

# Signs of the Times

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## Modern Church

Modern Church is an international society promoting liberal theology. Founded in 1898 to defend liberalism in the Church of England, we now work ecumenically to encourage open, enquiring, non-dogmatic approaches to Christianity.

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## Signs of the Times

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*Signs of the Times* is published in January, April, July and October. It provides news and information about Modern Church and offers members an opportunity to communicate with each other in print. We welcome articles, notices, poems, suggestions, comments and suitable accompanying graphics. Articles published do not necessarily reflect a Modern Church perspective – in keeping with our commitment to liberal theology we believe that other views should be heard.

Send material to the editor by 13 December, 20 March, 20 June or 20 September. Articles should not normally exceed 1,000 words. We prefer email but will process typed or handwritten text (phone for a postal address).

## Editorial:

### No Apology for Liberalism

*Anthony Woollard*

In January 2014, Jonathan Clatworthy put up two particularly important posts on the Modern Church blog.

The first was in response to the topical debate about the proposed new baptismal liturgy and its omission of the Devil. That debate was aired at length in the *Church Times* and focused largely on whether the Church would be offering a false prospectus if traditional belief in the Devil was played down. Perhaps just a simple issue of Biblical literalists versus the rest of us (though, as Jonathan demonstrated, the various Biblical images or roles of Satan or the Devil are by no means consistent.) But this is not really about a fallen angel with horns and a tail, but about whether there is such a thing as supra-personal Evil. Some liberals have at times seemed to suggest that evil resides entirely in human naughtiness or perhaps in social structures, and (as Pelagius argued) can be overcome by the exercise of human free will. Others have felt that their fellow-liberals have given an over-optimistic account of how things are, and that evil is something rather bigger than any of us, needing a more radical redemption (as Augustine argued). Some of the testimonies of parish clergy in the *Church Times* columns have suggested that quite a few parents bringing their children to baptism, even if rather agnostic about the reality of any transcendent value of goodness (such as people call God), are all too aware of that sort of evil as a possibility from which they want their children somehow protected or delivered..

In any event, it might seem that, over issues such as freewill and supra-personal evil, there may be more than one approach possible amongst those who reject fundamentalism. Which leads on to Jonathan's second blog posting, an extended version of which appears below. Are there two kinds of liberals, and what are the differences between them?

Jonathan suggests a distinction between “apologetic” and “permissive” liberals. The former are not, of course, “apologetic” in the weak popular sense: if anything, the very opposite. They are liberal because they “have a gospel to proclaim” which stems from belief in cosmic value (God), and hence feel obliged to contribute to Christian apologetics; and they find that elements of traditional dogmatism get in the way of that. The latter are “permissive” in the more negative sense that they are seeking release from traditional dogmatic and ethical requirements which seem to them oppressive – and (Jonathan argues) some of these would be willing, in that search, to sacrifice if necessary any idea of God, along with the horrors of patriarchy and homophobia, the manipulative power of the confessional or whatever their bugbear may be.

Clearly this is not the same as the distinction between “optimistic” and “realistic” liberals (to coin an equally inadequate distinction) to which I refer above. Some optimistic liberals, such as the Social Gospel movement in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century USA, have been highly conscious of the apologetic challenge, and have most certainly not ruled God out – though as H R Niebuhr famously argued, it is a moot point how much continuity their God has with the God of the tradition. Some realistic liberals, all too conscious of the power of evil, may derive their motivation from a deep need for release from the traditional chains that bind them, and indeed see the image of God which they learned at their mother’s knee as part of the problem rather than part of the solution – yet they too, more often than not, find in their experience some message of hope which they want to share. Precise understandings of “God” will vary right across this spectrum of liberal approaches. There will be equal variations in response to other key elements of the tradition, whether doctrinal, ethical or liturgical.

So I am not sure whether Jonathan’s typology will quite do, and I am certainly not suggesting that mine will do any better. There are other possibly typologies; for example, Brenda Watson’s article in this edition implies that some liberals may, in their urge to demythologise, have bought too readily into a contemporary culture of “literalism” and lost the value of metaphor, image and ritual. That may well be a more significant source of differences amongst us. But the point is that liberalism is not a single

ideology (as some of its proponents and many of its critics have claimed) but a broad church. And that challenges all of us to decide from whence our liberalism draws its motivation and just what it implies in terms of belief and spirituality and understanding of “the nature and destiny of Man” (Reinhold Niebuhr alas lived in pre-feminist days). It is also a challenge to decide whether or not we have a gospel to proclaim, and, if so, precisely what it is. I go back to my comment in the last issue, drawing on John Saxbee, that sometimes our movement may have been clearer about what it was *against* than what it was *for*.

