



*Liberal  
theology in  
a changing  
world*

# Liberal Anglicanism

Paul Badham

An MCU *Forewords* publication  
The Modern Churchpeople's Union

This paper is extracted from *Anglicanism: Essays in History Belief and Practice*, edited by Nigel Yates and published by Trivium Publications 2008.

It is reprinted by permission of the general editors of Trivium Publications, University of Wales, Lampeter.

For further information on this volume or other volumes in the series, or to place an order, (£18 including postage) please contact Carol Derv, Trivium Publications, The Library, University of Wales, Lampeter, Ceredigion, Wales, SA48 7ED.

Paul Badham is Professor of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Wales Lampeter. He is the author of *The Contemporary Challenge of Modernist Theology* UWP 1998, editor of *Modern Believing* and a Vice-President of the Modern Churchpeople's Union.

# Liberal Anglicanism

Liberalism has been characteristic of Anglicanism from its foundation. What led to Cranmer's appointment as Archbishop of Canterbury and ultimately to the subsequent break with Rome was Cranmer's proposal about where ultimate authority for the interpretation of Scripture should lie. Prior to Cranmer it had been assumed that the final decision about whether or not Henry VIII's marriage to his deceased brother's widow was in accordance with the scriptures must rest with the Pope. Cranmer proposed that there was a higher authority than the Pope for making such a judgement, namely the consensus of theological opinion within the universities of Europe whose advice should be given priority on this matter. Hence Anglicanism came into being with the insight that though the sources for authentic Christianity were of course the Scriptures as interpreted by the Church, the determination of what that teaching meant was a matter for scholarly research.

One immediate consequence of the Reformation in Britain was the dramatic expansion of the grammar schools during the Elizabethan age and the revival of the two universities. The ordinal insisted that the clergy must be 'Godly and well-learned' and indeed the idea grew up that there must be an educated person or 'Parson' in every village to teach the faith certainly, but also to be responsible for what other education was to be made available. For Hooker 'Scripture, tradition and reason' were the three sources of authority and it was through learning that one could be in a position to assess the balance between the three. The importance of scholarship for faith became axiomatic for 17th century Anglicans. To read the sermons of a Caroline divine like Lancelot Andrewes is to be aware of the immense learning of the preacher and indeed the preacher's presumption that constant appeal to Biblical and Patristic sources would be intelligible to his hearers. Yet in a church that values scholarship it was and is inevitable that diversity of opinion will exist. Hence alongside the high orthodoxy of the Caroline divines there were also thinkers of a more 'latitudinarian' persuasion like the Cambridge Platonists who interpreted Christian doctrine in a liberal manner and prepared the way for thinkers like John Locke, whose work *The Reasonableness of Christianity* was published in 1695. In the early 18th century a vigorous debate

took place ranging from the liberalism of Samuel Clarke to the scepticism of those who came to be known as Deists.

## Enlightenment

The greatest thinker of the 18th century was Joseph Butler, Bishop of Bristol and later of Durham, who did so much for the intellectual credibility of Christianity. His *Analogy of Religion* of 1736 was believed by most 18th and 19th century clergy as having answered the enlightenment critique, and as providing a solid rational defence of Christian truth, not as a matter of certainty but on the basis of reasonable probability through accumulation of arguments. His *Sermons Preached in the Rolls Chapel* are equally important as providing an empirical foundation for Christian ethics and for explaining precisely why it is that one cannot simply base moral judgements on the authority of Scripture. Here is what Butler says:

The Epistles in the New Testament have all of them a particular reference to the condition and usages of the Christian world at the time they were written. Therefore as they cannot be thoroughly understood, unless that condition and those usages are known and attended to so further though they be known, yet if they be discontinued or changed exhortations, precepts and illustrations of things, which refer to such circumstances now ceased or altered, cannot at this time be urged in that manner, and with that force which they were to the primitive Christians.

