

Signs of the Times

The newsletter of Modern Church

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Editorial: Containing multitudes

Anthony Woollard

A Modern Church supporter within my congregation is a great enthusiast for the poetry of Walt Whitman. I have never really got on with Whitman myself, but one stanza of his has resonance with me:

**Do I contradict myself?
Very well then, I contradict myself.
I contain multitudes.**

This can be read as an extremely pompous and self-satisfied statement, or as an expression of the Boston mysticism which Whitman shared with such as Emily Dickinson. It is probably both, but I prefer to focus on the latter interpretation. In the climate of thought which gave rise to theosophy, Whitman was aware that the boundaries between human beings are permeable, and that there may be no such thing as a fixed or final separate 'I'. All of us, in a sense, contain multitudes – parts of all those people, and perhaps even non-human entities, with which we have related in any way.

If that is true of us, it is most certainly true of that ultimate reality which we call God.

Susie Stead, below, argues that Tim Belben (in an article in this journal six months ago) was right to recognise that the constant use of the masculine pronoun limits God, but wrong to look for a gender-neutral alternative. God is He and She and It – and, I would argue, most certainly also They. The doctrine of the Trinity may be a stumbling-block for some ▶

Modern Church

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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.

Signs of the Times

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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 8th December, 8th March, 8th June or 8th September. Articles should not normally exceed 1,000 words.

We prefer email but will process typed or handwritten text (phone for a postal address).

readers, but perhaps it can at least be taken as a recognition of a sort of plurality in the Divine which mitigates some of the problems and narrowness of strict monotheism. Even in the Old Testament, the use of the plural *Elohim* for God suggests an awareness that this One God also, somehow, is more than one – contains multitudes, in fact.

Susie notes the way that the early Church took over the festival of Saturnalia and of the goddess Eostre. All this, too, is surely part of the multitudes that God contains. Christian belief should certainly not be constrained by the metaphysics of Greco-Roman, Celtic, or Hindu mythology, but would do well to learn from them all.

Of course that has many implications for Modern Church. Not only in terms of the understanding of the Divine, but in terms of practical theology.

On New Year's Day, in her *Church Times* column, Angela Tilby said outright something which many are feeling but seem until recently to have been reluctant to say openly. Our Church has become too dominated by Evangelicals, who give a special authority to the picture of God, and the demands of personal faith, which they see as contained in Scripture – though their beliefs on those points are usually procrustean rationalisations of diverse and difficult concepts. They find it hard to accommodate the considerable multitudes who cannot accept such a credo, and they logically regard 'multitudinism' as a dirty word. We as Modern Church, on the other hand, stand for the breadth of Anglicanism. Our church - the English Anglican part of the Body of Christ, or whatever other branch individual members may represent - most certainly contains multitudes, and none are excluded.

Many of them (of us), like Christopher Hallpike who features in another article below, feel obliged to question the authoritarian, deontological approach to ethics which such a Biblicism seems to imply. Even whilst taking scripture and tradition seriously, we wrestle with questions such as the source of authority in ethics and spirituality. Similarly, colleagues such as our Australian correspondent John Bunyan feel able to question exactly the Trinitarian belief which, I have implied, is adumbrated in this idea of 'containing multitudes'. And Robert Baldwin insists on the essential compatibility and interrelationship of Christian faith and evolution in a way which, even now and even in the UK, would not be comfortable for all those wearing an evangelical label.

Others in the churches – not all of them evangelicals – feel uncomfortable with all this questioning, this apparent inability to accept the authority of the Truth given to us. We have to try to understand their convictions. But this cuts both ways. St Paul faced very similar issues in the churches of Rome and Corinth, and – whilst from time to time feeling obliged to draw his own lines in the sand – generally wanted people on both sides of such arguments to be included and to hold together in charity. So far as lies in us, we surely seek that also, and want to see a Church which provides a safe framework for godly disagreement. Whilst Angela, and those who think like her, might not necessarily feel able to endorse everything in this editorial, or everything that Modern Church stands for, I am sure they would be at one with us in this.

We therefore particularly welcome and celebrate those of our fellow human beings (not just Christians) who most manifestly and successfully 'contain multitudes'. One supreme example is Shakespeare - if you have not yet signed up for our Annual Conference on that theme for this year, I urge you now to do so. But we are also now looking towards our **2017** conference, which will more directly address our understanding of the Divine including such issues as unity and plurality. In this we will be led by our President, Linda Woodhead, whose own understanding of practical theology, informed by her outstanding work on the sociology of religion, gives her a unique insight into such questions.

Modern Church itself, of course, contains multitudes – though not as many as we should like, and only a small proportion of those who 'think what we're thinking'. At our recent Council meeting, we discussed initiatives for increasing membership.

One was an update of our charitable objectives. This is not a simple matter, because such objectives have to be in a form approved by the Charity Commission, which might or might not be effective in communicating to potential supporters and others. We made remarkable progress, and some new and simpler objectives may be in place before the AGM.