That latter theme was prominent at our residential Council meeting in March, which was very much an exercise in “re-imagining” – our Church, and Modern Church’s role within it. Guy Elsmore’s opening presentation, drawing on the recent work of Linda Woodhead and others about the future of the Church of England, challenged us to re-commit to growth, both in our parishes and in our movement and its influence. A great range of issues was discussed, ranging from the role of our vacant post of President (and what sort of person might fill that role), through increased use of social media, future themes and structures of our conference programme, to how we can best facilitate the development and dissemination of sources for Christian formation which are not Alpha-shaped in their content but learn appropriately from the process of that apparently successful programme. (Being Modern Church, of course, we argued for some time about what “success” in such a context might mean!)

The 24 hours of intense discussions need to be fully digested before the Trustees can take concrete decisions on any of these matters, and it would not be appropriate – even if space allowed – to anticipate that process here. But it would seem that Council is once again supportive of the idea of a three-tier subscription structure which was aired last year; with the new arrangements for membership etc, we are still a little way from the steady-state financial situation which we need in order to plan our finances effectively, but, even though our annual deficit is now manageable, it is clear that we need some increase in subscriptions in order to grow as Guy would exhort us to. It seems also that - in response to the survey comments reported below by Christine Alker -

there is support for some experimentation with the length and timing of Annual Conferences. And, last but not least, it is evident that we need more volunteers to help run conferences both annual and day, as well as for a number of other functions, which go well beyond what busy Trustees and Council members can commit to. More about that at the AGM.

A year ago, it looked as though the challenges facing us, and the differences of viewpoint on how to tackle those challenges, could sink us. We are still not free of problems, as the tedious bedding-in of the new membership and mailing arrangements has demonstrated. Nor, alas, are we totally free of the pain to which the events of 2013 gave rise for some. But our prayers at the Council meeting, and in particular a moving Eucharist at which Lorraine Cavanagh presided, demonstrated a deep will for reconciliation and for finding truly creative ways forward. Indeed – though “Liberal Apologetics” is one theme suggested for a future Annual Conference – we have no reason to be apologetic for our liberalism, and much reason to rejoice in it.

## Two Directions for Liberal Theology

*Jonathan Clatworthy*

At last the mood in the churches is changing, with increasing sympathy for liberal Christianity. Recent controversies have revealed the downside of hardline dogmatic versions of the faith, with their campaigns against one or another feature of contemporary society. People are asking: who are the liberals, and what do they stand for?

I attended my first Modern Church conference in 1984 so in July I will have been involved with it for 30 years. I have just stepped down after 11 as General Secretary. Over the years I have developed a feel for liberal theology, both in the academic world and in the churches.

What it means to be a liberal varies between Britain and America, and between the churches and academia. In the USA the separation of church and state is sometimes virtually the defining feature of liberal Christianity, while in Britain liberal opinions

vary. Academic theology is still heavily influenced by Karl Barth who labelled his German predecessors, from Schleiermacher to Harnack, as liberals because he thought they put too much trust in human reason instead of submitting to the word of God.

Here I describe my experience of liberals in the churches, primarily the UK and mostly England. Every movement is to some extent a reaction against an earlier movement. Modern Church, founded in 1898, opposed a rising dogmatism which influenced Catholics and Protestants alike. That dogmatism was itself a reaction against the rise of atheism. It seemed to many that science was disproving the existence of God. If we take the controversy over Essays and Reviews (1860) as a starting-point, ‘liberals’ believed Christians could deny the existence of hell. And then, accept evolution. And then, accept archaeological evidence that the biblical histories were sometimes inaccurate. Meanwhile they defended religious belief against an atheism which reduced values and morality to mere human constructs. This kind of liberalism

- seeks a unitary account of reality, so that science and religion are consistent with each other;
- has an apologetic dimension, in that it expects religious beliefs to be compatible with scientific truths;
- seeks to be engaged with the issues of society, so that religious belief matters to the questions of the day.

Let us call this ‘apologetic liberalism’.

