* (Leicester, 1991), p. 34.

<sup>22</sup> G. D'Costa, *Theology and Religious Pluralism* (Oxford, 1986), p. 7.

<sup>23</sup> D'Costa, p. 88.

A number of evangelical theologians in recent times have come to embrace the inclusivist position while wishing to distance themselves from Rahner's notion of 'anonymous Christians' as going much too far 'in the direction of sanctifying non-Christian religions as vehicles of salvation.' Pinnock, for example, says that he wants to be 'more realistic about the good and evil in religions and not be naive when it comes to building bridges and engaging in dialogue'. But (while rejecting soteriological universalism) he believes that 'everyone will have an opportunity to be saved so that the possibility of salvation is universally accessible'.<sup>24</sup> Pinnock wants to leave open the possibility that the unevangelized will have opportunity to respond to Christ after death.<sup>25</sup>

This position is vulnerable to attack both from the exclusivist camp, since it can be shown to lack biblical support, and from the pluralist side for the Christian paternalism it arguably manifests. And there is no doubt that for many, like John Hick, this position has represented merely a staging-post on the journey from Christian exclusivism to the adoption of full-blown pluralism.

*Pluralism*, then, represents the third option and the one that has come to dominate the scene, not least because of its associations with tolerance. The term itself is a fairly slippery one and various kinds of pluralism have been distinguished. As helpful as any, for our purposes, is the simple distinction drawn, for example, by Ian Hamnett between religious pluralism as referring to a state of affairs where two or more religious systems co-exist within one society or culture and pluralism as an ideological position.<sup>26</sup> The latter is committed to a relativist approach to religious belief as such or, as Netland explains, 'to the position that the many different conceptions of the divine or religious ultimate (Allah, Shiva, Krishna, Yahweh, Nirvana, Sunyatha, etc.) are all various culturally and historically conditioned images of the same divine reality. This entails that [all these terms] ultimately have the same referent, although the

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<sup>24</sup> Clark Pinnock, 'The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions', in *Christian Faith and Practice in the Modern World*, ed. Mark A. Noll and David F. Wells (Grand Rapids, 1988), p.167.

<sup>25</sup> Clark Pinnock, 'Is Jesus the Only Way?' *Eternity* 27 (December 1976), p. 34.

<sup>26</sup> I. Hamnett, 'Religious Pluralism', in (ed.) Hamnett, p. 7.



connotations of the respective terms may differ.<sup>27</sup> The claim here, in other words, is that all religions are equally salvific paths to the one God and therefore 'Christianity's claim that it is the only path (exclusivism) or the fulfilment of other paths (inclusivism) should be rejected.'<sup>28</sup>

Hamnett observes that although the two kinds of pluralism he distinguishes are distinct concepts (logically and analytically), nevertheless in given historical circumstances 'de facto pluralism can modify the internal character of religious belief-systems for the believers themselves.' He points, on the one hand, to the situation in the earlier medieval history of the Middle East when peace between diverse religions was largely maintained on the principle that 'stout fences make good neighbours'. When religious groups are self-contained and close contact between members of each group is strictly limited, 'the internal features of each belief-system tend to remain intact'.<sup>29</sup>

In striking contrast, we have the contemporary situation in which we are faced with market-place pluralism – one in which we are 'not so much free to choose as compelled to choose'. Hamnett refers to the sociologist Peter Berger's *The Heretical Imperative* (1980) which argues that in such a situation heresy (*haeresis*) becomes imperative. Hamnett comments:

For better or worse this alters the structure of belief in profound ways. When the fences are crumbling, or have quite collapsed, the believer (and the unbeliever too, for that matter) finds himself exiled into an unorganized and anomic world of choice where, whether he likes it or not, he is 'forced to be free'. Belief loses something, or much, or all, of that quality of givenness which well-patrolled boundaries formerly secured for those held safe within the camp.<sup>30</sup>

It is not difficult to see the relevance of these observations to the current situation in the West.

In recent times pluralism has found increasing numbers of adherents in both the Roman Catholic and Protestant Churches. The best known representative is, of course, John Hick, a Yorkshireman whose early evangelical exclusivism was followed by the adoption of the full pluralist

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<sup>27</sup> Netland, 'Exclusivism, Tolerance and Truth,' *Missiology* 15 (1987), pp. 84-5. Quoted in R. H. Nash, *Is Jesus the Only Saviour?* (Grand Rapids, 1994), p. 55.

<sup>28</sup> D'Costa, p. 22.

<sup>29</sup> Hamnett, pp. 6-7.

<sup>30</sup> Hamnett, p. 7.

position, as marked by the publication of his *God and the Universe of Faiths*.<sup>31</sup>

### The Appeal of Ideological Pluralism

Why is ideological pluralism so attractive to so many people at the present time? John Stott suggests six reasons: three general and three particular. The latter three are those offered by Hick and the other authors of *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*<sup>32</sup> for their crossing of what they refer to as their 'theological Rubicon'.

First, '*the new global consciousness*'. Various influences are causing increasing numbers of people to develop a global perspective. 'The very survival of the human race seems to depend on our learning to live together in harmony and to co-operate for the common good. Whatever divides us, therefore, including our religions, is understandably regarded with increasing disfavour.'<sup>33</sup>

Second, '*the new appreciation of other religions*'. Modern methods of communication, for example, have produced a situation where 'people of strange beliefs and customs, who hitherto have been very remote from us, now live next door to us, and actually enter our homes – on the screen if not in person.... And as we become better acquainted with the world's religions, what Professor John Hick has called their "immense spiritual riches" have 'tended to erode the plausibility of the old Christian exclusivism''.<sup>34</sup>

Third, '*the new post-colonial modesty*'. Stott refers to the shift in theological consciousness which has paralleled the profound post-Second World War cultural shift in the West from one of superiority to equality in respect of the non-Western world. In light of the cultural shift, 'to continue...to claim Christian universality, it is said, is to lapse into the old imperialist mindset'.<sup>35</sup>

In addition, the three particular bridges which Hick and his colleagues say took them across their theological Rubicon were:

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<sup>31</sup> J. Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths* (London, 1973).

<sup>32</sup> Ed. J. Hick and P. F. Knitter, *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* (London, 1987). See also, by way of response, G. D'Costa, *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religion* (Leominster, 1991).

<sup>33</sup> John Stott, *The Contemporary Christian* (Leicester, 1992), p. 298.

<sup>34</sup> Stott, p. 299.

<sup>35</sup> Stott, p. 300.

a. the *historico-cultural* bridge, or *relativity*. They came to hold that since all religions are the creations of the human imagination, each from a particular cultural perspective, the Christian faith must cease from its claim to be in possession of absolute or final truth.

b. the *theologico-mystical* bridge, or *mystery*. This step involves a recognition that all religions equally represent 'some sense of the Transcendent or experience of God who, being himself infinite and ineffable always remains beyond our apprehensions of him'.<sup>36</sup> Another contributor to *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, maintains that therefore 'for Christians to think that Christianity is true, or final, or salvific, is a form of idolatry'. Another contributor, Tom Driver, defines idolatry as 'the insistence that there is only one way, one norm, one truth'.<sup>37</sup>

c. The *ethico-practical* bridge, or *justice*. Stott describes the contributors to Part III of *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* as 'outraged by the sufferings of the oppressed and united in their commitment to social justice'. Pluralism, for them, 'is not an end in itself, but a means to the end of liberating the oppressed'. Such a goal requires 'a worldwide liberation movement' which, in turn, 'needs a worldwide inter-religious dialogue'.<sup>38</sup> In this light the only important criterion for judging any particular religion appears to be the quality of its contribution to the promotion of social justice.

For these reasons pluralism is the preferred option and represents the only truly tolerant religious attitude in our modern world. Christian exclusivism, by contrast, is widely portrayed as intolerant and morally deficient. According to Cantwell Smith, 'Exclusivism strikes more and more Christians as immoral. If the head proves it true, while the heart sees it as wicked, un-Christian, then should Christians not follow the heart? Maybe this is the crux of our dilemma.'<sup>39</sup> 'Similarly,' writes Netland, 'the historian Arnold Toynbee, a vigorous critic of exclusivism, asserted that the only way to purge Christianity of the 'sinful state of mind' of

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<sup>36</sup> Stott, p. 302.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> Stott, p. 303.