For 1726 this seems an astonishingly perceptive insight. What Butler said of the Epistles is of course equally true of the Gospels and even more true of the early books of the Old Testament. To understand Scripture and to understand the development of Christian doctrine in the first five centuries it is absolutely vital to see them in the intellectual context and world view of their time. Equally to make sense of them in our own day we have to relate these beliefs to the world view and intellectual context of our own day. Butler believed that moral judgements should be based on an acceptance of Jesus' teaching about the priority of the law of Love towards our neighbour together with a sound, empirically based, knowledge of what behaviour leads to the real happiness of human beings. For Butler nothing could be more useful than for us to see things as they really are and this empirical approach to ethics was to become the hallmark of Christian liberalism in the 1950s and 60s.

The primary focus of this paper is to explore Anglican liberalism as expressed by the broad churchmen of the 19th century, by the Anglican modernists of the early 20th century and by the new morality of the 1960s. What I shall also suggest is that though neither ‘liberalism’ nor ‘modernism’ are labels that many today would choose, in practice most of the positions for which Anglican liberals fought have become mainstream perspectives of contemporary Anglicanism.

It is very common today to see theological liberalism as the child of the Enlightenment. This is partly true of 19th century German theology in that David Hume’s work had first awakened Kant from his dogmatic slumbers, and thereafter Schleiermacher, the father of modern theology, saw as his primary theological task the need to take Kant’s critique seriously and to answer him. The course on modern religious thought which I followed at Cambridge was dated from the publication in 1781 of Kant’s first critique and for much of my academic career I assumed that this must also have been applicable in England and Wales. In this I was quite wrong.

Anglican liberalism does not derive from the Enlightenment. There are three grounds for thinking this. First it is a central enlightenment idea that the arguments for the existence of God are flawed. Yet in 1802 Paley published his *Evidences for Christianity* setting out a form of the design argument which had been taken to pieces a generation earlier by Voltaire, Hume and Kant. That Paley’s book was not merely published but became the most popular work of Christian apologetic shows that the enlightenment critique had not taken root in early 19th century thought. Paley’s work was ultimately discredited in Britain not by the enlightenment critique but by the rise of geology and evolutionary theory. Secondly key enlightenment books were not read in England and Wales. David Hume lamented that his *Treatise on Human Nature* had fallen ‘dead from the press’. Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* was not translated into English until 1855 and apart from a translation circulated privately in Edinburgh in 1838 Kant’s major contribution to modern theology, *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, was not translated into English till 1934. Schleiermacher’s speeches *On Religion* were translated in 1893 but his main work *The Christian Faith* was not translated into English till 1928. The only German liberal who had a real impact on Anglican liberalism

was Adolf Von Harnack, and he explicitly rejected not only the metaphysics of the Enlightenment but also the metaphysical speculation of the Graeco-Roman world. What shaped Harnack's thinking was the research he had done for his seven-volume work on *The History of Dogma*. Harnack's little book *What is Christianity* appeared in English a year after its first publication in Germany and sold more copies than any other theological work till *Honest to God*.

Thirdly Anglican liberals like Anglican conservatives assumed that the enlightenment critique of religion had been decisively refuted by Bishop Butler whose works were recommended reading for ordinands for 200 years. Moreover on reading the works of 19th century broadchurchmen and 20th century modernists it becomes clear that their liberalism did not come from any source other than their studies of the Bible and the Church Fathers.

## Historico-critical Approach to the Bible

The first characteristic of Anglican liberalism is that it adopts an historico-critical approach to the Bible without reservation, insisting as Butler did that the meaning of the text can only be discovered by reading it in its original context. The pioneer of this among the broadchurchmen was Samuel Taylor Coleridge whom both Rowland Williams and F.D. Maurice described as their spiritual father. Coleridge announced that he was going to try to read the Bible as if he had never read it before and would try and treat it like any other book not ignoring discrepancies and moral problems when they were clearly there in the text. His first claim was that the Bible does not read like a divinely dictated book which was infallible in every detail. On the contrary biblical authors refer to their sources like other responsible writers. For example in 2 Chronicles 29:29 the author says that he drew his information about King David's life from the Chronicles of Samuel the Seer, the Chronicles of Nathan the Prophet and the Chronicles of Gad the Seer. Coleridge points to discrepancies in different accounts of the same event in the Gospels. Such differences are just what you would expect from different human sources giving accounts of the same event. But they are not what you would expect if they were all dictated by an infallible intelligence. More seriously belief that the Bible was a divinely dictated book would take all the heartfelt

emotion out of the worship of the Psalms and transform David into a ventriloquist's dummy. Coleridge also drew attention to the moral difficulties posed by the Old Testament commands to massacre all their enemies and the moral problems posed by the cursing psalms. Consider for example the appalling ending of that otherwise lovely psalm *By the Rivers of Babylon*, the final verse of which reads 'Blessed is the man who picks up their babies and smashes their heads against the rocks.' One is glad that none of the soldiers in the recent Iraq wars thought that this was a beatitude to be placed on a par with Jesus' beatitudes in Matthew's Gospel.