Most church leaders moved in a different direction. Rather than trust that truth would emerge from common discourse they emphasised their own spiritual authority. The claims for the infallibility of the Pope and the Bible were at their strongest towards the end of the nineteenth century. What made them popular was that they defied modern society. Across the Catholic-Protestant spectrum, western Christianity became more dogmatic. Today this is expressed in the heavy emphasis on single issues where church leaders differ from secular society: Catholics on abortion, Protestants on homosexuality. Dogmatic Christianity thus identifies itself by defying secular society.

It is not just a matter of theoretical disagreement: it often oppresses. Currently, women are often oppressed by dogmas of male headship, gays and lesbians by condemnations of their relationships. In times past other issues have dominated. Countless people have been severely traumatised, perhaps by the threat of hell or the sense of being not good enough. When these beliefs are internalised in childhood the trauma may last a lifetime.

People who rebel against these dogmas often become atheists. This is perhaps most likely when the cause of the oppression is identified as God. Others want to cling onto church life but find healthier, more tolerant versions of Christianity.

This is a more focused liberalism. It is more rooted in church life, seeking to make it open, inclusive and tolerant. We might call it 'permissive liberalism'. As befits those recovering from trauma, it has a therapeutic character. This makes a difference. Characteristically, when we are ill we do not set out to change the world. For the time being we postpone our external interests and concentrate on our own condition. In the same way permissive liberalism tends not to have an apologetic dimension: the emphasis is on letting go of the burden, on permission not to believe. Permissive liberalism is therefore less inclined to resist atheism, less engaged with the public issues of the day.

Both apologetic and permissive liberalisms permit doubts and welcome debate about Christian teaching, so both are characterised by people who like to think for themselves. As I see it, the key theological difference is about the existence of God. Apologetic liberalism defends religious belief against atheism as well as fundamentalism. Permissive liberalism permits disbelief, without necessarily drawing the line at God.

The distinction is not clear-cut. One complication is the philosophical debate about what it means for things to exist. 60 years ago you either believed in God or did not. Since then theologians have drawn on the concepts of non-realism, relativism and constructivism to produce alternatives: you can believe 'God exists' in different ways. One result is that people can become atheists gently, one small step at a time. It meets a need. Those busy divesting themselves of oppressive Christian

dogmas may well divest themselves of God as well without feeling they ought to give up singing in the choir or helping with the Sunday School. Perhaps their church means a lot to them. Perhaps the believing side of things was never important to them anyway and they would rather think of themselves as liberals than as atheists. Although the logic of it baffles me, I know some Modern Church members who are much better than me at praying, meditating, producing good liturgies and conducting services but whose beliefs about God are, to my mind, effectively atheist. I console myself with the thought that God enables us to relate to the divine in different ways.

For realists who do not buy into these complications, there are others. What is important about God to one realist (say, God as creator or judge) may be rejected by another; so you may reject the God I believe in while both of us believe in God. Nevertheless, despite all the complications, there remains a difference between those who are committed to God in some way or other and those who are not. The difference matters for some purposes, which often concern apologetic liberals.

Of the two liberalisms, apologetic liberalism is more self-sufficient. If atheism and dogmatism both collapsed, apologetic liberalism would just become normal religious believing, as arguably it has been in the past. Permissive liberalism would change character: no longer needing to react against oppression, it would lose its emphasis on disbelief. It might perhaps become more positive about what it did believe, in which case it would become more like apologetic liberalism.

Asked to choose between the two types, some like me would see themselves as apologetic liberals. Others would see themselves as permissive liberals. Others again, probably most, would not recognise the distinction.

Nevertheless tensions between the two do crop up. Characteristically apologetic liberals want to affirm that their faith matters in the public realm. Permissive liberals may feel that the claims made by apologetic liberals are too dogmatic.

I think these two liberalisms are likely to move in different directions. Permissive liberalism has an important role within church culture, and will

continue to have it as long as there are oppressive versions of Christianity. Outside church culture, permissive liberals fit easily within normal secular culture. It is religious dogmas they disbelieve; as far as society's norms are concerned they usually have nothing distinctively religious to offer. They are less likely to challenge the status quo. Outside church culture they can therefore seem pretty invisible.

Apologetic liberalism does have the tools to challenge the status quo. With its unitary account of reality it expects to play a significant part in exploring how society understands the way things are and how we ought to live. Its commitment to God is a commitment to an authority higher than national governments, an authority which knows how things work and how we ought to live, and therefore passes judgement on what governments actually do.