Another is outreach to students. We have already decided upon, and publicised, a reduced subscription rate of £10 for those in full-time education, be they sixth-formers or doctoral students. Students prepared to assist at our conferences already get to attend free, and we are hopeful that we can soon ▶

offer concessions to groups of students attending together. Furthermore, we are beginning to consider a joint outreach programme with our partner organisation SCM, which may also involve a promotion within higher education institutions of the 'alternative to Alpha' course for parishes, on which another group is working. None of this effort will automatically or quickly translate into new and younger members. Like the Church at large, we have a minority of such members, and we need to treasure them, because they are the future - and it may well be they, primarily, who recruit their peers. But we need to be more open to them. There is room for concern about the tendency, in some parts of the Church, to be obsessional about recruitment of 'yoof' at pretty much any price, and Guy Elsmore's article below about church growth is relevant. Such an obsession is not likely to appear in Modern Church, but we certainly need to listen to the younger generation about their needs and expectations.

Part of that is the role of social media. Around the turn of the year, our website featured articles by Martyn Percy in preparation for the Primates' Meeting (whose outcome disappointed so many, but was perhaps not quite as negative as it might have been). More recently, he has written on the Reform and Renewal programme within the Church of England – an article which again picks up Guy's theme. The impact of these articles, widely publicised through Facebook and Twitter, has been astonishing, with website hits and downloads running into four figures in each case. Whether any of that has affected or will affect the debates on these matters can never be known, but it is an object-lesson in extending our reach. We most certainly do not want to abandon our more traditional activities of publications and conferences; indeed there may still be room to extend them. But newer media need to be taken seriously.

Council also, however, took an interest in conventional media. Shortly before the Council meeting, the Church Times published a number of supplements on 'Theology today'. The various contributions, at least in the earlier supplements, were for the most part monochrome and rather boring. There was little or no representation of the liberal tradition in theology, nor of any of the new theological strands such as black, queer, liberationist or even feminist. Linda Woodhead and Elaine Graham organised a protest letter about the absence of such voices, attracting a quite remarkable range of signatures. Not all of us agreed about the style of that

intervention, but it just may have opened up a space for dialogue between Modern Church and other traditions, not least Radical Orthodoxy. Such a dialogue may well need both more courage and more humility than has been shown in recent interactions. But it is surely central to the project which Guy's article addresses, and hence to the very being of Modern Church.

**They drew a circle that shut us out –
Heretic, Rebel, a thing to flout.
But Love and I had the wit to win;
We drew a circle that brought them in!**

So shall the Church contain multitudes. ■

Response to Tim Belben's *Pronoun paradox* (in *Signs* October 2015)

Susan Stead

Tim Belben's conclusion to his article is that 'we need the unavailable gender-less pronoun'. I disagree.

After thousands of years of God as 'he', we need first to imagine God as 'she' with all the rich imagery and metaphor that evokes. Tim's aversion to 'she' is on the basis that 'she' carries echoes of an entirely different religion. Since when has the church balked from taking over other religions and using elements that suit? We've taken over the winter solstice and called it Christmas and transformed the spring equinox into Easter. The goddesses have been absorbed as Virgin Mother.

It's time we took on 'She' and claimed our God as one who holds both male and female within her identity – THEN turn to the apophatic way and confirm that God is neither.

Why are we required to choose only one pronoun? Why can't we play and dance with 'he' and 'she', 'you' and 'God'? Tim Belben quotes Paul from Acts 17. Just to take verses 26-29 (NRSV), how about:

From one ancestor God made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and she allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed God is not far from each one of us. For 'In him we live and move and have our being'; as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we too are her offspring.' Since we ▶

are God's offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals.

Indeed. Nor should we think of the deity as encompassing only the 'male'. Yes, Jesus is male and the incarnation of God but the Risen Christ is not male or female. Also please note that Jesus was a first century Middle Eastern Jew yet we have felt entirely free in Europe to image Jesus as a shaven, blue-eyed Aryan blonde and God as an elderly white European man, which, surprisingly enough, epitomises those who have held power over the last 2000 years.

It is too soon and too easy to try and jump to 'gender-less'. As if we can pretend that 2000 years of appalling treatment of women has never happened. (Jerome: 'Woman is the root of all evil', Tertullian: 'you are (each) an Eve. You are the devil's gateway' or Thomas Aquinas: 'Woman is defective and misbegotten'). As if we can pretend that there is no link between this abuse and the way we have imaged God as solely male. It is about time to change.

No, Tim. We have all the pronouns we need for God. We just need to use them all. ■

Do we need God to be good?

Christopher Hallpike and Maria Barry

While modern secularists dismiss God and believe we live in a purely material universe, they still suppose we can make human rights the cornerstone of a modern, non-religious morality. Human rights are presented to us as though they were self-evident truths any rational person of good will would agree with. But secularists either ignore or forget that the idea of human rights originally developed in a specifically Christian context, of the moral unity of all the human race as children of their Heavenly Father, of the dignity of each individual as made in the image of God, and the responsibility of kings, under God, to rule their people justly and to refrain from tyranny. To this limited extent, human rights, in the sense of 'civil liberties', are certainly Christian. One can add that the freedom to speak according to one's conscience established by the Reformation was an essential basis for the liberal value of freedom of expression.