<sup>39</sup> Wilfred Cantwell Smith, 'An Attempt at Summation', in *Christ's Lordship and Religious Pluralism*, ed. G. H. Anderson and T. F. Stransky (New York, 1981), p. 202. Quoted in Netland, p. 302.

exclusive-mindedness and its accompanying spirit of intolerance is to shed the traditional belief that Christianity is unique'.<sup>40</sup>

### **Some Responses to the Charge of Exclusivist Intolerance**

Three responses may be made at this point to the charge of intolerance often levelled at the exclusivist position. First, Christian exclusivists can learn a good deal from the pluralists and should be able to identify, in a way they have not always done, with many pluralist concerns. As John Stott, for one, acknowledges, evangelical Christians are bound to identify with the commitment of many pluralists to the search for global harmony, the pursuit of social justice and the service of the poor. We must recognize that past colonial attitudes of superiority were arrogant, that further knowledge of other religions does bring us enrichment, that the mystery of God is beyond human apprehension and even that the Bible is a culturally-conditioned book. But none of these alignments can ever be at the expense of commitment to the truth.<sup>41</sup>

Second, we should humbly confess that Christian exclusivists have been as capable of showing arrogance, insensitivity and bigotry as others and that indefensible things have been done by professing Christianity. It is, of course, another question altogether whether these evils are a necessary entailment of the exclusivist position.

Third, the charge of intolerance needs to be turned back on the pluralist position.<sup>42</sup> Don Carson makes the important point that in many Western societies the nature of tolerance has changed. Tolerance used to be a matter of relating to people but now it mainly concerns ideas. When tolerance is primarily directed towards people, its practice enables the most vigorous of debates over the relative merit of this or that idea to take place while the highest standards of mutual courtesy are maintained. The new practice of tolerance, however, brings with it no inherent demand to be tolerant of people and, says Carson, 'it is especially difficult to be tolerant of those

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<sup>40</sup> Netland, p. 303. See Arnold Toynbee, *Christianity Among the Religions of the World* (New York 1957), pp. 95ff.

<sup>41</sup> Stott, p. 304.

<sup>42</sup> The '90s have seen a growing body of academic writing calling attention to the intolerance inherent in the pluralist position. See *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, ed. Gavin D'Costa (New York, 1990). Cf. Peter Donovan, 'The Intolerance of Religious Pluralism', *Religious Studies* 29 (1993), pp. 217-29.

people whose views are so far outside the accepted “plausibility structures” that they think your brand of tolerance is muddleheaded.’ He points out, too, how this brand of tolerance results in less discussion of the merits of competing ideas

because tolerance of diverse ideas demands that we avoid criticizing the opinions of others; in addition, there is almost no discussion where the ideas at issue are of the religious sort that claim to be valid for everyone everywhere: that sort of notion is right outside the modern ‘plausibility structure’ (to use Peter Berger’s term) and has to be trashed.<sup>43</sup>

In the religious context, relativistic tolerance immediately rules out ‘any strong opinion that makes exclusive truth claims – all, that is, except the dogmatic opinion that all dogmatic opinions are to be ruled out, the dogmatic opinion that we must dismiss any assertion that some opinions are false’.<sup>44</sup> In an address given a few years ago in Edinburgh, under the auspices of Rutherford House, the late Bishop Lesslie Newbigin told how he found himself in a group of people and used the word ‘dogma’, only to apologize immediately for using it since it made some in the group so angry. He was interrupted by the head of a large comprehensive school who said, ‘Don’t apologize. I know perfectly well that in my school dogma reigns in every department except R.E. where it is treated as rubbish.’ Newbigin remarked, ‘Of course she was perfectly right. The difference is not between those who rely on dogma and those who don’t. It’s the difference between those who know what the dogma is they are relying on and those who do not.’<sup>45</sup>

There is no doubt that pluralism is a dogmatic position. It makes much of the notion of universal human experience of spirituality but insists, apparently as an absolute truth, ‘that God has not or cannot reveal himself in an absolute or propositional way’.<sup>46</sup> Clements also calls attention to the real threat posed to liberty of conscience by the religious variety of political correctness which it engenders. ‘School teachers who wish to express a personal commitment to the uniqueness of Christ may find

<sup>43</sup> D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God* (Leicester, 1996), p. 32.

<sup>44</sup> Carson, p. 33.

<sup>45</sup> The tape of this address entitled, ‘The Trinity as Public Truth’, is available from Rutherford House, 17 Claremont Park, Edinburgh, EH6 7PJ.

<sup>46</sup> Clements, ‘Can Tolerance Become the Enemy of Christian Freedom? Part II’, *Cambridge Papers*, Vol. 1; number 3, Sept. 1992, p. 2.

themselves viewed as blinkered fanatics out to brainwash their pupils. An evangelical scholar who is known to defend a Nicene view of the deity of Christ may find it hard to achieve academic promotion. Would-be ordinands who confess an ambition to convert Jews or Muslims to Christ may discover that their sense of divine vocation is not endorsed by ministerial accreditation panels.<sup>47</sup> None as illiberal as the liberals, they say, and examples of pluralistic intolerance could easily be documented.

### 3. Tolerance and Scripture: the Truth Issue

What this paper wishes to affirm is that, contrary to widespread belief, the position of Christian exclusivism offers the only stable basis for tolerance as we move into a new millenium. Our starting point is one which the pluralists of necessity deny: God's revelation of himself in his Word, personal (Jesus Christ) and written (the Old and New Testament Scriptures). As such it is the only sure and certain guide for human beings and its revealed standards of truth and morality the only reliable reference points for our lives. This is where we must begin.

#### What is Truth?

Clearly the issue of truth is at the heart of the current debate and the kind of tolerance which we will cherish depends largely on how we relate to it.<sup>48</sup> As we have seen, the dominant view is that since all religions are equal in status and independently valid, when they appear to be making independent truth claims we must 'live with the paradox of mutual contradiction and logical inconsistency'. Religion after all is 'a universal human experience of spirituality which transcends rational analysis and verbal articulation'.<sup>49</sup>

This, put beside the assumption of a radical divide between the public realm of 'facts' (above all in the physical sciences) and the private realm of 'values', means that 'since religion is said to be limited to this private world of values and preferences, questions of truth and falsity are

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<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> Stott puts his finger on the nub of the matter in saying that his response to the six reasons why some find pluralism attractive is basically the same: 'They beg the question of truth; we want to press the question of truth. Has God fully and finally revealed himself in Christ, and in the total biblical testimony to Christ, or not?' Stott, *op. cit.*, p. 304.

<sup>49</sup> Clements, Part II, p. 2.

inappropriate in religious matters'.<sup>50</sup> Or, as Newbigin puts it, 'The rival truth claims of the different religions are not felt to call for argument or resolution; they are simply part of the mosaic – or perhaps one should say kaleidoscope – of different values that make up the whole pattern.'<sup>51</sup>

Truth, on this view, is whatever works for the individual. There is no ultimate distinction between truth and error. And the argument is that only on the basis of this understanding of truth is tolerance possible. The result, as Clements says, is 'that tolerance which began in the seventeenth century as an expression of Christian confidence in the self-authenticating power of absolute Truth, has in the late twentieth century become an expression rather of a profound uncertainty regarding absolute Truth'.<sup>52</sup> The impact of this situation on the contemporary church is plain. Carson remarks that while past ages disagreed over what exactly constituted heresy, 'for the first time in history large numbers deny that theological corruption is possible'.<sup>53</sup> If the church seems to have little or nothing to say to the contemporary world, this is, suggests Stott, because

the church itself is confused; it shares in the current bewilderment, instead of addressing it. The church is insecure; it is uncertain of its identity, mission and message. It stammers and stutters when it should be proclaiming the gospel with boldness. Indeed, the major reason for its diminishing influence in the West is its diminishing faith.<sup>54</sup>

Our calling is to be witnesses to the truth, but if the very notion of truth is in question, it is little wonder that the trumpet gives an uncertain sound.