Dogmatic Christianity also claims to pass judgement on society. Dogmatic Christianity, however, is hampered by its own dogmas. Even when it reaches beyond its narrow list of *bêtes noires* – homosexuality, evolution, abortion, etc – it feels the need to relate its concerns to biblical texts, with the result that it only speaks to other dogmatists. Liberals by contrast can speak the language of ordinary people, and care about poverty, climate change and cancer for the same reasons that ordinary people do. What liberals add is that we see it as God's world, and use our religious resources to explore the implications.

For the foreseeable future permissive liberalism will have an important role, if only within the churches. Apologetic liberalism seems liberal in the present ecclesiastical context, but in the longer term is just normal religious belief. Most liberals are a bit of both. The need to choose between them does not often arise.

I suspect it will arise more often in the future. If dogmatic Christianity is now to go into long-term decline, as I believe and hope, fewer will be traumatised by its oppressions. There will be less need for permission to disbelieve. Those whose liberalism is characterised by what they don't believe will increasingly look like ordinary unbelievers until they regain enthusiasm for what they do believe. Apologetic liberalism, on the other hand, is already in increasing demand. The

traditional orthodoxies of modern western secularism are under increasing pressure. The emphasis on never-ending economic growth and technological innovation, characterised as a 'progress' which increasing numbers experience as oppressive, is rapidly losing popularity. Increasing numbers are looking for alternative visions of progress, alternative accounts of what human life is for. Effective alternatives will need to appeal to standards higher than the secular orthodoxies of the day. It is difficult to see where else they might come from, except some coherent philosophy about the divine.

If it is to be provided by Christianity, it will have to be a Christianity with a confident, positive account of what human life is for, an account which reflects the world of, and speaks the language of, ordinary people. Dogmatic Christianity cannot do it. I believe apologetic liberalism can.

## Let our Bishops go Free

*Jean Mayland*

In April 2012 *Signs* published an article by me entitled *Collegiality and Conciliarity and their implications for the wider church*. I explained that in 2000 the Council for Christian Unity of the Church of England published a booklet entitled *Bishops in Communion- Collegiality in the Service of the Koinonia of the Church*. This examined ways in which the collegiality of Bishops might enhance the communion of the Church of England in its inner unity. The report admitted that Collegiality can sometimes impose limitations on the ministry of bishops yet there may be occasions when, in conscience, an individual bishop feels compelled to resist the common mind.

Dr Carey had been surprised to become Archbishop and unsure of himself needed to be surrounded by bishops who supported the lines laid down. Men of independent mind and courage became a crowd of passive people ready to sing from the same hymn sheet. They were all instructed to support the Act of Synod and flying Bishops and oppose the ordination of gay and lesbian people. We accused them of having had their backbones removed.

The trend continued under Archbishop Williams; it seemed essential for Bishops not to challenge him in General Synod, and clergy and laity were made to feel guilty if they did. In the matter of the Covenant the Bishops not only voted for it but tried to push it through their own dioceses. Only a very small handful of bishops had the courage to vote against the Covenant and only 2 retired and one serving spoke openly against it.

This iniquitous pressure continues. Recently I went to a dinner with a number of retired clergy and their spouses and one serving Rector who has recently been nominated as a Suffragan Bishop. During the course of the evening he revealed that he had already been for the first module of his training to be a bishop. They had been taught how to deal with the press and make statements on issues. They were supplied with papers telling them what to say and they had to practise saying it! They were assured that when they were bishops they would be supplied with a briefing telling them what to say.

I was horrified though I admit that I did not express it publicly. I was sitting by a man who was a retired Suffragan Bishop and we muttered together. He told me that he had never been instructed in this way and would not have obeyed if it had occurred. At one time he and I had worked together in Durham Diocese. We began to reminisce about Bishops we had known who were outstanding characters and would never have been instructed – Mervyn Stockwood, John Robinson, Hugh Montefiore, Stanley Booth Clibborn – and with many chuckles our beloved David Jenkins!

I thought that maybe one sign of hope was the report on the Bishops' Meeting about the Pilling Report. We were told that the Bishops had 'agreed to disagree' and so there at least was an admission that they do not all personally agree,

I had had e mail correspondence with some Bishops who said that they agreed with me about 'gay marriage' in other words that it is an extension and not a destruction of the concept of Marriage. They said that they would be taking that line at the meeting but recognised that it would be very hard. Well at least the admission about differences in the Report recognises that not everyone agreed but that is an end of it. The matter has been adjourned

for further discussions in the Anglican Communion and 'more listening' but that is all.