The first problem with dismissing God is that a divinely ordered world maintains a proper balance between the claims of individual and society. God

requires us, on the one hand, to respect the social order, show humility in our relations with other people, and restrain our physical appetites, but on the other requires the state and society to respect the dignity of the individual and the claims of spiritual life. But if we no longer worship God, public moralities will tend to go either toward worshipping the individual and the Self, or the state. We saw plenty of godless state worship in the last century, but the Western world has gone in the opposite direction of worship of the Self, particularly in the extraordinary proliferation of what are claimed to be individual rights.

The second and more fundamental problem is that while secular liberals can produce endless arguments for not believing in God, it is remarkable that they never seem to ask themselves why we should believe in the existence of human rights. It does not seem to occur to them that in a purely material, Darwinian universe, the whole idea of human rights is completely meaningless. We are simply another species of animal, as Dawkins and others constantly remind us, 'not so special after all', and have no more significance in the ultimate scheme of things than ants or wasps. It is quite normal for different groups of the same species to fight one another in the competition for natural resources, and within groups there are inherent natural inequalities between individuals that make some winners and others losers. In a Darwinian world it would be quite rational to be wholly unconcerned with the well-being of foreigners, to treat the poor as contemptible failures, and the old and sick as burdens, and in this respect the philosophy of Nietzsche is far more plausible than Humanism.

The growing worship of Self and the individual in modern Western societies has had two especially obvious results. The first is the increase in self-absorption, narcissism, and the importance of winning at all costs, in which social media, in fostering an obsession with fame and consumerism and a corrosive sense of entitlement, are playing an increasingly malignant part. Added to this are the vastly increased opportunities for pornography and depravity of all kinds. But why not? Surely the old ideas that pride and lust and avarice were deadly sins were just religious mumbo-jumbo that we are much better off without in our more enlightened times.

The second is the growing cult of victimhood, and the idea that not just governments but society as a whole is a vast system of oppression with an ever-growing list of sufferers. For example, advocates of ▶

children's rights regard discipline in schools as a violation of their rights, and not just discipline but teaching itself is now being represented as a form of oppression because it prevents children discovering their true identities. Indeed, the very idea of normality is seen as oppressive because it stigmatises anyone who is different from bourgeois norms. So diet soda, for instance, is oppressive to fat people because it carries an implicit criticism of their excessive weight. If everyone's feelings are sacred then not only all forms of criticism, but opinions that can cause offence become 'hate speech' that should be banned, indeed, can be considered a form of violence. University students who are too intellectually and psychologically fragile to encounter opinions with which they disagree are therefore entitled to exclude speakers who might challenge their beliefs, while professors must warn students if they think anything in their lectures might offend them. The belief in freedom of thought and expression is starting to seem almost as old-fashioned as religion.

We don't need God to tell us that it is wrong to rape, steal, and murder, and that it is good to be honest and helpful to others, because we can understand this from our experience of living in society. But God and religion have a much more profound influence on how we view the world than a simple list of moral do's and don't's, and a Christian civilisation that is abandoning its religion is being hollowed out in fundamental ways, some of which I have indicated here. There is a common belief in the non-Western world that the doctrine of human rights is cultural neo-colonialism - whether this is true or not, Christian beliefs actually have much more in common with those of the other world religions than with secular liberalism.

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Do We Need God to be Good? An anthropologist considers the evidence is published by Christian Alternative Books. ISBN: 978-1-78535-217-1 (Paperback) £13.99 \$22.95, ISBN: 978-1-78535-218-8 (e-book) £5.99 \$8.99. ■

Science-shaped religion?

Robert Baldwin

Bishop E. W. Barnes was prominent in the Modern Churchman's Union (now known as Modern Church). In 1927 he delivered a series of sermons (the 'gorilla sermons') aimed at synthesizing liberal theology with evolution. In 2010 the Church of England Synod voted overwhelmingly to accept evolution. The current Pope is said to favour 'theistic evolution'.

So is Barnes' quest complete; are Christianity and evolution reconciled? Clearly not, given the salvos launched at each other by atheists and (largely American) evangelicals.

Barnes promoted 'science-shaped religion'. Since Barnes, Christians versed in science have made significant contributions (for example John Polkinghorne, Keith Ward, Arthur Peacocke), although usually from consideration of the physical than the life sciences. The latter pose more challenges. Conceiving of a creator setting the physical constants to 'fine tune' the universe is one thing but discerning the creator's hand in unguided evolution is quite another. Although this article considers mainly the impact on Christian belief of evolutionary biology, the whole universe has evolved, from cosmic dust to complex life. In this general sense evolution stands for any process whereby change occurs by natural laws, not by imposition of a deity (cranes not 'skyhooks', to use Daniel Dennett's terms).