### **Propositional Truth and the Principle of Noncontradiction**

Netland provides a helpful discussion of this vital subject of religion and truth. He examines various attempts to formulate theories of religious truth that do not include the notions of propositional and exclusive truth and finds serious problems with each of them. He argues that any acceptable theory of religious truth must 'recognize that beliefs are integral to religion and that truth in religion, just as in other domains, must include the notion of propositional and exclusive truth'.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Netland, p. 36.

<sup>51</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (London, 1986), p. 16.

<sup>52</sup> Clements, Part I, p. 2.

<sup>53</sup> Carson, p. 354.

<sup>54</sup> Stott, p. 183.

<sup>55</sup> Netland, p. 150.

Netland clarifies what he means by propositional truth. To say that truth is propositional 'is to recognize that although "true" and "truth" can be used in a variety of ways, in the logically basic sense truth is a quality or property of propositions. That is, truth is a property of propositions such that a proposition is true if and only if the state of affairs to which it refers is as the proposition asserts it to be; otherwise it is false.'<sup>56</sup>

While it is clear that divine revelation cannot be identified with a set of propositions nevertheless,

insofar as revelation is informative about God – and surely this is the whole point about revelation in the first place – it must be capable of being expressed propositionally. It is simply nonsensical to think in terms of knowledge of God that is nonpropositional. If the propositional element is eliminated from divine revelation, whatever else one is left with, it cannot be informative about God.<sup>57</sup>

Netland suggests that it is naive and misleading to present the alternatives (as is often done) as an exclusive disjunction – we either have propositional truth about God or existential encounter with God, but not both. 'Not only is it possible to have both,' responds Netland,

one cannot respond appropriately to God without first having some knowledge of God. The believer can only respond personally to God as Lord and Saviour if he or she already knows something about what God is like and what he expects from humankind. And the more one knows about God the more one will be able to know God personally and respond appropriately to him. As Nash puts it, 'Personal encounter cannot take place in a cognitive vacuum.'<sup>58</sup>

The assumption, which he finds implicit in much contemporary theology, that 'propositional revelation is abstract, detached, cold and incapable of eliciting more than a bland intellectual response of mental assent from believers', Netland quite rejects.

There is no reason why we must suppose that propositions about God cannot prompt powerful and moving personal responses from individuals. Propositions may indeed be 'response evoking', as Paul Helm puts it, particularly if the propositions have to do with the nature of God (*e.g.* his love) and what he has graciously done for humankind.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Netland, pp. 114-15.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p.126.

<sup>58</sup> Netland, pp. 126-7.

<sup>59</sup> Netland, p.127. Cf. Helm, *The Divine Revelation* (London, 1982), p. 27. Helm shows how, for the Westminster Divines, 'the words and



Moreover, Christian exclusivism is based on the principle of non-contradiction: two contradictory statements cannot both be true. Netland describes the growing trend, even in the western Christian church to resolve questions of how Christians should relate to one another by appealing to an indeterminate higher form of 'Truth' not limited by this principle of non-contradiction. He rejects this stance as epistemologically untenable.

The price of rejecting the principle of noncontradiction is forfeiture of the possibility of meaningful affirmation about anything at all – including any statement about the religious ultimate. One who abandons the principle of noncontradiction is reduced to utter silence, for he or she has rejected a necessary condition for the meaningful statement of any position whatsoever.<sup>60</sup>

### Truth and (In)tolerance in Scripture

It seems clear that the understanding of truth espoused by Christian exclusivism reflects that of the Bible itself. In a significant article, Roger Nicole has analyzed how the word 'truth' is used in both the Old and New Testaments.<sup>61</sup> He finds that in the Old Testament '*emet*' means not only faithfulness (the quality that provides appropriate ground for confidence) but, in many instances, truth in the sense of 'that which is conformed to reality in contrast to anything that would be erroneous or deceitful'.<sup>62</sup> There are also many instances of '*emet*' coming to mean, by extension, truth as 'the embodiment of God's wise and merciful pattern for human life'. The Psalmist, for example, prayed, 'Guide me in your truth' (Ps. 25:5).<sup>63</sup> Both faithfulness and commitment to truth among human beings is intended to reflect the fact that God himself is supremely the God of truth (e.g. 2 Chron. 15:3; Ps. 31:5; Jer. 10:10) – the God 'who sums up in himself the fulness of faithfulness and truth'.<sup>64</sup>

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propositions of the gospel are not a barrier to faith in Christ, they are a necessary condition of that faith' (*loc. cit.*).

<sup>60</sup> Netland, p. 145.

<sup>61</sup> Roger Nicole, 'The Biblical Concept of Truth', in *Scripture and Truth*, ed. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (1983) pp. 287-98.

<sup>62</sup> P. 290. He cites Deut. 13:14; 17:4; 22:20; Prov. 8:7; Isa. 43:9; Jer. 9:5; Dan. 11:2, etc.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.* Other examples given are: Pss. 26:3; 43:3; 51:6; 119:43; Prov. 23:23; Dan. 8:12, etc.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 289.

In the New Testament, *aletheia* and its cognates are used frequently (some 183 times). Here the connotation of faithfulness is not so much to the fore (the latter idea is represented in the New Testament more by words of the *pistos* family) and the 'primary...emphasis is...on truth as conformity to reality and in opposition to lies and error'<sup>65</sup> (e.g. John 7: 18; Eph. 4:25; 1 John 2:21). There are also many expressions linking truth with witness, thus establishing that 'truth is viewed as factuality.... In John 5:33 and 18:37 our Lord represents himself as a witness to the truth. To give this witness is one of the purposes of His incarnation.'<sup>66</sup> As in the Old Testament, truth represents not only conformity to fact but (notably in 1 John) 'that pattern of living that conforms to the revealed will of God'.<sup>67</sup> A further important connotation of truth, found especially in the writings of John (e.g. John 1:9; 6:32; 6:55; 15:1; cf. Heb. 8:2; 9:24), involves 'the contrast not so much between correct and false, but rather between complete and incomplete, definitive and provisional, full-orbed and partial'. This means that John 1:17, for example, while it 'does not deny the gracious character of the truth content of the Torah,' nevertheless 'emphasizes that the administration of grace in its complete and ultimate form is the fruit of the incarnation of the Logos, 'who came from the Father, full of grace and truth' (John 1:14).<sup>68</sup>

As Nicole concludes, the elements of factuality, faithfulness and completeness must each be given their proper place in any accurate account of the biblical concept of truth. Ultimately, truth is a perfection of the triune God himself – not only as the only genuine God but as the truthful one. His word is the truth, his law is the embodiment of truth and his faithfulness to his word grounds 'full confidence on the part of believers'.<sup>69</sup>

In the light of this understanding of truth as a perfection of the Deity, as the hallmark of his revelation in Scripture and in Christ and as the path we are called to walk, it is not surprising to find a correspondingly intolerant strain running through the Scriptures. A Jewish rabbi in the States used to enjoy saying in public, 'Tolerance is not a theological virtue,' to the dismay of the good liberals in his audience. Religion, he would then say, is about truth, not tolerance. In the light of Scripture he appears to be both right and wrong.

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<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 293.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 294.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 295.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 296.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 296.

The contemporary relativistic view of truth cannot be squared with the radical intolerance of idolatry and its ethical consequences, both outside and within God's covenant community, which we find in the Old Testament. The first of the Ten Commandments is a prohibition against idolatry (Exod. 20:3). Joshua insisted that the choice facing the people was stark: other gods or Yahweh (Josh. 24:14-15). Any Israelite found secretly enticing another to engage in the worship of other gods was to be executed without compassion (Deut. 13: 6-11).