Coleridge's liberalism derived from direct study of the Bible itself. In this he was typical of many 19th century people. One group who frequently lost their faith in the Victorian period were lay preachers who first read the Bible seriously after their appointment and were appalled by what they found there. Bishop Colenso of Natal might also be placed in this category since he first became critically aware when he tried to translate the Bible into Zulu and discovered that according to Exodus 21:21 a man who flogs a slave or a slave girl to death shall not be punished provided the slave survives for a day or two after the flogging: 'the loss of his property is punishment enough'. Colenso's subsequent five volume commentary on the Pentateuch shows that the story of the Exodus and conquest of Palestine cannot be regarded as straightforward history. There are too many impossibilities in the narrative.

Rowland Williams' study of the Bible derived in part from the research for his two-volume study of the Prophets, and in part because his historical and textual studies of Hindu and Buddhist texts convinced him of the need to ask the same kind of historical questions of the sacred text of his own religion. Rowland Williams showed that the Old Testament prophets were writing for their own day, and were not soothsayers of a messianic future. In particular he looked at the context of the supposed messianic prophecy in Isaiah 7, 'behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a son'. Rowland Williams showed that this verse in its original context related directly to the political events of the prophet's own day. Jerusalem was threatened by invasion from the kings of Syria and Ephraim. Isaiah's message was not to worry because this was a very temporary threat. He said that a young woman would conceive and have a son and before the child was old enough to refuse evil and choose good the two

kingdoms threatening Jerusalem would themselves be under threat from the rising power of Assyria. The verse can only be read as a messianic prophecy if it is mistranslated and taken totally out of its historical setting.

## Geology

Another challenge to biblical infallibility came from geology. The Revd Charles Lyell in his *Principles of Geology* published in three volumes between 1830 and 1833 showed that the history of the earth was immeasurably older than the six thousand years presupposed by the Genesis story. The stories of a six day creation, of the fall of Adam and Eve and of a universal flood covering the whole earth could not be an historically accurate account of human origins. These findings were accepted by most academic theologians in the 1840s and 1850s and by almost all Victorian churchmen after the widespread acceptance of Darwin's theory of evolution. In academic theology the watershed was in Charles Gore's edited book *Lux Mundi* published in 1889 which presented Christianity wholly within an evolutionary framework. *Lux Mundi* was very important for the acceptance of liberal theology within Anglicanism because its contributors were anglo-catholic rather than broadchurchmen, Charles Gore also did much to aid the acceptance of evolutionary theory within the church in his subsequent work *Belief in God*. In this he pointed out that early Christian thought would have had little problem in embracing evolution. According to St Gregory of Nyssa in the 4th century, 'God in the beginning created only the germs or causes of the forms of life which slowly developed in gradual course over long periods of time.' Such a perspective would be very easy to harmonise with the concluding sentence of Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species*: 'There is grandeur in this view of life with its several powers having been originally breathed by the Creator into a few forms or into one and . . . from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being evolved.'