I contacted Changing Attitude to see what they made of the situation and was assured by the Director of his support. He wrote

*'I grew up in Southwark Diocese and was ordained by Mervyn. John Robinson, Eric James, Ernie Southcott and Gwen Rymer (Youth Officer) typified the radical independence of thought that characterised Southwark. It was normative for me and something of a shock to discover that it wasn't characteristic of the whole Church of England.*

*It is impossible now to work effectively against the induction to which new bishops are subjected, and, it would seem, which they accept as reasonable.*

*People in the CA network have been disappointed by the statement about the College of Bishops meeting by David Walker, Bishop of Manchester, issued at the end of last week. It is depressingly passive and conformist. Had David Walker and Nick Holtam and others been bishops 40 years ago they would, I hope, have been far more critical of the Pilling Report, especially in the context of the anti-gay bills in Nigeria and Uganda and the support given to them by African Primates and bishops supported by western conservatives.*

*My tactic is to keep the pressure on and try and destabilise the terrible complacency that is so characteristic now. But it's hard and tiring work.'*

It was also commented on by an observer present that the media were not allowed the same access to those organising displays at the last General Synod.

All this is happening at a time when the Church of England is dying. The series of articles in the Church Times has made clear the decline. I know it in my own family. When I was a child my parents, my cousins etc and our neighbours were all faithful members of their respective churches and sincere believers. Now none of our children or grandchildren go to Church. One daughter has definitely rejected any belief in God. The other will come at Christmas and Easter to sing! My grand daughters have not time for a church which holds out against women bishops and will do nothing to

help and support gay and lesbian people. Only Ralph's nephew goes regularly to one of the very evangelical churches which is large and growing but is it Christianity they are teaching? Certainly it is not the God in whom I believe.

I help out in the villages around here during interregna when I can. We have 2 clergy moved and as result 14 parishes vacant. In some only 2 or 4 or 7 people form the total congregation. They are so faithful and so caring and so appreciative but what is the future? I know they would welcome women bishops but I do not know what they think of those who are gay or lesbian. I suspect that they would be more positive than many of our Bishops as country folk have long been wise and welcoming to such people.

One does not want to look back with rosy coloured spectacles but during my time at university and my 5 years on Church Assembly and my 25 as a lay member of General Synod the scene was very different. Churches were alive and vigorous and SCM was strong. Bishops were not afraid to express their views and I have named some of these 'giants' When David Jenkins spoke about God, religion was talked about in schools offices and work places. Only the 'churchy' were scandalised. Society as a whole welcomed the freedom to think and discuss. I do also remember a Salvation Army Officer in Durham saying to me 'Bishop David is wonderful because he gives us permission to think'.

Bishops and Archbishops on General Synod were not fearful of being challenged. I often expressed disagreement with Bishops and on several occasions stood up to Robert Runcie and John Habgood. In fact those two Archbishops were never afraid to disagree openly in General Synod. I remember that in one of the many debates on the Ordination of Women- the one in November 1984 on a motion by the Bishop of Southwark, the two Archbishops starting from opposites points of view, crossing past each other and voting against each other – but not from the position at which they started!

The Archbishop of Canterbury began by praising all the women priests he had met in the communion- 'In past years I have come not only to accept the presence of ordained women in the Anglican  
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Communion but to experience examples of their ministry which are an enrichment to the life of the Church'....BUT then he finished up 'I do not believe that we can move with integrity to the stage of legislating for the ordination of women in the Church of England' He voted against the motion.

The Archbishop of York John Habgood began by saying that the matter had been brought back to General Synod too soon and too near the end of the life of that particular Synod. He continued 'Having explained why I believe this is the wrong debate at the wrong moment I want to explain why in the end I shall vote for the motion. It seems to me that to defeat it at this stage would be a crushing blow to a cause in which I believe, because I believe in the ordination of women.' He voted in favour of the motion which was passed in all three houses. The Bench of Bishops was divided. Some spoke in favour and some against but in that House it was passed 41 to 6. York won over Canterbury. Thanks be to God.( See Report of the Proceedings of General Synod Vol 15 no 3 pages 1092 and 1107)

I find the whole current scene very depressing. Nor do I think it is one that women bishops will be able to challenge for some time. They may feel more rebellious than the men against the idea of being told to toe a party line. We have all had lots of experience in doing the opposite – but it will be tough for them. All eyes will be upon them and they may well feel that this is one issue that they cannot tackle until they have proved themselves. I do sympathize – though I know I would have to rebel – but then there is no chance of my becoming a Bishop! Meanwhile the Church goes on haemorrhaging

Like Colin Coward all I can do is plod on and challenge whenever I can. It is a grim scene. I also know that we cannot fool God. If his church dies, then it will rise again in new ways – perhaps sadly without our lovely country churches but with an honesty and a compassion which reaches out to all people bravely and openly in the knowledge and strength of the all loving God.