For many people the most objectionable expression of intolerance in the Old Testament was the kind of ethnic cleansing involved in the conquest of Canaan. Recent memories of Rwanda and the tragic events unfolding in the Balkans (not to speak of the more remote activities of the Crusaders and Conquistadors) make this a sensitive and difficult question. Vanhoozer calls attention to the way in which the Bible has been used to justify the oppression of persons or peoples but argues convincingly that this is the fault, not of biblical ideology, but of the way in which the Bible has been interpreted. 'For the text itself contains sufficient resources with which to provide adequate checks and balances on attempts to appropriate it for alien political purposes.'<sup>70</sup>

### **The New Testament and Christian Tolerance**

In the light of the clearer revelation of God's will in the New Testament, the violent aspects of Old Testament exclusivist intolerance fall away. The primary citizenship of Christians is in the coming kingdom of God from which all violence will be excluded. Christians are called to be peace-

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<sup>70</sup> Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in this Text?* (Leicester, 1998), p. 179. With regard to the application of the Conquest narrative to new situations, Vanhoozer comments, 'My strategy, were I to construct an adequate response, would be to appeal to the fuller canonical context of the biblical text itself. In the immediate literary context, it is clear that the taking of Canaan was to be a once-for-all event. It had to do with the fulfilling of a specific divine promise to Abraham and cannot, therefore, be made into a general principle. Moreover, the land was not simply a possession, but "the vehicle of a benefit, the promised rest" (Brevard Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* [London: SCM, 1992], 146). Finally, in the context of the canon as a whole, it is Jesus, not Joshua, who leads his people into a new, eschatological rest (Heb. 4:1-11).' *Ibid.*, p. 193, n. 172.

makers, to be prepared to suffer patiently even when its cause is unjust and to overcome evil with good. We have no biblical justification to attempt to purge idolatry or heresy with the weapons beloved of the Inquisition. That said, it must equally be affirmed that the New Testament manifests no more theological tolerance of idolatry than does the Old. Likewise, the truth claims of the gospel are affirmed as exclusive and absolute. The claim of our Lord is entirely unqualified: 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me' (John 14:6) and the idea that Christians would welcome any other gospel led Paul to employ some of the most searing language found anywhere in Scripture (Gal. 1:6-9). Exclusivism is unquestionably the stance of biblical Christianity.

But as *Dignitatis* brings out well in its section on 'Religious Freedom in the Light of Revelation,' it is the same biblical revelation that makes known the inherent dignity of human beings and in doing so uncovers the foundation for religious freedom and tolerance: 'Revelation...disclose(s) the dignity of the human person in its full dimensions. It gives evidence of the respect which Christ showed toward the freedom with which man is to fulfil his duty of belief in the Word of God. It gives us lessons too in the spirit which disciples of such a Master ought to make their own and to follow in every situation.'<sup>71</sup>

The truth of God 'appears at its height in Christ Jesus, in whom God perfectly manifested Himself and His ways with men'. He displayed the utmost meekness, humility and patience towards others. While he denounced the unbelief of some, he left vengeance to God. In sending out the apostles he told them: 'He who believes and is baptized shall be saved, but he who does not believe shall be condemned' (Mark 16:16), 'but He Himself, noting that cockle had been sown mid the wheat, gave orders that both should be allowed to grow until the harvest time, which will come at the end of the world'. He acknowledged the authority of governments but 'gave clear warning that the higher rights of God are to be kept inviolate (Matt. 22:21).' He refused to be a political Messiah and showed himself the perfect servant of God. And then:

In the end, when He completed on the cross the work of redemption whereby He achieved salvation and true freedom for men, He also brought His revelation to completion. He bore witness to the truth, but He refused to impose the truth by force on those who spoke against it. Not by force of blows does His rule assert its claims. Rather, it is established by witnessing to the truth and by hearing the truth, and it

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<sup>71</sup> *Dignitatis Humanae Personae*, II.9. See Mullan, p. 336.

extends its dominion by the love whereby Christ, lifted up on the cross, draws all men to himself.

The apostles in turn 'followed the example of the gentleness and respectfulness of Christ'. Renouncing coercion and methods unworthy of the gospel, they strove to have people converted to faith in Christ as Lord by the power of the Word of God alone. 'They were unceasingly bent on bearing witness to the truth of God' but 'showed respect for weaker souls even though these persons were in error'. Like the Master, they recognized legitimate civil authority but 'did not hesitate to speak out against governing powers which set themselves in opposition to the holy will of God...'.<sup>72</sup>

The disciple of Christ today is therefore under obligation to understand, proclaim and defend the gospel but 'never – be it understood – having recourse to means that are incompatible with the spirit of the gospel. At the same time, the charity of Christ urges him to act lovingly, prudently and patiently in his dealings with those who are in error or in ignorance with regard to the faith'.<sup>73</sup>

If, for Roman Catholics, the above paragraphs represent an extraordinary *volte-face*, it should be noted that it is one that is true to the biblical witness. In the light of that witness, what kind of tolerance should Christians seek to exemplify and promote in the pluralistic world of the twenty-first century?

#### **4. Practical Application: Contexts of Christian Tolerance**

It may be helpful to distinguish four different contexts in which the notion of tolerance is applicable: the legal, social, intellectual and ecclesiastical.<sup>74</sup>

In the legal context, Christians and the church should have no hesitation in affirming basic rights for all, regardless of religious affiliation. Scripture requires no less of us. Christians should fully support legal tolerance of religious pluralism which is 'essentially a formal recognition of the basic human right of each individual to choose which religious tradition to become a part of (if any at all) and to participate freely in the practices of that tradition'.<sup>75</sup> Today we tend to take for granted this right as guaranteed by the constitutions of western democracies. We too easily forget that in many countries it simply does not exist. In an

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<sup>72</sup> *Dignitatis*, II.11. Mullan, pp. 336-8.

<sup>73</sup> *Dignitatis*, II.14. Mullan, pp. 339-40.

<sup>74</sup> Netland helpfully discusses the first three: *Ibid.*, pp. 305f.

<sup>75</sup> Netland, p. 305.

officially Islamic state like Saudi Arabia, for example, it is illegal and punishable to attempt to convert Muslims to another faith.

For herself the church rightly claims freedom, as *Dignitatis* expresses it, 'In human society and in the face of government...in her character as a spiritual authority, established by Christ the Lord. Upon this authority there rests, by divine mandate, the duty of going out into the whole world and preaching the gospel to every creature.' According to *Dignitatis*, the church also claims the right 'in her character as a society of men...to live in society in accordance with the precepts of Christian faith,' while 'the Christian faithful, in common with all other men, possess the civil right not to be hindered in leading their lives in accordance with their conscience'.<sup>76</sup>

Christians should also lead in affirming tolerance in the social context. The Christian knows that, as made in the divine image, each human being is of incalculable worth. It, therefore, matters greatly how we treat one another. We are to love those with whom we may disagree profoundly. Acknowledging the difficulty in achieving the ideal, not least in highly pluralistic societies, Netland holds that 'evangelicals must take the lead in cultivating social tolerance for those with differing religious views'.<sup>77</sup> We should show love to all, be unfailingly courteous and helpful and live at peace with all men. We, of all, should be attractive people.<sup>78</sup>

The third context in which tolerance applies relates to the area of fundamental beliefs. Here we must hold that tolerance is fully compatible with non-acceptance of all the beliefs of others as true. We must also insist that true tolerance is fully compatible with the carrying out of the church's mission in evangelism and the free proclamation of the good news of salvation through the Lord Jesus Christ. We must insist (courteously) that to denounce evangelism as spiritual imperialism is wrong-headed. As Netland puts it,

The evangelical conviction that all persons are in need of God's gracious forgiveness, that this is available only through Jesus Christ, and that out of obedience and love Christians are to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ to all who have never heard, in and of itself is not

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<sup>76</sup> *Dignitatis*, II.13-14. Mullan, pp. 338-9.

<sup>77</sup> Netland, p. 306.