## Salvation and Atonement

More serious to the traditional understanding of Christianity than either biblical criticism or the rise of modern science was liberal criticism

of the traditional scheme of salvation. S.T. Coleridge believed that faith in Christ was in no way dependent on belief in such things as original sin, substitution atonement or hell. F.D. Maurice's *Theological Essays* of 1853 took this approach much further. He claimed that not merely were such beliefs inessential to Christianity, they were incompatible with it. Maurice believed that the erosion of faith among his contemporaries was a direct result of a 'monstrous perversion' of Christianity being proclaimed in place of the original Gospel. For the doctrines of original sin, substitution atonement and hell are in direct contradiction to the primal and quite decisive Christian doctrine of the love of God. If we start from belief that 'God is actually love', we shall 'dread any representation of Him which is at variance with this [and] will shrink from attributing to Him acts which would be unlovely in man'

From this premise Maurice argued that the idea that an historical fall had led to the total depravity of human nature was 'a horrible notion which has haunted moralists, divines and practical men', and runs directly contrary to the New Testament's teaching that sin is *not* part of our nature, but something that we are all called to fight against'. Moreover if anyone believes that Christ is 'the light which enlightens every man who comes into the world' he cannot also believe that humankind is of necessity depraved. Consequently to believe in an historical fall is a 'most flagrant denial of God.'

Likewise Maurice claimed that any doctrine of the atonement which presumes that sins cannot be forgiven unless satisfaction is first paid also contradicts the teaching of Jesus; as Maurice puts it:

We can forgive a fellow-creature a wrong done to us, without exacting an equivalent for it. We think we are offending against Christ's command who said, 'Be ye merciful as your Father in heaven is merciful' if we do not'.

Maurice believed that the whole notion of Christ having to die in order to appease God's anger was completely contrary to the doctrine of the incarnation that 'God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.' Consequently according to Maurice, 'Orthodox faith as it is expressed in the Bible and the Creeds absolutely prevents us from acquiescing in some of those explanations of the Atonement which both in popular and scholastic teachings have been identified with it.' 'If we would adhere to

the faith once for all delivered to the saints we must not dare to speak of Christ as changing that Will which he took flesh and died to fulfil.’

Finally Maurice taught that the doctrine of hell made a mockery of Jesus’ picture of the loving fatherhood of God. For if it were indeed the case that all humanity is damned except those who accept Christ as their personal saviour it would condemn

most of the American slaves, and the whole body of Turks, Hindus, Hottentots and Jews . . . to hopeless destruction from which a few persons, some of whom are living comfortably without any vexation of heart, may by special mercy be delivered.’

Such a conclusion would negate belief in the infinite love of our heavenly Father and utterly destroy the credibility of the Christian gospel.

The liberal critique of substitution atonement and hell was perhaps the most controversial and most discussed aspect of their teaching. F.D. Maurice’s views were echoed by many other liberals. Benjamin Jowett wrote a detailed commentary on St Paul’s Epistles in which he argued that the doctrine of substitution atonement was read into rather than out of the Pauline text and that the doctrine was scarcely known in the first thousand years of the Christian era. Rowland Williams argued that justification by faith should be understood as ‘the peace of mind or sense of divine approval which comes of trust in a righteous God, rather than a fiction of merit by transfer’. Let us interpret the atonement, wrote Williams, ‘not as a purchase from God through the price of Christ’s bodily pains’ but rather as ‘salvation from evil through sharing the Saviour’s spirit’. In other words the meaning of a Christian’s sense of being justified is that they come to trust in God’s righteousness and love and people feel at one with God when they share in Christ’s spirit.

With regard to belief in hell the most important broadchurch writer was H.B. Wilson in his contribution to *Essays and Reviews*. Wilson’s key argument was that ‘if we look around and regard the neutral character of the multitude we are at a loss to apply either the promises or the denunciations of revelation’. In other words he felt no-one at the time of death was so utterly good or so spiritually mature either to deserve or to fully appreciate instant translation to eternal bliss in intimate communication and fellowship with God; equally no-one is so wholly evil as to merit nothing but endless torment. He therefore felt that there must be

room for development after death. For this expression of hope Wilson was prosecuted for heresy for denying hell and Williams for practising biblical criticism and denying substitution atonement. Williams won the right to practise biblical criticism in 1862 and on appeal to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council in 1864 the two were completely cleared. This led to the celebrated headline ‘Hell, dismissed with costs’. The Lord Chancellor, Lord Westbury sat together with three other Law Lords, the Archbishops of Canterbury and York and the Bishop of London. In relation to both hell and substitution atonement they concluded that there was nothing in the Anglican formularies which required such beliefs. A key factor in their reasoning on hell is that in the 16th century 42 *Articles of Religion* had been drafted as its doctrinal foundation, but only 39 articles appeared in the Elizabethan prayer book. One of the three dropped had affirmed everlasting torment. Its omission implied that the Church of England from the time of the Elizabethan settlement has not required its clergy to believe in hell even though undoubtedly the vast majority of them had done so. Wilson’s acquittal was important for F.D. Maurice who had lost his chair at King’s London for his earlier denial of hell but was now rehabilitated and appointed to a Chair at Cambridge.