The significance of this is illustrated in the 2016 Reith lectures. Professor Stephen Hawking quoted a famous conversation between Napoleon and Laplace who, when Napoleon asked where did God fit in to his scientific theories, said he had no need of that hypothesis. Hawking explains: 'I do not think that Laplace was claiming that God didn't exist. It is just he does not intervene to break the laws of science. That must be the position of every scientist'. This is a shrewd challenge to Christian belief in an interventionist God. Consider too this from the Christian geneticist Theodosius Dobzhansky in 1973: 'Nothing in biology makes sense except in the light of evolution'. This means testing belief against evidence, as people can and do believe anything, whilst eschewing scientism, the ideology that science explains everything. Humility matters too, as none of us can know the future of science. I am assuming though that liberals agree that evolution by natural selection is not 'just a theory'. ▶

Consequently, in an evolutionary account there can be no original perfect order, no special creation and no fall of man. There is no rupture of nature to repair. Natural disasters are just that. Humans cannot be responsible for what occurred before they existed. This is uncontroversial for many liberal Christians. I want to argue though that it does not follow that there was nothing for Christ to die for.

Paul (Romans 7:15) describes a central human dilemma: 'I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do' (NIV). In evolutionary terms the oldest part of the human brain is instinctual, acts rapidly and is geared toward survival; the limbic system mediates emotional responses and, much later in evolutionary terms, the frontal cortices mediate conscious reasoning. The instinctual and emotional centres operate more quickly than the reasoning cortex, so that reactions frequently occur ahead of conscious thought or outside of conscious awareness. This does not explain Paul's dilemma, which he expresses theologically, but a biological approach is deeply informative about the peaks and troughs of human nature. Cod theology it may be, but is this not one way to think about 'original sin', not as moral weakness but as a struggle brought about by hominid evolution?

Clearly we are less in control than we think. Even less when one adds evidence that a significant proportion of our temperament is genetic; that foetal programming sets hormonal responses, such as to stress; that early attachments and the developmental environment produce enduring behavioural patterns; and that peer relationships and culture mould us. The complexity of human nature revealed by science therefore supports a merciful (to use Pope Francis' term) approach to human behaviour rather than a judgmental one.

Christians attest to the Spirit of Christ giving strength to enable de-centering from natural (evolved) selfishness and herd mentality and re-centering by attunement with Him ('feed on Him in your hearts', as the Communion service has it). Again primitive theology it may be, but this version of what Christ came to do aligns spiritual experience with the reality of our evolved condition.

Evolutionary psychology suggests that the basic equipment for religious belief is furnished by evolution. Only in humans is Theory of Mind (knowledge that others' have minds with their own

intentions) developed to a degree that one can make a statement like 'God understands that Bill is moved by Linda's recent grief'. The basis of empathy, altruism and morality is in the evolution of cooperation and trust within kinships and cohesive coalitions of groups. Inter-dependence is deeply ingrained in nature, from the earliest eukaryotic (nucleated) cell formed by endosymbiosis to the alliance between humans and their skin and gut bacteria, without which hostile pathogens would invade. There is a deep message in this for environmental stewardship.

An evolutionary basis for altruism does not explain sophisticated phenomena like compassion. However, an evolved brain is necessary for it, and other complex mental states. Some biologists view religion as an evolutionary side effect ('exaptation'), but the brain's evolution is what accommodates religious experience - specific sets of neurons are activated during religious contemplation. Rather than religion as accidental, another perspective, promoted by theologian John Haught among others, is to see evolution as the only way for God to produce a universe of fruitfulness, with creatures capable of worship. If this sounds too teleological, convergent evolution (Simon Conway Morris) proposes that evolution is constrained by the properties of the material with which it has to work and the environment in which it operates. Re-running earth's history might still result in complex life. A creator would know this.

Viewed scientifically, some Christian beliefs are untenable. Others, such as believing humans are the most important creatures or that man is intrinsically evil, require modification. Others still, such as the meaning of the Cross, can gain from science without degrading faith. Strikingly, evolution has given us the mental equipment to ponder all this. Is a 'science-shaped religion' mere intellectual curiosity? To me it is a matter of intellectual honesty, our intellect having been crafted by God's gift of evolution. I welcome comments. ■

The real Jesus?

Adrian Alker

Since the Church has always invited its followers to affirm the humanity of Jesus, it would seem obvious that the search for this historical Jesus would always be a part of Christian theology. So who is this Jesus? Is he the sinless Son of God, born of the Virgin Mary, risen from the dead and declared to be the world's ▶

Saviour and Redeemer by the councils and creeds of the early Church? Or was he a human being, like you and me, whose halo could slip, a remarkable prophetic man of his time and for his time but whose bones lie somewhere in the dust of Palestine? Or could he indeed have been both human and divine? Or is Jesus whatever we want him to be – a dying saviour, an exemplar of justice and compassion, a God presence in our lives, a name to swear by?

Whatever we think, the world will not let go of this Jesus. Not only in art but in film and literature this Jesus captivates and intrigues generation after generation of people across the planet. When the world's athletes descend on Rio de Janeiro for the 2016 Olympic and Paralympic Games, the 30 metre tall *Christ the Redeemer* statue will overlook the city. There's no getting away from Jesus!