<sup>78</sup> A fine discussion of the attitude Christians should have to people of other faiths is found in G. Grogan, *The Christ of the Bible and the Church's Faith* (Fearn, 1998), pp. 270-75. On the complex issue of dialogue, Netland's discussion is excellent: pp. 283-301.

intolerant. It is the methods used to communicate this conviction that can be said to be tolerant or intolerant.<sup>79</sup>

If the human predicament is as desperate as we believe it to be and the gospel as true and wonderful as we believe it to be, it would be intolerable not to evangelize. In a sermon delivered at the fiftieth anniversary of the Tambaram Missionary Conference in 1988, Bishop Lesslie Newbigin spoke these moving words:

If, in fact, it is true that almighty God, creator and sustainer of all that exists in heaven and on earth, has – at a known time and place in human history – so humbled himself as to become part of our sinful humanity, and to suffer and die a shameful death to take away our sin, and to rise from the dead as the first-fruit of a new creation, if this is a fact, then to affirm it is not arrogance. To remain quiet about it is treason to our fellow human beings. If it is really true, as it is, that ‘the Son of God loved me and gave himself up for me’, how can I agree that this amazing act of matchless grace should merely become part of a syllabus for the ‘comparative study of religions’?<sup>80</sup>

In Christian evangelism the question of methods is crucially important. Dreadful damage has been done to the Christian cause by the use of methods that are unworthy of the gospel. In under a month from Christmas Day last year there were one hundred and fifty attacks on Christian targets in India – more than in the first fifty years since independence put together. On 23 January, Graham Staines, an Australian missionary who had worked in a leper colony in Orissa for more than thirty years, was incinerated in his car, together with his sons Philip (9) and Timothy (6). The reasons for this violent backlash are doubtless complex. But sadly, at least part of the explanation appears to have been the questionable nature of the methods being used by some missionaries in recent times. Natasha Mann reported:

There are some very evangelical groups, small groups, who will persuade people by hook or by crook in the name of miracles, says one Christian worker in the region.

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<sup>79</sup> Netland, pp. 312-13.

<sup>80</sup> Quoted in Stott, p. 305. On the question of the resurgence of other religions and the comparative failure of Christianity, Stott comments that ‘these things should lead us not to the conclusion that the gospel is untrue, but rather to self-examination, repentance, amendment of life, and the adoption of better ways of sharing the good news with others.’ Stott, *Ibid.*, p. 300.

Some are in it for profit. There is a rumour that one group is receiving a dollar per person. It is a relatively recent phenomenon. Over the last ten years there have been some Pentecostal, evangelical groups who use trick and miracle cures. They give antibiotic powder and link it with the name of Jesus and easily convince people.<sup>81</sup>

There is in fact no greater expression of love to our neighbour than to communicate the gospel to them, providing that we do so in the spirit of the great evangelist of the early church who said, 'We have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways; we refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God' (2 Cor. 4:2).

A fourth context in which the issue of tolerance is important is that of the Christian church itself. Here again our record leaves much to be desired. Cardinal Newman's words are telling: 'Oh, how we hate one another for the love of God!'<sup>82</sup> As Augustine saw clearly, although his practice in relation to the Donatists left much to be desired, the issue of tolerance in the intra-church context arises because of the need to distinguish between the ideal (perfect) church of the age to come where there will be no need for tolerance, because all will be united in perfect knowledge, holiness and love, and the imperfect church of this present time, called and committed indeed to truth, love and holiness but whose life and witness are too often marred by error, discord and sin.

'Not,' as John Stott says, 'that we are to acquiesce in its failures. We are to cherish the vision of both the purity and the unity of the church, namely its doctrinal and ethical purity and its visible unity.... And in pursuit of these things there is a place for discipline in cases of serious heresy or sin.'<sup>83</sup> Stott adds, 'Neither Scripture nor church history justifies the use of severe disciplinary measures in an attempt to secure a perfectly pure church in this world.'<sup>84</sup> He is surely right.

The actual practice of discipline in the contemporary church varies widely. Within Scottish Presbyterianism, according to Henry Sefton, it has

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<sup>81</sup> 'Burning down the mission', *Scotsman*, 16 April 1999.

<sup>82</sup> See Netland, p. 304.

<sup>83</sup> Stott, *Ibid.*, pp. 388-9.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 389.



largely lapsed in the Church of Scotland.<sup>85</sup> In the smaller Presbyterian Churches, matters of church discipline sometimes appear to dominate all else. Indeed they have become so divisive that, in the view of some, small church Presbyterianism in Scotland is on the brink of the abyss.

The New Testament gives clear warning against both permissiveness (as seen, for example, in the toleration of the practice of incest in the church in Corinth) and the heavy-handed authoritarianism that would use discipline as an instrument of power to destroy true liberty of conscience. Small denominations have always run the risk of producing leaders who thrive on the sense of self-importance which being big fish in a small pond tends to encourage. Church discipline, whose regular (and ruthless) exercise helps consolidate both authority and a reputation for 'faithfulness' in some quarters, lies temptingly close to hand. And there is some evidence that the 'left' in power can be every bit as heavy-handed as the 'right'.

The great difficulty of getting things right in the area of discipline is suggested by comparing the message to the church in Ephesus with that to the church in Pergamum or Thyatira (in Revelation chapter 2). The church in Ephesus was praised because it would not tolerate evil-doers, but rebuked for abandoning the love it had at first. Intolerance had apparently bred an inquisitorial spirit that left little room for love. On the other hand, the church in Thyatira is praised for the love it manifests but rebuked for tolerating the activities of the seducing prophetess Jezebel. The pressures of a non-Christian pluralist society had blurred the distinction between the church and the world. As G. B. Caird commented, 'how narrow is the safe path between the sin of tolerance and the sin of intolerance!'<sup>86</sup>

Some sections of the church, therefore, need to be recalled to a recognition of the seriousness (even cruelty) of heresy.<sup>87</sup> New Testament warnings about the damage done by false teachings (e.g. 1 Tim. 1:3-5; 6:3-5) and concern for the guarding of the pure content of the gospel (cf. 1 Tim. 6:20) require to be heard with a new clarity. Other, discipline-happy, sections of the church need to be warned against trying to be more faithful than Scripture itself. Sometimes the fault arises through failure to

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<sup>85</sup> H. R. Sefton, 'Discipline', ed. N. M. de S. Cameron, D. F. Wright, *etc.*, *Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology* (Edinburgh, 1993), p. 246.

<sup>86</sup> G. B. Caird, *The Revelation of St John the Divine* (2nd edn, London, 1984), p. 41.

<sup>87</sup> See C. F. Allison, *The Cruelty of Heresy: An Affirmation of Christian Orthodoxy* (London, 1994).

distinguish between what can properly be required for church membership and what is appropriate in the case of office-bearers who are expected to subscribe to confessional statements.<sup>88</sup> Sometimes, it is failure to appreciate that not every teaching of Scripture is intended to serve as a test of orthodoxy. As Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8 make clear, the Scriptures themselves urge mutual tolerance in some areas of disagreement. Sometimes authoritarian discipline is simply an expression of fallen human desire to lord it over the consciences of others.<sup>89</sup>

'Let both grow together until the harvest,' said Jesus in the parable that was so important to Augustine. While the whole question of what exactly is tolerable in the Christian church still awaits proper analysis, the burning concern for the unity of the church manifested both by Christ and his apostles, strongly argues that we will only ever approximate to the correct view when the promotion of (biblical) ecumenism is of prime concern to us also. Clearly, we have a long way to go.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> John Frame suggests that 'if the church requires its officers to subscribe to every "jot and tittle" of the confession on pain of ecclesiastical discipline, the confession becomes in principle unamendable.' Such a creed, he argues, 'becomes, in effect, the equivalent of Scripture; Scripture itself loses its unique authority in the church'. He adds, 'There must be some leeway, some at least momentary tolerance, some leg room for people who conscientiously believe that something in the confession is unscriptural'. Frame, *Evangelical Reunion* (Grand Rapids, 1991), p. 97. For office-bearers of our smaller Presbyterian Churches there is, in fact, no leg room.

<sup>89</sup> Commenting on 1 Cor. 8:9, Calvin, after emphasizing the Lord's desire that we have concern for the weak (those not yet well grounded in godliness), goes on: 'At the same time he [Paul] hints that tough giants, who want to play the tyrant, and put our freedom under their control, can be safely ignored; because one need not be afraid of offending people who are not led into sin by weakness, but who, at the same time, are eagerly on the look-out for something to find fault with.' *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians, Calvin's Commentaries*, ed. D. W. Torrance and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh, 1960), p. 178.