Since I wrote the above, the Bishops have issued their statement on the Pilling Report which saddened and angered GLBT people. It allows prayers after Civil Partnerships and 'gay weddings' for lay people but presents a very hard line of

clergy. It refuses to allow 'blessings' in all cases. It has horrified many people. I had been in email correspondence with a number of Bishops before their meeting. All expressed agreement with what I said but also felt it was going to be very hard for them to present their case. There is an admission that there was disagreement but the statement was issued on behalf of all and no one has broken ranks since. This is collegiality gone mad and is very destructive of the Church's mission,

## **Making Sense of the Eucharist: continuing the discussion**

*Brenda Watson*

Doesn't the context in which the Eucharist was inaugurated provide a major clue as to how it can be interpreted? It was Jesus's last meal with his disciples on the eve of what would shake their faith in him to the core. Jesus needed to give them something to do together which would somehow summarise for them that the terrible event that was to happen was not the end but the beginning of something more marvelous.

So much of human life is organized around the necessity for eating and drinking. To endow these with great symbolism is to offer something which can in its simplicity become meaningful for anyone. The metaphor of likening flesh to bread and blood to wine is at an obvious level: bread has substance and so has flesh; blood is red liquid and so is red wine. Interestingly, the Jewish scholar Geza Vermes has denied the historicity of the Eucharist by saying that no Jew would ever dream of linking blood with something to drink. Strangely enough, that comment convinces me that only someone like Jesus would have dared to voice such a brilliant and original analogy.

Teasing the analogy out further, everyone knows that we are - at one level - what we consume. Napoleon famously remarked that an army marches on its stomach. When imbibed, food and drink are changed - they don't remain what they were but become something else which enables the organism that consumes them to flourish. Even so Jesus likened the shocking disintegration of his body on the cross to the metamorphosis to which food and drink are subjected by the human

digestive system so that they can give life to the person. Thus by analogy Jesus is giving his life for the life of the world.

The power of this analogy is so great that it is unsurprising that Christians over the centuries have struggled to contain its meaning in words. Exactly what this means is bound to elude us, limited as we are in our capacity for understanding Mystery. Even so, we shouldn't take refuge prematurely in the notion of mystery, failing to think about it as much as we can.. Such thinking may not be able to reach settled conclusions, but it is invaluable in helping to identify misunderstandings and mistakes. This is why the various theories of the Atonement have emerged, in search of some kind of explanation.

The rich Hebrew liturgical traditions associated with the concept of sacrifice made this the most obvious route for Jewish followers of Jesus to take in their efforts conceptually to understand what had happened. Because this concept was so deeply nurtured in them - as it was also in the Gentile world - it proved to be a kind of life-line for them as they struggled to find words to express the extraordinary events to which they were bearing witness. *Agnus Dei qui tollis peccata mundi*. But for us today, living in a civilization in which any concept of sacrifice has been largely marginalized, it doesn't make much sense. We have been conditioned into a different mind-set. Since the Enlightenment and the overwhelming success of science in transforming our lives, we have become literal-minded, unhappy with metaphor, symbol and analogy as purely imaginative products of the human mind to be subjectively interpreted, Thus we see no obvious meaning in such terms as sacrifice for sin. At a basic literal level the *Agnus Dei* means little. No lamb can take away the sin of the world, and the history of human behaviour since the crucifixion is as terrible as it was before.

I have tried to find literal meaning in the three-fold invocation of the *Agnus Dei* as taking away the guilt of sin, the poison of sin and the distress caused by sin. Forgiveness is offered which contains the harm locked in sin and gives peace and strength to cope with the painful consequences. I think that I am justified in seeing it like this, for there continue to be wonderful examples of this threefold transformation in the lives of individuals and communities. One can think immediately of

Holocaust survivors who have learnt to forgive their tormentors, of the Truth and Reconciliation movement emerging from the long struggle against apartheid, and the amazing work of Canon Andrew White in Baghdad working in desperate situations to bring warring religious leaders together round the table.