I doubt the name of Jesus will ever be unknown to human civilization. Have you ever wondered how much music has been written in the world in connection with Jesus and the gospel stories? From early plainsong, through to music of Bach and Handel, from hymns and gospel songs, from musicals such as *Godspell* and *Jesus Christ Superstar*, through to the exciting compositions of Karl Jenkins, musicians have been inspired by the New Testament accounts of the birth, life and death of Jesus of Nazareth. Film-makers and film audiences are still captivated by the Jesus story. We look back to the American blockbuster 1965 film *The Greatest Story Ever Told*, or Piero Pasolini's *The Gospel according to Matthew*, also produced in the 1960s with a cast of ordinary Italians including Pasolini's mother playing the part of Mary. More recently, Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*, first screened in 2004, gave rise to criticism by some reviewers who claimed that its extreme portrayal of the violence and torture inflicted upon Jesus obscured the message of the film.

Across continents and cultures the person of Jesus continues to intrigue Christians and people of other and no religious faith. In the 1990s the Anglican mission societies, CMS and USPG (now Us) produced a resource entitled *The Christ We Share*. This contained 32 images of Jesus, drawn, painted, sculptured from across the world. Like many colleagues, I have often used these images to stimulate discussion. One picture, for example, is of *The Angry Christ*, an image from the Philippines, which places the historical reality of the Marcos regime in the biblical context of the Overturning of the Tables in the Temple (Mark

11.15-19). In contrast is an image entitled 'Lesser Brethren', which pictures a Jesus in a clean white robe, surrounded by animals and birds set in the English countryside! The resource also has *Christa*, a sculpture made in 1974 by Edwina Sandys, the granddaughter of Sir Winston Churchill, for the United Nations Decade for Women. Sandys depicted a female Christ on the cross to represent, in her words, 'the oppressed and devoured women of our jails and prisons, any woman forgotten, hidden, abused or thrown away, the suffering woman in all of us'.

The 'quest' for the historical Jesus has been and still is, I believe, an important part of the honest search to discover who Jesus was and is. Trying to discover more about the lives of great figures of history has always been a favourite stock-in-trade of writers, theologians, novelists and playwrights. In the popular television programme, *Who Do You Think You Are?*, celebrities trace their family trees, to find out about the lives of their ancestors. When I came home on my first Christmas vacation from Oxford, my father would have none of my newly acquired airs and graces (long since gone!). He asked, 'who do you think you are?'

For hundreds of years the theologians and historians have asked this and other questions in their searching: who is Jesus, who did he think he was and who did others think he was?

Adrian Alker has been a Church of England clergyman since his ordination in 1979. He has served in four different dioceses, held posts as a youth officer, a parish priest and a director of mission resourcing. He founded the St Mark's Centre for Radical Christianity in Sheffield and is currently Chair of the Progressive Christianity Network in Britain. His new book, ***Is a Radical Church Possible?***, is published by Christian Alternative Books, ISBN: 978-1-78535-250-8 £12.99 (or £9.99 online at pcnbritain.org.uk). ■

Can liberals embrace the Growth Agenda? Part 1 of 3

Guy Elsmore

The Church is in trouble.

The Archbishops have written recently to all the clergy in the Church of England appealing for a national wave of prayer for evangelism in the week leading up to Pentecost 2016.

I recently ran into a colleague who leads a popular leadership training module which aims to support ▶

Church growth. He's run off his feet with demand. 'The Dioceses are desperate', he confided.

Small wonder. The attendance statistics continue to show the familiar 1%, or thereabouts, annual decline. The annual figures, in fact, lull us into a false sense of security. The figures the national Church and Diocesan offices are looking at include congregational age profiles. These tell an even worse story. The Church of England is approaching a demographic cliff-edge, as the average age of congregations approaches the average age of mortality.

Even on the most wildly optimistic of assumptions (that we will all manage to attract an additional 3% membership, year on year) the mortality stats and the numbers leaving more generally mean that we will, in 25 years' time, have a national Church with around a third of the current attendance.

Little wonder the Dioceses are desperate to help us all think about Church growth.

Speaking at a recent Council meeting of Modern Church, Professor Elaine Graham accurately observed that liberalism is all too often a critical, rather than constructive agency within the Church. I agree wholeheartedly.

Of course, there can be much to criticise! However, the urgency of the hour calls us to go beyond what may be justifiable criticism of the many specks in the eyes of the Church of England and the Anglican Communion and to attend to a plank of our own.

High time for the liberal end of the Church to think again about Church growth and what we might bring to the table. We have for far too long stood by, offering theologically and sociologically informed critiques of Alpha Courses, Fresh Expressions, Natural Church Development and the rest, and often with good reason. The time has come, though, to move beyond our ability to offer an informed critique and instead to offer some alternatives.

In some ways, Modern Church is beginning to do this already. I am delighted that 'The Modern Church Course' – a liberal alternative to the Alpha Course is in the midst of being edited - early copies should be available for beta testing this Autumn.

However, I think we need to go much further and begin to bring our theological tradition and practise to

bear on the issue of Church growth much more explicitly. If we don't, there won't be a Church left to criticise – and then where would we be!

Liberalism's reputation as a party of opposition comes from a deep seated desire to rid the Body of the Church of all forms of exclusivism and phoneyism. We liberals tend to be passionate about our quest for authenticity in doctrine and praxis. Can we take these and other liberal virtues and apply them in a positive sense to the task of Church growth? What is there in the liberal tradition and in the liberal theological mind which might in fact be helpful in the process of seeking to counteract decline and in helping the Church to reconnect with the society around it?