<sup>90</sup> The approach to ecumenism represented by the WCC appears to be in some trouble. Strong criticisms of the WCC and serious questions about its future were voiced at the meeting of its Eighth Assembly in Harare, Zimbabwe, in December, 1998. According to one report,

### **Concluding Reflections: Tolerance, Truth and the Public Square**

Richard Neuhaus famously spoke of the contemporary public square as 'naked', stripped of its old values. All around us, as David Wells puts it, 'are the outlook and values that arise in a society that is no longer taking its bearings from a transcendent order'.<sup>91</sup> The moral vacuum thus created is all too apparent in many areas of contemporary life, not least in education which pleads that it is obliged to be value-neutral, with the (tragic) result that 'in the new civilization which is emerging, children are lifted away from the older values like anchorless boats on a rising tide.'<sup>92</sup>

But if God's word represents absolute and public truth then we have a responsibility to hold it forth with boldness and courtesy in the public square from which in the past we have been too ready to retreat into our gospel ghettos. We need more psychological intolerance of all that stands against the truth as it is in Jesus whether in the political, social, economic or educational spheres. If the Hindus, for example, are able, by their protests, to prevent the showing of an episode of *Xena: Warrior Princess* because of its offensiveness to the Hindu community, what offensively anti-Christian material might be kept off our screens if Christians could act appropriately and in concert? One has to be aware, of course, of the deep-seated antagonism to orthodox Christianity which the media regularly display. But they have to listen when sufficient numbers speak out.

The already considerable pressures on a shrinking church to bring its view of truth into line with the prevailing consensus will intensify in the new century. This temptation will probably be felt most acutely in our national Church, as it finds itself increasingly marginalized in a secular society. David Wright notes how the Kirk at times seems to attract 'the harshest intolerance – as though it is being made to pay for its privileged

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'Orthodox and Anglican representatives complained that their communions were under-represented in the Council. The former had threatened withdrawal before because of the way in which Christian truth and ethics were being de-emphasized by the WCC. The Anglicans expressed concern about the way in which the decline in Western Christianity and the world-wide dimension of mission was being ignored.' *The Banner of Truth* (April 1999), p. 8.

<sup>91</sup> D. F. Wells, *No Place for Truth Or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids, 1993), p. 80.

<sup>92</sup> Wells, p. 84.

history.<sup>93</sup> He perceives the danger to lie 'not in the denigration itself' but in the reaction of a 'quiet, perhaps half-unconscious, resolve never again to expose oneself or the Church on this or that unpopular tenet of faith, to soft-pedal the gospel which originally met with incredulity from Graeco-Roman gentiles and sounded deeply offensive to many Jews, to tailor the Church's teaching or service to what sceptics or humanists will bear in silence.'<sup>94</sup> He is surely right to state that, however painful an experience marginalization may be for a body like the Kirk, when that marginalization is caused by 'ever-widening forces of unbelief and immorality' the words of the Master must be heeded: 'What will it profit a person (or a Church) to gain the whole world and lose its soul?'.<sup>95</sup>

Our calling as individual Christians and as the church of Jesus Christ is to serve as witnesses to the truth. Whatever else we allow to go, we *must* not, we *dare* not, give up our stewardship of the truth of the gospel. Some of us believe that God has a great purpose in store for our national Church in terms of its role in furthering the interests of Christ's kingdom in this land. It is a purpose that will be realized only as we are given grace to resist the temptation to sell our birthright for a mess of short-lived 'popular acceptance'.

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<sup>93</sup> David F. Wright, 'The Kirk: National or Christian?' in *The Realm of Reform*, ed. Robert D. Kernohan (Edinburgh, 1999), p. 35.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 35-6.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

## REVIEWS

### **The Coming Evangelical Crisis**

Edited by John H. Armstrong

Moody Press, Chicago, 1996; 269pp., \$12.99; ISBN 0 8024 7738 0

In this symposium, fourteen evangelical scholars address the current state of evangelicalism and argue that current trends within the movement contain the seeds of its destruction. The contributors include some very well-known writers and pastors such as John MacArthur Jr, R.C. Sproul and Michael Horton, together with senior academics like Robert Godfrey and Albert Mohler Jr. Lined up together, they constitute a significant constituency within the evangelical camp and the book deserves to be taken seriously.

The essays range across the spectrum of current issues, but always with a particular target or focus. The book is divided into five parts. Part one is entitled 'The Present Crisis Observed'. Albert Mohler leads the field with an article seeking to define the word 'evangelical' and bemoaning the lack of clarity in its usage today. Bob Godfrey draws attention to Luther and the doctrine of justification, clearly with a sidelong glance at Packer and Colson. Gary Johnson asks 'Does theology still matter?' not only because of our 'mindless and irrational culture' but also because even some evangelicals neglect or ignore the importance of theology.

Part 2 is concerned with 'The Crisis of Revelation' and has two essays. R. Fowler White deals with the question as to whether God speaks today apart from the Bible. In the course of this he rejects some of the modern evangelical views on prophecy, naming particularly Jack Deere and Wayne Grudem as those with whom he disagrees. In the other essay in this section, R. Kent Hughes presents a biblical defence of preaching as over against those pastors (even so-called evangelicals) who give little or no time to the study of the word and instead offer short devotional talks or spend their time in the pulpit telling stories instead of expounding the word of God.

Part 3 is entitled 'The Crisis of Gospel Authority' and has four essays. R. C. Sproul argues, from an exegesis of Galatians 1, that there is the danger today of another gospel being preached which is not the biblical gospel. Lewis Johnson hammers this point home by focusing attention on substitutionary atonement as being the heart and centre of gospel. Robert Strimple continues this section of the book with an attack on those who

deny the biblical doctrine of God, particularly his omniscience. His target is the 'free will theism' of Clark Pinnock and Richard Rice, among others. John Hannah concludes this section by arguing that evangelicals have been so concerned to be 'relevant' that we have watered down the gospel. More particularly, he argues that opposition to the enlightenment has led to a rationalist mentality which has robbed us of the notions of mystery, awe and wonder.

Part 4 is concerned with particular topics of debate and is entitled 'Flash Points in the Crisis'. In this section John McArthur has an article on worship in which he condemns the emphasis upon drama, music, comedy *etc.*, which in many places has replaced true biblical worship. Leonard Payton follows this up with an essay on singing praise which is very practical and challenging and insists that worship and entertainment are different! David Powlison continues the section with an article of pastoral care which argues that true pastoral counselling must be biblical and rejects the solutions (often imported into evangelical churches) of the psychotherapists. John Armstrong concludes the section with an essay on spiritual warfare which challenges the notion of 'territorial spirits' and similar deviations.

The final part of the book (Part 5) is called 'Responding to the Crisis' and contains a single essay in which Michael Horton seeks to draw the thread of the various contributions together and offer a way forward for evangelicals. In this essay, 'Recovering the Plumb Line', he argues that a recovery of confidence in the authority and sufficiency of Scripture is the only way to stop the current decay within evangelicalism and to restore the cause of Christ.

This is a challenging book which drives us back to the fundamentals and one can only hope that its lessons will be learned.

*A.T.B. McGowan, Highland Theological College, Dingwall*

## **Sermons on Galatians**

John Calvin, translated by Kathy Childress

Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1997; xii+671pp.,

£21.95; ISBN 0 85151 699 8

These 43 sermons, preached in Geneva between November 1557 and May 1558, were first published in French in 1563 and in English in 1574. This first subsequent fresh translation from the French reproduces language as readable as the content is relevant and compelling. Calvin – exact exegete and expositor, biblical theologian and alert pastor, with

much study behind him and nothing before him in the pulpit but his Greek New Testament – speaks from these pages for the reader's personal edification and as an example to all who are called to feed the flock. In the absence of formally announced structure the sermons receive coherence and point from their faithfulness in unfolding the particular text under review, clause by clause. Calvin the commentator and theologian informs, but does not supplant, Calvin the preacher. It is a useful exercise for preachers acquainted with the theology of Calvin's *Institutes* to take his commentary alongside his sermons to observe the biblical scholar and theologian in the pulpit and the sometimes-forgotten difference between commenting and preaching. The sermons generally conclude with a call to fall down before the majesty of the great God and to seek grace to put the truth into practical effect and are calculated to promote these ends.