But the sin is still there to be dealt with. The lamb hasn't literally taken it away. This is metaphor for something else. It is pointing - towards language. This is why it doesn't contradict the flesh and blood analogy which worried Jeyan in his comment about the Passover symbolism. For in thinking about reality, many metaphors are necessary. The similarities and dissimilarities present in a metaphor have to be teased out in every case. Even the pursuit of science cannot manage without invoking a variety of metaphors. A fascinating article by a physicist in the current *CR Magazine* points out how all our thinking about time and space requires metaphor at a basic level, whether thinking in terms of lines, waves, fabric etc.

The awesome victory which literalism has won in the West calls for strong protest and a re-investment in the intellectual and emotional power of metaphor so that it is seen not just as a poetic embellishment of language but as a means of glimpsing truth. We may all then be able gratefully to accept the metaphors given us by Jesus himself as sufficient to help us in our journey towards that true Mystery beyond words and understanding which we sense at the heart of every Eucharistic service. Elizabeth I's reputed succinct summary, quoted by Jeyan, was not just an extremely clever way of avoiding harm to herself; it actually expresses the only sane and rational, as well as spiritual, approach to the reality we intuit but cannot conceptually possess.

## BOOK REVIEW

**Love for the Future: A Journey** David Osborne  
Wild Goose Publications 2013; Pp284; pbk, £10.99;  
download, £8.50.

*John Reader - Ironstone Benefice, Diocese of Oxford,  
and William Temple Foundation.*

In 1992 whilst still a rural parish priest in the Diocese of Lichfield, David Osborne took time out of his formal ministry to walk from his home parish to Iona. This book is the result of his reflections upon that journey, which was spread over a 6 week period, and took him through Cheshire, Manchester and parts of Lancashire, up via Scargill House and the Borders and on to his final destination. 1992 was also the year of the Rio conference on the environment, and although the text has been written mainly after the event, the theme of our responsibility for creation features significantly throughout the book. Like all good pilgrims, Osborne engages with the context through which he passes and brilliantly brings to life not only the world which he discovers as a result, but also his own feelings en route. The fear with such a project would be that one loses interest towards the end and the narrative becomes repetitive, following a stimulating and rewarding start. Osborne however avoids this both through the quality of his writing and the depth of his insights.

Each chapter takes us along part of the route, but then offers a series of resources for further discussion: often the story of a historical figure who illustrates the theme such as Benedict, Cuthbert or John Newton, followed by questions for discussion, some recommended biblical references, possible actions one might take, and then finally some further books to follow up. As such this is a book to be used rather than just read, and could easily form the basis for a parish study group.. The themes which emerge include community; compassion; repentance; hope, wisdom and love. To take just one chapter as an example (Chapter 10, Songs and Stories), David paints a powerful picture of his trek through the Southern Highlands, the dangers and difficulties encountered, and then closes with a helpful discussion of hope: "Hope is a conviction that the pain, the grief, the struggle and the suffering of the world is taken into a greater reality where the wounds are not removed but healed.

Out of loss comes new possibility” (p221). This comes out of personal experience of losing a child, but is also highly relevant to the challenges currently being faced by those of us concerned about environmental matters. The insights and theological reflections are introduced in such a way that it is easy to identify with them, and to see what Osborne is getting at, even though one might not always agree with him. He is not suggesting that we should all go on such pilgrimages or follow his particular journey - so one feels encouraged and accompanied on one’s own particular path rather than being forced down someone else’s. I would recommend this book heartily as one of the best and most accessible pieces of spiritual writing I have encountered for a long while. Buy it, spend time with it, return to it and then share it with others.

## **Summary of responses to the survey about Modern Church conferences**

*Christine Alker*

The conference survey was included in the October mailing. 34 people responded of whom 12 had not attended a single conference in the past three years.

Reasons for not attending conferences included age and ill health of the member or their partner (7), high cost (5), other commitments including holidays and work (11); 4 people said the topics were not of interest.

When asked about the timing and length of the conference, the respondents were split 50-50 as to whether it should be 3 days rather than 4 days in length, but the majority want it to be mid-week rather than at the weekend and for it be kept in July.

The large majority (27) would be interested in attending day conferences and would be prepared to pay at least £15 for the day, not including a meal. The average figure people would pay for a day conference was £20 - £25. Suggestions of venues ranged throughout the country with the most

suggesting London and Birmingham, but 5 naming Manchester/Liverpool and 4 suggesting Leeds/Sheffield/York. Bristol and Oxford each had 4 votes. Given the option of attending day or residential conferences, the responses were: 10 for day, 2 for residential and 15 for both. Significantly there eight people who would be prepared to help organise a conference and other who would help on the day.