This, by no means exhaustive, list of liberal attitudes which might contribute to the Growth Agenda numbers eight. In the limited space available for this article, here they are, with a little comment offered for each one.

- 1) **Liberalism doesn't suffer from excessive anxiety.** This article is premised on the fact that, where numbers are concerned, we might have something to be anxious about. Nonetheless, liberals are generally fairly non-anxious types, unfazed by lack of immediate success. This is a gift to a church of headless chickens 'doing something because something must be done'. If we can engage confidently and non-anxiously with this agenda, we have much to offer.
- 2) **Flexible thinking is sewn into the woolly jumper of liberalism.** We love to rethink orthodoxies and think about new ways of explaining and applying theology. In an age where the tramlines of tradition by-pass almost everyone outside the church, such flexibility of thought and expression could be an exciting part of reconnecting with wider society. Liberals embrace ambiguity as a virtue to be celebrated, rather than a vice to be eliminated.
- 3) **Inclusivity is at the heart of modern liberalism.** We have been defined in recent years by our support for women's ordination and episcopal ministry and for our work on LGBT rights in society and in the Church. Seeing all people as made in the image of God is at the heart of it all and so we are deeply ▶

in touch with mainstream society. We represent a 'detoxified' brand of Christianity which many currently outside the Church may be ready to listen to and to take seriously.

- 4) **Theological creativity is a core liberal attitude.** As the UCC Advertisement of a few years ago put it, 'God is still speaking'. We don't believe in a finished theological canon. Rather, as the arts and sciences reveal more about humanity and the world we live in, so the revelation of God deepens and changes. Liberal theology is a supremely creative act - bringing together (as Saxbee puts it so well in *Liberal Evangelism*) the needs of the world and the riches of Christian tradition, and in so doing discovering something new about both.
- 5) **We are proud to be 'all things to all people'.** I have already alluded to the traditionalist critique of liberalism as 'advanced wooliness'. However, being 'all things to all people' has a fine biblical basis and is, in an age where the church is speaking simultaneously to many cultures, exactly what is needed. One size no longer fits all and being non-dogmatic in an age which, for the most part, eschews dogmatism, is a huge strength.
- 6) **Listening before speaking** is (at our best) is another liberal habit. If we begin on the territory of 'the other', rather than our own ground, we are far more likely to connect.
- 7) **It's all about Life before Death.** Often the Christian tradition has fixed on Christianity as being mainly about the business of salvation, life after death and all that. Liberalism sees the Christian Way as far broader, concerned as much with this life as the next, with justice and peace in the here and now. This connects strongly with an age where existential questions are receding in the popular mind.
- 8) **An optimistic view of humanity and the world.** The tradition has so often spoken of original sin, total depravity and the human inability to help itself. By contrast, liberal instincts go toward original blessing, appreciative thinking and the giftedness and grace found in places far beyond the church and the elect. Such a mindset is well equipped to make life-giving connections in evangelism.

So what might all this look like in practice? Stay tuned for the next article!

Meanwhile, a poem.... *Interview* by Sydney Carter

Where have you been all day?

Fishing with question marks.
The fish I caught
are piled up in the basket.
What I seek
is deeper than the water.

Where have you been all night?

Travelling past the flesh,
beyond the bone,
until I came to nothing.
Back again
I travel in the morning.

So what do you believe in?

Nothing fixed or final
all the while I
travel a miracle. I doubt,
and yet
I walk upon the water.

That is impossible

I know it is.
Improbability
is all you can expect. The
natural
is supernatural.

Where are you going next?

Like you, I ask that question.
I can only travel with the music.
I am full
of curiosity. ■

Letter to the Editor

John Bunyan

May I gently respond to Lorraine Cavanagh's comment (Signs January 2016) that 'Ebionite language and hymnody' stall 'our growth into spiritual maturity'. Our knowledge of 'Ebionite' and similar early forms of Jewish Christianity is limited. Ebionites did believe that Jesus was a man anointed by God, not 'divine', whatever exactly that means, but their belief was shared by many early Christians! Their non- ▶

Pauline Christianity survived on the margins for some centuries, Islam owing something to it.

In the 16th century some (only anachronistically described as 'Ebionites') found it again, in the Scriptures, for example, those who formed the still lively Unitarian Christian Church in Transylvania. Some encountered harsh opposition. Archbishop Cranmer in his court had two simple Bible Christians burnt to death for denying Trinitarian doctrine. As late as 1697 a Scotsman was executed for the same reason.

In the 18th century, a Church of England priest, Theophilus Lindsey, author of two very readable defences of his beliefs, after unsuccessfully seeking through the Feathers Tavern Petition to have the requirement of subscription to the Articles abolished, founded Britain's first Unitarian church. (Subscription was not abolished until 1865 after a long campaign that Dean Stanley of Westminster has described, replaced by a never legally defined general assent.)

Later in the 18th century, after the Revolution, Massachusetts' oldest Episcopal church, King's Chapel, Boston, became Unitarian, producing its own revision of the Book of Common Prayer, based on Lindsey's. Its 1986 8th edition is about to be re-printed for a church that today is flourishing.