*Hugh M. Cartwright, Free Presbyterian Church, Edinburgh*

### **Models for Scripture**

John Goldingay

Paternoster, Carlisle, 1994; xi+420pp., £19.99; ISBN 0 85364 638 4

### **Models for Interpretation of Scripture**

John Goldingay

Paternoster, Carlisle, 1995; x+328pp., £19.99; ISBN 0 85364 643 0

### **A Model Answer? John Goldingay's Analysis of the Nature and Interpretation of Scripture**

No one could accuse John Goldingay of timidity! Having previously produced wide-ranging studies on the Old Testament and a detailed critical commentary on that most demanding prophecy, the Book of Daniel, Goldingay published two significant volumes (within only a few weeks of each other) on the fundamental issues of the nature and interpretation of Scripture. They are entitled *Models for Scripture* and *Models for Interpretation of Scripture*.

In the face of such adventure, one might well ask where the line falls between boldness and recklessness, but it appears that Goldingay's labour has not been in vain, at least in the eyes of some of scholarship's most notable interpreters of Scripture who offer their enthusiastic commendations for these volumes. Indeed, there is much to commend these volumes to serious students of the Bible, and not the least of the virtues is the very obvious fact that the two volumes are companion

volumes, seen most clearly in the common use of the term 'models' in the titles.

### **Uniting what cannot be separated**

What Goldingay has done in tying these two volumes so closely together is to make it plain that the work has not been completed when a doctrine of Scripture has been formulated. Even the highest view of Scripture as the infallible word of God still leaves the interpreter with the vexed question of how to understand the text in question. To make this point is not to say that we do not need a high view of Scripture; it is simply to recognise the need to wrestle with difficult questions which arise out of our view of Scripture, which cannot be settled purely on the claim, 'the Bible is the word of God'. This is certainly part of the contribution that Goldingay's books make.

### **The concept of 'models'**

Goldingay has clearly chosen the term 'models' with some care as the key to his books. It is a term that may be unfamiliar to many Christians in the context of a discussion of the Bible. It is a modern term, but that, in and of itself, does not invalidate it. It is also a term which has been used by authors at the more radical end of the theological spectrum (notably Sallie McFague, in her book *Models of God*<sup>1</sup>) but this too is not a sufficient reason for avoiding it. Goldingay defines a 'model' in the following terms:

A model is an image or construct that helps us grasp aspects of these realities by providing us with something we can understand that has points of comparison with the object we wish to understand, thus helping us to get our mind round its nature.<sup>2</sup>

The term (in the plural) brings to the reader's attention Goldingay's fundamental contention that a single concept is insufficient to do justice to the diversity of the biblical literature.

What are these models? Goldingay has chosen four: *witnessing tradition*, *authoritative canon*, *inspired word*, *experienced revelation*. Each of these models has been chosen because it is considered to be particularly appropriate to a particular swathe of biblical literature. Thus the model of *witnessing tradition* is considered most appropriate for discussion of narrative in the Bible, while the prophetic writings are best understood by the model of *inspired word*; the instruction material associated with the

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<sup>1</sup> London, 1987.

<sup>2</sup> *Models for Scripture*, p. 7.



Pentateuch is understood as *authoritative canon*, and the model of *experienced revelation* includes biblical poetry, the epistles and the apocalypses. However, in the first volume, each model is applied to each form of literature in order to give an indication of how the different forms of literature compose one coherent scripture.

The problem with any model is that it can sometimes be too precise for the data for which it attempts to account. It is probably the case that Goldingay's models, while helpful in many ways, are neither entirely appropriate in every case nor mutually exclusive. Yet the value of any model may lie as much in provoking further reflection and nuanced argument, as in putting an end to discussion altogether. The particular merit of Goldingay's models, however, is that they are multiple!

### **Diversity Celebrated**

Goldingay is to be commended for adopting the principle that the various units of literature in the Bible should be allowed to have their own distinctive voice. The emphasis on giving proper respect to the various genres of biblical writings is one of the most valuable emphases to come from contemporary scholarship (though it might be claimed with some justification that the best interpreters among the Fathers and the Reformers displayed a similar sensitivity).

When Goldingay describes the way in which many preachers treat a narrative in Scripture – a brief summary of the story (usually leaving out many of the interesting details) followed by a question: now what can we *learn* from this? (*Models for Interpretation of Scripture*, p. 71) – he perhaps makes many of us uncomfortable and that is the first step towards asking whether we are doing justice to the biblical texts.

### **Unity Concealed?**

The suspicion remains, however, that the emphasis on the diversity of the genres of Scripture is not balanced by an emphasis on the organic unity of the works that have been recognised as canonical. If this is indeed the case then a reason for this must be considered, and perhaps the answer is simply that in laying entirely due emphasis on the distinctive human contribution to the texts of Scripture, insufficient emphasis has been laid on the 'God-breathed' character of these documents.

It would not be surprising, therefore, if chapter 19 of *Models of Scripture* draws most attention and critical comment, being entitled 'Inspiration and Inerrancy'. The chapter is located in Part III of the book, well on into a discussion of 'Scripture as Inspired Word', and assumed

from the start that the previous discussion has established the inspiration of Scripture. The question then remains, Does inspiration imply inerrancy?

The chapter contains a useful discussion of what 'inerrancy' might mean in historical terms, and who actually held such a position. He points out numerous instances where a biblical author is apparently unconcerned about, for example, the precise figure of casualties in a battle. However, he goes on to categorise such examples as 'factual errors' (p. 265), without explaining what constitutes an 'error' or by whose standard this is judged. Goldingay is not prepared to go down the road of saying that the scriptural text is inerrant in relation to the intention of the author on the basis that such a route leads to the 'intentional fallacy' (how are we to read the mind of the author? See *Models for Scripture*, p. 270). This is indeed a valid concern, and the work of E. D. Hirsch has rightly been criticised for being rather naive in what it suggests we can know about an author's intentions. However, we *may* ask the modified question, what can we know of the author's intention, *in so far as it is embodied in the text?*

Is Goldingay fair in his identification of 'errors'? If I tell my wife that there were forty thousand people at the football match, I should not be criticised for error (or even inaccuracy) if there were in fact 41,316 people at the match, on several grounds. First, I have no access to that precise figure (unless it is specifically made known to me). Secondly, it is a common convention to use round figures in the case of a large crowd. Thirdly, it is of no real consequence to the purpose of my communication to my wife concerning how I spent my afternoon. It seems to this reviewer that Goldingay takes a number of similar examples from the pages of Scripture, claims that they are errors, and absolves the author of guilt because it does not really matter. I would suggest that at least some of his examples do not constitute 'errors' in any fair sense at all.

Inerrancy rests primarily on the character of the God who breathed out his words and on the character of the Lord who sustained every word of Scripture with his own authority. Goldingay protests that this does not provide a consensus on the meaning of Scripture since there remain disagreements at the level of hermeneutics. True enough, but what Goldingay does not seem to appreciate is that for those who hold to inerrancy (however expressed), it is not a pragmatic ploy to bring ecclesiastical unity but a theological necessity that must be maintained regardless of the problems that remain for the interpreter.

So we must voice reservations concerning Goldingay's discussion of inspiration and inerrancy, and these are important reservations, but it would be disappointing if Goldingay's contribution to these important

aspects of theological discussion was neglected on the basis of disagreement with him at this point. The more that the diversity of the documents that comprise the canon of Scripture is appreciated, the more the reader can appreciate the richness of expression found there, and also the striking harmony that is found in the combined voices of these documents.

### **Believer and Scholar Combined**

That Goldingay is a scholar, and a very competent one at that, is evident throughout these works. The volumes which he draws from in his discussion represent the whole spectrum of theological investigation, from Old and New Testament (though Goldingay would say 'First' and 'Second' Testament) exegesis through philosophical hermeneutics and history to dogmatics and contemporary liberationist trends in theology.

His discussion of the rather daunting field of hermeneutics in *Models for Interpretation of Scripture* evidences awareness of and interaction with important discussion in the most recent literature, and yet a readable presentation of the issues at stake that does not lose the reader in a fog. This places Goldingay's writings in a very rare position in a field of literature where ease of reading is not frequently high on the list of notable qualities.