What all this adds up to is that by the end of the 19th century the traditional scheme of Christian doctrine taken for granted at the beginning of that century was no longer acceptable to large numbers of educated Christians. J.S. Bezzant sums up the situation thus:

known facts of astronomy, geology, biological evolution, anthropology, the comparative study of religions, race and . . . the literary and historical criticism of the Bible, with the teaching of Jesus and the moral conscience of mankind, had banished this scheme beyond the range of credibility.

Geology had shattered the Genesis timescale, while biological evolution and anthropology showed that the human race was not created perfect, but gradually developed from a sub-human past. Hence the concept of an original sin damaging pristine virtue became untenable. The rise of historical and literary criticism in classical studies and the subsequent application of this methodology to biblical studies revealed that the prophets of Israel should be understood as men who proclaimed the will of God to their own day, rather than as soothsayers of a far distant

messianic future. Likewise the study of comparative religion showed that the attribution of miraculous powers to charismatic religious leaders was a common feature of human religious experience, and hence the telling of such stories about Jesus could in no way be considered as evidence of any divine status for him.

## Virgin Birth and the Divinity of Christ

During the 20th century liberalism became more controversial because it applied historical and critical research to the New Testament account of Jesus. Adolf Von Harnack's widely read book *What is Christianity* argued that belief in the Virgin Birth was not part of the earliest traditions about Jesus, and that what was important for the truth of the resurrection was not the empty tomb but the appearances of Jesus. Whether or not such views were acceptable within Anglicanism became significant in 1906 when William Temple offered himself as a candidate for ordination while making it clear that he could only 'tentatively assent' to the doctrines of the Virgin Birth and the bodily resurrection of Jesus with a greater emphasis on 'tentativeness' than on assent. Francis Paget, Bishop of Oxford, felt unable to ordain such a person but two years later agreed not to object to Randall Davidson, as Archbishop of Canterbury, ordaining Temple instead. In 1912 B.H. Streeter edited *Foundations* in which he argued that the Resurrection of Jesus should be understood in terms of Jesus' personal immortality, and that Jesus was enabled to convince the disciples of this victory over death possibly by showing himself to them in a 'spiritual body' or possibly through 'some psychological channel akin to telepathy'. In the same volume William Temple argued that the Chalcedonian Definition of the divinity and humanity of Christ demonstrated the complete bankruptcy of Patristic theology.

Such issues were further raised in 1917 by the nomination of Hensley Henson to the bishopric of Hereford despite the fact that he had questioned the Virgin Birth in three books. Moreover although Henson agreed to allow the Archbishop to report that Henson accepted the Creeds 'ex animo' this did not mean that he had in any way retracted his opinion of the virgin birth. 'On the morrow of his consecration' he explicitly insisted that there was nothing in any of his published works of which he wished to recant.

Controversy about Christ continued at a Conference of the MCU in 1921. Hastings Rashdall argued that there are ‘five essential preliminaries’ for any discussion of the person of Christ. These were the recognition that:

- (1) Jesus did not formally claim divinity for himself;
- (2) Jesus was in the fullest sense a man;
- (3) It is untrue that the human soul of Jesus pre-existed;
- (4) The Virgin Birth is not necessarily implied in the Incarnation;
- (5) Nor is the omniscience of Jesus on earth.

Rashdall argued that these were the clear findings of New Testament scholarship and that the only way to make sense of the claim that Jesus was divine in the light of these findings was to accept a ‘degree Christology’. This hypothesis accepts as a fact of religious experiencing that people can become aware of God through God’s presence in the lives of others. Rashdall suggested that in Jesus the divine presence we partially sense in other holy people was present to the *n*th degree. Understood this way it can truly be believed that God was in Christ and yet that Christ was fully human.