In England, the Unitarian Christian Association keenly maintains its Christian faith within a larger body now not exclusively Christian and the same is true of the US Unitarian Universalist Christian Fellowship. In Ireland, the eirenic Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church, with more than 30 congregations mainly in Northern Ireland, is Christian, Biblical, and Unitarian.

As for the 'language and hymnody' of Unitarian Christians, King's Chapel in particular has preserved much of the beauty of the BCP and the AV, and continues to address God as 'thee' and 'thou', to my mind more euphonious, and more appropriate than ever for the One who is not 'a person' but the undergirding, encompassing personal Mystery beyond our comprehending.

Earlier, Unitarian Christians did avoid any address to Jesus, and Unitarian Christian liturgies are still addressed to God alone. However, the King's Chapel Prayer Book and the excellent English Unitarian *Hymns of Faith and Freedom* both include the poetry of hymns sung to our Lord. The latter, for example, has Charles Wesley's beautiful eucharistic hymn, *O*

thou who this mysterious bread, absent from most Church of England books! Even without *those* hymns, their hymns would encourage *not* stall growth into spiritual maturity (very different from the rather lifeless deist hymn-books, for example, of former Christian, Stopford Brooke).

King's Chapel retains the Matthean words at Baptism, and the Ten Commandments, Lord's Prayer, and Apostles' Creed on its sanctuary wall, and its Communion table cross, its Prayer Book states symbolise the Christian tradition to which it holds, though with members free to follow that tradition as they understand it. Its once wordy worship is enriched, for example, with ashes, palm crosses, and an Easter vigil, a continuing great musical tradition, and social outreach.

In the reformed Church of England, there probably have always been Unitarian; in the 17th century, for example, the philanthropist Thomas Firmin, in the 19th century, though less explicitly, Bishop Colenso. (He objected to *Hymns Ancient and Modern*, because of its hymns to Jesus!) In the 20th century, G.W.H. Lampe, in his Bampton Lectures, *God As Spirit*, explains what he means if he is thought Unitarian.

I write all this because as well as being a licensed priest in the Diocese of Sydney, a parishioner of St John's, Canberra (200 miles away), and an 'adherent' of St Stephen's Uniting Church in central Sydney, I am a long-time member of that King's Chapel. (And long-time member of the UCA, the UUCF, Modern Church, and the Prayer Book Society!)

Great Roman Catholic scholars such as Hans Kung, James P. Mackey and Roger Haight SJ have made helpful and valiant (though not always appreciated) attempts to re-state or re-interpret the doctrines of the Incarnation and Trinity. I find myself rather closer to the views of A Richard Kingston in *God in One Person: The Case for Non-Incarnational Christianity* (available now as a print-on-demand but expensive paperback). With his views, Richard felt he could not remain as a Methodist minister. I remain an Australian Episcopalian priest, assenting to Prayer Book and Articles in so far as they are in accord with the heart of the teaching of Jesus (Luke 10.28) and the great Hebrew prophets, and in accord with reason. But what knowledge we have, through study of the Scriptures, of the ministry of the truly human Jesus, and our present scientific, biological insights regarding the human person makes impossible, I think, belief ▶

in him as in any literal sense the sinless, absolute embodiment of God the Word, the Logos or Second 'Person' of the Trinity. This does not lessen the value (and significance?) of poetic, Trinitarian imagery— in some 'Celtic' prayers or in Rublev's icon, or of speaking of the divine Reality as Creator, Word, and Spirit, one God.

My *personal* prayers (not the hymns I sing) have always been addressed to God rather than to Jesus, much as Jesus has inspired my whole life. I sense the 'presence' of God but not any presence of Jesus although I am impressed by the two brief life-changing visions of Jesus seen by the young Sundar Singh and Hugh Montefiore.

My own questioning (Ebionite?) faith, incomplete but joyful and positive is set out, mainly through 50 of my hymns, and 68 of my poems (mostly sonnets) but also in some prosaic discussion, in my just published *Four Score Deodatus: an autobiographical anthology of prose and verse*. (£9, 120 pp) I can supply it without bank charges being involved! Contact me via email or post: bunyanj@tpg.com.au; Colenso Corner, PO Box N109, Campbelltown, NSW 2560, Australia. ■

BOOK REVIEW:

***The Sin of Certainty: Why God Desires Our Trust More Than Our Correct Beliefs* by Peter Enns (2016)**

Laurence Pearce

Most of us will have at some point talked or thought about our 'faith'. However, speaking for myself, and I doubt that I am alone in this, I suspect that not many of us have a clear understanding or definition of what we mean by this.

This book tells the story of how the author started off with a faith based on what he *believed about* God, and whose faith is now based on *trust in* God. Along the way, he provides plenty of examples from the Bible, as well as several well-known spiritual writers, to justify his new understanding.