Throughout the two volumes, Goldingay tends to adopt a mediating position between more critical scholarship and more conservative scholarship. It is, of course, always admirable to take a position that is eminently reasonable and avoids the excesses of those who hold positions on either side, but at times it appears that Goldingay is not so much defending the legitimacy of a more constructive approach to the biblical text as attempting to avoid the conservatives being too badly scolded.

That Goldingay is a believer is also evident throughout these books, and it is refreshing that this is so. There are numerous references to the place of Scripture in the life of the church, and these serve to give a pastoral warmth to these volumes that is missing from some other discussions of these subjects. It is entirely fitting that this two-volume project should be concluded with a chapter entitled 'Reflective Expository Preaching' in which the preacher is challenged to 'open yourself to the costly demand of the text and commit yourself to repentance and change in the light of it', and encouraged to lead the congregation 'into the same

position of being addressed by the passage as you have occupied in your presentation.<sup>3</sup>

If Goldingay's work leads preachers (and all who read and interpret the Bible) to such an attitude to their task then it will have been of value, even if some aspects of Goldingay's own position may require just that same change in the light of the text.

*Alistair I. Wilson, Highland Theological College, Dingwall*

## **The Unique Christ In Our Pluralist World**

Edited by Bruce J. Nicholls

Paternoster Press, Carlisle, 1995; 288pp., \$14.99; ISBN 0 85364 574 4

This book contains the papers presented at a consultation held in Manila in 1992 under the auspices of the World Evangelical Fellowship. The twenty chapters are authored by evangelical theologians from around the world and the book includes the full text of the 'The WEF Manila Declaration' – a long statement discussing Christology in the context of modernity which was drafted during the consultation and agreed by all the participants.

The theme of the uniqueness of Christ is discussed in relation to key aspects of modern culture: religious pluralism, modernity, and the demand that genuine theology must address the pressing issues of peace and economic justice. Inevitably there is unevenness in the quality of the contributions offered here but the book contains some fine material on a crucial subject. With more than half the contributors coming from the non-Western world, including countries like Japan and India where other religions have been dominant for centuries, the subject is treated in a manner that is both realistic and deeply challenging. The 'Declaration' hints that there were problems in obtaining a consensus among participants, even in areas where Evangelicals have previously taken a common line. Thus, there was disagreement as to whether salvation might be found through the blood of Christ by people who 'do not consciously know the name of Jesus'. The 'Declaration' simply concludes that 'More study is needed' on this issue and affirms (rightly in my view) that Evangelicals must give priority to the development of 'a more adequate theology of religions'.

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<sup>3</sup> *Models for Interpretation of Scripture*, p. 286.

As far as individual contributions are concerned it is difficult to single out particular chapters for mention from such a wide range of papers, but I was helped especially by reading Chris Wright's opening survey of the issues at stake, Rene Padilla's brilliant discussion of the challenge of modernity, and the profound and genuinely fresh approach of Miroslav Volf, who attempts to chart a path between the 'false alternatives' of an unshakeable dogmatism, on the one hand, and an absolute relativism, on the other. There is not space here to describe Volf's 'middle way' but, for this reader, it suggested the direction evangelical theology may need to take as it comes to terms with the twin imperatives of faithfulness to the Bible and relevance in the context of a shifting culture.

*David Smith, Whitefield Institute, Oxford*

### **The Scandal of A Crucified World. Perspectives on the Cross and Suffering**

Yacob Tesfai

Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY, 1994; 155pp., n.p.; ISBN 0 88344 976 5

This book is the outcome of a Third World consultation within a project of the Institute for Ecumenical Research. The consultation's topic was the cross and suffering with special attention to 'the division and unity of humanity in the face of suffering'. It resolved to carry out this debate particularly in dialogue with Lutheran and feminist theologies already addressing the same concerns.

The consultation, if these papers are anything to go by, succeeded in sticking to its brief. The results, however, are mixed. The volume is of particular value to readers in the northern hemisphere for its painful but purifying education into the catastrophic effects of the colonial and modern era on Africa and Asia particularly. Slavery, apartheid, racial inequality and cultural colonialism fall under withering analysis and critique. No doubt remains as to the sources of the main injustice. In some places, it has to be admitted, the case is overstated but, in the main, western pride and complacency undergo a thorough and well-deserved shaking. And most of it is well referenced with data. The analysis cuts even deeper than this, pinpointing the complicity of institutional Christianity of varying traditions. In Latin America, according to Walter Altmann's penetrating contribution, the situation is acute. Because of the alliance between the cross and the sword, right up to very recent times, the question faces Christians: can 'one talk about experiencing liberation

*in* Christ. Inversely, would not a liberation *from* Christ be necessary?' The answer is that we can again speak of liberation *in* Christ only if we have re-earned the right to do so by acting justly.

The main source of disappointment is the lack of theological depth. There is useful evaluation and development of Luther's theology of the cross, but much else is repetition of such familiar rubrics as the suffering of God, liberation theology, God's solidarity with the oppressed, *etc.* In respect of these, not much new is added, though the historical context is helpfully expanded with broader and deeper perspectives, particularly on Africa and Asia.

Two exceptions to the complaint above are Elizabeth Moltmann-Wendel's discussion of feminist critiques of the cross, and Theo Sundermeier's updating of Luther's theology of the cross. Moltmann-Wendel very skilfully, though sympathetically, exposes the weaknesses in some feminist criticisms. The solutions she offers fall short of traditional aspirations, but she does force reflection at levels not normally reached by conventional theologies of the cross. Sundermeier's 'Contextualising Luther's Theology of the Cross' not only throws new light on Luther's thinking but relates it to today, illustrating the fertility of the Reformer's theology.

Criticisms notwithstanding, this book deserves serious attention by theologian and, especially, by practitioner, if only to put mettle into the sometimes romantically privatised, and hermetically sealed, safe haven of today's evangelical mentality.

*Roy Kearsley, South Wales Baptist College*

## **Child Sexual Abuse and the Churches**

Patrick Parkinson

Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1997; 287pp., £8.99; ISBN 0 340 630159

Stories of child sexual abuse continue to flood the news, but these incidents are more disturbing still when they focus on the church. In this book, Professor Patrick Parkinson, a specialist in family law and child protection, and an advisor to churches on this subject, challenges Christians to face the problem and take action. While recognising that the official church responses are improving, especially in Britain, he makes the chilling comment that 'in my experience of child protection in Australia, children are less likely to be protected in churches than in almost any other group in society'.

This book is an invaluable tool in moving towards greater concern and knowledge. The author draws on the latest research, but also on the personal experiences of a number of victims, thus giving statistics and general points a very human feel. The stories are intensely moving – and call for a response from the church so that others will be prevented from suffering in the same way.

Part One is devoted to understanding child sexual abuse. Parkinson describes the nature of sexual abuse, and gives some information concerning its prevalence. He explores the world of the perpetrators, who may be men, women, adolescents, Christians; the rationalisations made for abuse; the process of victimisation and the reasons why the church has been reluctant to deal with the issue. He also tackles some of the controversies surrounding abuse including sexual relations between adults and young teenagers, the reliability of recovered memory, and ritual abuse.

Part Two concentrates on pastoral issues. The author describes the effects of child sexual abuse on victims in the short and long-term, and the factors which are likely to influence the outcomes. He deals with emotions like guilt and shame, grief and anger, along with other consequences such as post-traumatic stress, sexuality and the capacity to trust. The struggle of faith is also raised as a real problem for those who believe God was not present during their suffering, and who have distorted images of God, not least his 'maleness'. The author goes on to discuss the issues surrounding the difficult subject of forgiveness and repentance.

Finally, in Part Three, Parkinson turns to the churches' response to child sexual abuse in their own communities. Recognising some of the reasons why the church has often evaded its responsibility, he argues for the rightness of taking the issue seriously. He gives information concerning the process of disclosure, investigation and law, and proposes disciplinary procedures for those within the church who sin. He concludes by advising on ways to make churches safer for children, giving suggestions for both action and prevention. Further reading and resources are listed at the end.

This book is a must, especially for ministers and anyone concerned with the welfare of children in our churches. It is a first-class source of information and understanding, written with clarity and fairness and out of great experience, good biblical foundation and unmistakable compassion.

*Fiona Barnard, St Andrews*