More general individual comments included suggestions for more involvement of younger people, recognising that weekends are better for them and liaising with university chaplains might be one way of reaching a university age audience. Regarding the organisation of the annual conference, there was a suggestion that there might be a sub-group planning worship with the chaplain to avoid problems experienced in the past. The timing of the AGM was queried: if it were at the start or finish of the conference, people could miss it or attend separately from the conference itself. Time for more group discussion was requested and less time on “entertainment”!

Many thanks to all those who took the time to respond to this survey.

## **Modern Church Annual General Meeting**

A notice about the AGM of Modern Church is enclosed with your April mailing. As is our usual practice, the AGM will be held on the second afternoon of the annual conference at High Leigh Conference Centre, i.e. Tuesday 15th July. If you cannot come to the whole conference, you are of course invited to the meeting when the annual report will be discussed and council members will be elected.



## Conference 2014

### A Liberating Spirit?

Exploring Spirituality for the 21st Century

**14th – 17th July 2014**

High Leigh Conference Centre, Hertfordshire

*To book and for full details Please see our website  
[www.modernchurch.org.uk](http://www.modernchurch.org.uk)*

What might be a “liberal” approach to spirituality? Many in our world have lost interest in institutions and are weary with dogmatic arguments but are looking for authentic, intelligent and accessible ways of reflecting on the realities and mysteries of life which can actually make a difference to their own lives.

This conference will be an opportunity to explore some of the contemporary approaches to spirituality through the lens of open minded and well-informed enquiry. Subjects will include: spirituality and culture; youth spirituality; Mindfulness and the Buddhist/Christian dialogue; silence; the arts; feminist spirituality; a spirituality of ministry; spirituality and creation.

Chairing the conference: Canon Professor Martyn Percy, principal of Ripon College Cuddesdon.

Speakers will be:

- Grace Davie (University of Exeter);
- Abby Day (Kent University);
- John Peacocke (academic and Buddhist teacher);
- Dave Bookless (A-rocha UK);
- Rachel Muers (Leeds University);
- Mark Oakley (St.Paul’s Cathedral);
- Emma Percy (Oxford University).

We are expecting this conference to be very popular because of its theme and mix of speakers and so it may well be worth booking early (as well as being very helpful to us!).  
*Tim Stead (Conference Secretary)*

## Appeal...

The Editor of this newsletter has no visual or design sense whatever and his IT skills are rather limited also. He is therefore dependent on others for formatting its copy into a camera-ready version. Our new General Secretary has been holding the fort valiantly, but we ideally need someone for this specific role. Is there anyone out there, please? A competent user of Microsoft Publisher or equivalent could probably do the job in well under an hour....and it’s only four times a year. Please contact [awoollard@joyousgard.org.uk](mailto:awoollard@joyousgard.org.uk) as soon as possible.



*Liberal faith in a changing world*

Modern Church is an international society promoting liberal theology. Founded in 1898 to defend liberalism in the Church of England, we now work ecumenically to encourage open, enquiring, non-dogmatic approaches to Christianity.

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Or select the link "Join Us" on the home page of the Modern Church website.

**Website**

[www.modernchurch.org.uk](http://www.modernchurch.org.uk)

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## PUBLICATIONS

### **Making Sense Series**

This is published by SPCK in partnership with Modern Church and addresses in a short and accessible way aspects of Christian thought from a liberal perspective. Their price is £7.20 each including UK post and packing. Topics covered are the Bible, God's Love, Sex, Faith in God, Death and Immortality and Religious Pluralism

### **Forewords**

This is a long-running series on issues of concern to the Church. Their price is £2.50 each or free to download on the website; titles are: Created by God: Christianity and Homosexuality in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Interfaith Priorities, Liberal Anglicanism, A Christianity that can be believed in.

Order **Making Sense** and **Forewords** publications on the website or from Clare Nicholson, 32 Craddock Road, Canterbury, CT1 1YP

### **Together in Hope Series**

These resource books are published jointly by PCN Britain, Modern Church, Free to Believe and St Marks CRC. They are intended for individuals and groups wishing to explore matters of faith and belief from a progressive Christian point of view. Their price is £3.95 each including UK post and packing. A new title in the series is: **Christianity and Feminism by Sonya Wratten.**

Other titles look at the person of Jesus, the meaning of the Christmas story and an examination of the Resurrection

Order **Together in Hope** on the website or from Together in Hope, 23 Meadowhead, Sheffield, S8 7UA