Following the Girton conference, the Archbishops of Canterbury and York established in 1922 a commission of theologians drawn from every party within the church to try to settle how much liberality in doctrine could be regarded as acceptable within the Church of England. The commission debated for 16 years before finally under the chairmanship of Archbishop William Temple it reported in 1938. Essentially it accepted the legitimacy of liberal Anglicanism within the church. It has been normal to regard the 1938 report as marking the highpoint of the acceptability of liberal views within the Church of England and indeed there was a subsequent backlash against the public proclamation by bishops of liberal understandings; but I suggest that in reality liberal Anglicanism is now in practice the main stream.

If we look through the various components of liberality in doctrine today we find first an all-but-universal acceptance in theory of the legitimacy of the practice of biblical criticism. This was recognised in law at the first trial of Rowland Williams in 1862 but it has since become the standard procedure in all university departments of theology and biblical

studies in most mainstream seminaries and in all A-level teaching of biblical study. Concerning the liberal acceptance of evolutionary theory this is now all but universal in Britain though not in America. The theory of evolution was acknowledged by the Archbishops of Canterbury and York at Darwin's funeral in 1874 and almost all scholarly accounts of Christianity in Britain now affirm it. There is a greater reluctance to apply biblical criticism to the New Testament and belief in the Virgin Birth and bodily resurrection are often used as litmus tests of orthodoxy. However virtually all academic studies of the historical Jesus discount the nativity stories and virtually all discussions of the resurrection accept that however it is or is not to be interpreted it is not a question of Jesus' corpse being restored to life. Despite his wish to sound wholly traditional even Tom Wright accepts that in Jesus' case we are looking at something 'transphysical'.

In the world of contemporary Christology there is a comparable problem for although almost all contemporary scholars accept the five principles listed by Hastings Rashdall and in particular accept that Jesus was fully human in every respect, had no consciousness of being divine and was mistaken about God's purposes, nevertheless many who call themselves orthodox continue to insist that Jesus was literally divine. They do this by adopting a *kenotic* Christology in which Christ completely emptied himself of all divine attributes in the process of becoming incarnate including any self-understanding of himself as being divine. It seems to me that an 'incognito' as complete as this simply evacuates the traditional doctrine of all meaning. The *language* of traditional doctrine is preserved in kenotic Christologies, but the meaning has been 'emptied out' of the doctrine along with the removal of all the divine attributes. I cannot see any difference between the claim that Jesus was literally God but possessed no divine attributes and the claim that Jesus was not literally God. On the other hand it does seem to me that those who take a non-literal doctrine of incarnation have a real message to proclaim because the doctrine can be presented as a true metaphor and we can validly claim that the personality of God was fully revealed in the life and teaching of Jesus just as the personality of God is partially revealed through the lives of other holy people.

The most widespread success of liberalism has been the near collapse of belief in hell. When disbelief in hell was pronounced as legal in 1864 almost half the clergy signed a petition to say they still believed in it. But in practice preaching of hell fire has become very rare in contemporary Anglicanism. The doctrine was firmly repudiated as incompatible with belief in the love of God in the Doctrine Commission report *The Mystery of Salvation* in 1995. On the other hand in the year 2000 the Evangelical Alliance firmly declared that they still believed in hell and asserted that hell ‘involves severe punishment . . . both physical and psychological’ and will be a ‘conscious experience of rejection and torment’.

On the doctrine of the atonement it seems to me that liberals have won all the arguments but the language associated with former atonement beliefs continues to be widely used. Stephen Sykes is right to say that ‘phrases and sentences’ associated with the older atonement beliefs are ‘the common coin of the Church’s worship’, but he also rightly notes that explanations of such language are ‘not obvious’ and if an ‘inquirer . . . were to demand [an explanation], we might quickly be in some difficulty’. The problem is that the theory of atonement speaks in terms of a sacrifice by which God was placated, or a bait through which the devil was deceived, and even conservative Christians jibe at such affirmations. Archbishop George Carey, in his otherwise very conservative *Canterbury Letters*, explicitly denies that a ransom was paid to either the devil or to God. He describes such pictures as sterile, immoral, and out of character with what we know of God. Similarly staff members at some evangelical theological colleges, who contributed to John Goldingay’s collection of essays *Atonement Today*, were also unanimous in rejecting older views of the atonement either in terms of a ransom paid to the devil or as the Son appeasing or propitiating the wrath of God the Father. But without any realistic sense of a ransom being paid somewhere, what meaning is left in keeping the language of redemption?