His story may appear to be of limited interest to those, such as many Anglicans, who do not totally define themselves by what they believe. However, his journey of discovery and self-discovery will resonate with everyone who takes seriously why they are in

church. And he writes in a style and language that is highly accessible and without academic jargon. The author explains that as a lecturer in theology he was, for many years, content to base his teaching on the 'party line' of his spiritual community, with clearly defined boundaries and certainties of what was correct and, therefore, permissible, to say and think.

Gradually, however, he began to feel so suffocated by imposed intellectual 'no-go' areas, and so out of sympathy with the prevailing intellectual ethos, that he found himself forced to leave his job.

He began to understand that equating *faith in* God with *thoughts about* God sells God short, by keeping Him captive to what we are able to comprehend. Essentially, he believes the result is a God in our image - rather than the God of the Bible and the God he was gradually coming to know. He might well have quoted the writer who said 'God created man in His image, and man returned the compliment'.

For the writer, faith is enmeshed in the fullness of our humanity, and cannot be reduced to an essentially intellectual process.

To support this thesis, he quotes at some length from the Old Testament, which models a trust in God that does not rest on a set of beliefs.

The thrust of his examination of the *Psalms*, *Job* and *Ecclesiastes* is that God does **not** in actual fact prevent the wicked from prospering, or bad things happening to those who obey. The correct response, however, as shown in these books in particular, is to trust in God **anyway** and to continue obeying Him in the hope that this trust is not misplaced.

In essence, he argues that one of the great comforts of the Old Testament, especially for those who are suffering or whose loved ones are suffering, is that raw expressions of fierce doubt and lack of trust in God are **an integral part** of faith. And, of course, this is equally true of Jesus on his cross (Matthew 27:46 and Mark 15:34).

Having shown that faith is essentially trust in a loving God, the remainder of the book is devoted to living out this faith in practice. In particular he explores, firstly, the correct response when God appears not to respond to our calls, and, secondly, how we should treat our neighbours.

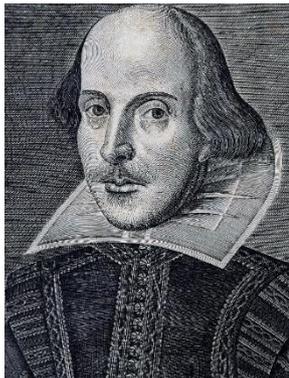
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God's absence, he argues, is a divine gift to help us grow out of our little ideas of Him, out of the God within our control, who moves in our circles and who agrees with us. It forces us to listen to Him, rather than try to get Him to listen to us. Only then can we be led into a deeper faith, of letting go of the need to know and the need to be certain.

He then argues that true faith extends to self-sacrificial love towards others, and includes behaving

towards others as Father and Son behave towards each other. He goes even further, and states that to love as God loves us involves not only loving just others like us, but also those most unlike us.

In summary, faith is not, for the author, dogmatic certainty or maintaining a tribal identity. It is about trust in God, being with us in all our experiences and relationships and being an integral part of our lives. ■



2016 Annual conference of Modern Church

Performing the faith: Shakespeare in the world

Shakespeare, the theatre and theology today

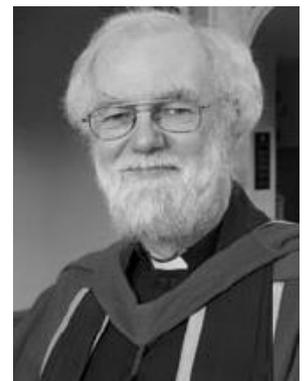
11 July 2016 (arrive from midday, lunch 1.00) **to 13 July** (end with tea at 3.45)

at High Leigh Conference Centre, Hoddesdon, Herts: www.cct.org.uk

**Keynote speaker: The Most Revd and Rt Hon
Lord Rowan Williams of Oystermouth**

Conference Chair: Revd Dr Alison Milbank

Conference Chaplain: Revd Dr Paul Edmondson



2016 is the 400th anniversary of the death of England's - some would say, the world's – greatest playwright. Shakespeare's links with religion are complex, but his plays contain much implicit (and occasionally more explicit) theology. And the very form of the drama owes much to religious traditions – even if the Church has at times viewed it with suspicion. To this day, whether on stage or on screen, drama – and not least the work of Shakespeare, staged and interpreted in ever-new ways - remains a most powerful medium for exploring truth and meaning. Liberal Christians, who read the books of Scripture, tradition and reason alongside each other, need also to learn to read this cultural phenomenon.

Our keynote speaker, **Rowan Williams**, needs no introduction; he has spoken and written much about the links between Shakespeare and theology. Our Chair, **Alison Milbank**, Associate Professor of Theology and Literature at the University of Nottingham, is a well-known writer on the theological implications of English literature, and contributed a paper on *Apocalyptic readings: the Bible and the novel* to our 2011 conference on reading the Bible today. Our Chaplain, **Paul Edmondson**, is Head of Research at the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust in Stratford-upon-Avon, and an internationally noted Shakespeare scholar as well as a Minister in Secular Employment; his latest publication is *Shakespeare: Ideas in Profile*. Other speakers will include **Professor Ronnie Mulryne, Dr Bea Groves, Dr Graham Ward and Dr Alycia Smith-Howard**.

For further details visit modernchurch.org.uk or email Diane: office@modernchurch.org.uk