However contemporary liberal theology does offer an understanding of Jesus’ death which is believable and which has become increasingly popular. This is that God was present in Jesus’ suffering on the cross and this illustrates the way in which God shares in the sorrows of humanity. This was the view held by all the leading modernists who saw

the death of Christ as a parable of the way God suffers with us. Today this understanding of the cross has been endorsed by the 1995 Church of England Doctrine Commission report *The Mystery of Salvation* as the ‘only ultimately satisfactory response to evil’ and most contemporary Christians think this is what Christianity is all about.

One further characteristic of liberal doctrine is that liberals believe that God has nowhere left himself without witness but has created all human beings with a yearning to feel after him and find him. Hence they believe that God is at work in all the great religions of the world. The classic liberal explained this by reference to belief that the logos of God which found expression in Christ was also at work in other religious leaders. One implication of this was spelt out by Archbishop William Temple who claimed that:

By the Word of God – that is to say by Christ – Isaiah, and Plato, and Zoroaster, and Buddha, and Confucius conceived and uttered such truths as they declared. There is only one divine light; and everyman in his measure is enlightened by it.

## Ethics and Social Reform

So far I have focused on doctrine, but in today’s Church much of the controversy between liberal and traditional actually lies in the field of ethics. Here it seems to me that the liberal premise remains the Christian empiricism of Bishop Butler in the 18th century. The liberal position starts from the teaching of Jesus that we must love our neighbour as ourselves and always treat them as we would like to be treated ourselves. Liberals then go on to seek empirical evidence as to what kind of action can contribute to our neighbour’s well-being. Butler’s empiricism was at its most influential in the thinking of the Church of England Council for Moral Welfare which subsequently became the Board for Social Responsibility. In all their reports they took especial care to be thoroughly informed of the empirical facts and of the known consequences of the existing prohibitions. These church reports had an enormous influence on the so-called ‘permissive legislation’ of the 1960s which followed very closely their recommendations. Thus the Church of England’s report *The Problem of Homosexuality* of 1954 foreshadowed the decriminalisation of homosexual behaviour in 1967. In the light of contempo-

rary Anglican discussions it is worth reminding ourselves that the birth of a more tolerant attitude to homosexuality in modern society owes a tremendous debt to Christian teaching in the 1960s and the speeches of Michael and Ian Ramsey and many other bishops in the House of Lords debates between 1965 and 1967. No bishop voted against the decriminalisation of homosexuality. In the light of the current opposition to assisted suicide it is ironical that the Anglican report *Ought Suicide to be a Crime?* of 1959 was followed by the Suicide Act of 1961. Likewise the report *Abortion: an Ethical Discussion* published in 1965 paved the way for the legislation of 1967, just as the report *Putting Asunder* of 1966 recommended a Divorce Law for contemporary society almost identical to that instantiated in the Divorce Reform Act of 1969.

Liberal Anglicans consistently supported the ordination of women to the priesthood and now support their consecration to the episcopate. In both cases the motivation is a belief that women have a sense of calling as well as abilities that the church could use. In both cases a combination of treating women with a calling in the way in which men with a calling would wish to be treated outweighs any arguments based merely on tradition or interpretation of certain scriptural passages. In the case of homosexuals, liberals accept the empirical evidence that suggests that homosexuality is a natural state for certain people to find themselves in and hence love of the neighbour implies that they should be allowed the same opportunity to find fulfilment in a stable relationship as heterosexuals enjoy.

Liberal Anglicans find it puzzling that a church which was formerly in the van of social reform and which played a key role in changing public attitudes should now find itself increasingly at odds with the ethics of a modern civilised society. Furthermore that for the sake of unity across the communion, the church appears to be willing to abandon two centuries of liberal scholarship and in the case of homosexuality to return to an ethic based on biblical taboo instead of accepting the findings of scientific empirical research into the consequences of human behaviour, and then evaluating those findings on the basis of Jesus' guidelines of loving one's neighbour as oneself, and always treating others as you wish them to treat you.

This paper is extracted from *Anglicanism: Essays in History Belief and Practice*, edited by Nigel Yates and published by Trivium Publications 2008. It is reprinted by permission of the general editors of Trivium Publications, University of Wales, Lampeter.

Further information about *Anglicanism: Essays in History Belief and Practice*:

All contributors are former or present members of staff in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Wales, Lampeter

The contents of the book are:

1. *Historical Anglicanism: Changes in the Concept of a Via Media*

Nigel Yates: Professor of Ecclesiastical History, Provincial Archives Adviser to the Church in Wales

2. *Reformed Anglicanism: The Legacy of Thomas Cranmer and His Attitude towards Scripture*

Mark Cartledge: formerly Lecturer in Practical Theology, now Senior Lecturer in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Birmingham

3. *Catholic Anglicanism: The Development of a Tradition*

Simon Oliver: Senior Lecturer in Systematic Theology

4. *Liberal Anglicanism: A Rational Approach to Theological Interpretation*

Paul Badham: Professor of Theology and Religious Studies, Director of the Alister Hardy Religious Experience Research Centre

5. *International Anglicanism: The Making of a World-Wide Communion*

W M Jacob: D J James Professor of Pastoral Theology, Archdeacon of Charing Cross and Rector of St Giles-in-the-Fields in the Diocese of London

6. *Political Anglicanism: Church and State in the Twentieth Century*

Keith Robbins: Honorary Professorial Fellow, former Vice-Chancellor, President of the Centre for the Comparative Study of Modern British and European Religious History

7. *Welsh Anglicanism: A Renewed Church for a Reviving Nation?*

D P Davies: John James Pantyfedwen Professor of Theology

8. *Liturgical Anglicanism: Contemporary Worship in a Historical Context*

Juliette Day, Lecturer in Liturgical Studies, Director of Open Learning Theology

9. *Authority in Contemporary Anglicanism: Historic Roots and Contemporary Dilemmas*

Frances Knight: Senior Lecturer in the History of Christianity, Head of Department

10. *Anglican Social Ethics: A Free Church Perspective*

Neil Messer: Senior Lecturer in Christian Theology, Co-Convenor of the Research Institute of Theology and Religious Studies

11. *Memory and Self-Perception: Aspects of Anglican Identity from a Roman Catholic Perspective*

Thomas O'Loughlin: Professor of Historical Theology, Dean of the School of Humanities and Social Sciences

NOTE The eleven essays in this volume were originally delivered as a series of public lectures in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Wales, Lampeter in the Lent term of 2006. They attracted large and lively audiences of staff and students. The idea for this lecture series came about when we realised that the Department had one of the largest groups of practising Anglicans, clerical and lay, of any such department in the United Kingdom and that they represented just about every known shade of Anglicanism. Accordingly they were each encouraged to approach the topic from their respective theological positions, though in a manner appropriate to the academy; but we added for good measure, and in the interests of ecumenical balance, lectures by a United Reformed Church minister and a Roman Catholic priest, both of whom are also members of staff in the same Department.

# Liberal Anglicanism

## Paul Badham

*Paul Badham is Professor of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Wales, Lampeter. He is the author of The Contemporary Challenge of Modernist Theology and Editor of Modern Believing.*

## MCU *Forewords* booklets

MCU *Forewords* booklets are designed to illustrate liberal approaches to theological issues.

MCU (The Modern Churchpeople's Union) is a forum for Christian debate and discussion which welcomes new insights in religious faith.

Founded in the late 19th century to represent liberal views within the Church of England it now has members throughout the English-speaking world.

We believe divine revelation has not come to an end. God invites us to do our believing in ways appropriate to the 21st Century.

New ideas may be true today even if they have not been officially accepted by church leaders in the past.

We therefore promote open, honest searching for truth in a spirit of humility and respect.

If you enjoy being challenged, MCU is for you.

*For more details about the MCU*

- *visit [www.modchurchunion.org](http://www.modchurchunion.org)*
- *email office [@modchurchunion.org](mailto:@modchurchunion.org)*
- *phone 0845 345 1909.*