

Liberal theology matters

To be of value, religious faith must be relevant to our lives and consistent with our knowledge in other areas. We therefore support constructive dialogue between theology and the sciences.

From this perspective religion, like other subjects of study, inherits a tradition but recognizes that its knowledge is neither complete nor certain. We may use our scholarship, under God's guidance, to add new insights so that the tradition lives and develops.

This does not mean that we easily abandon our beliefs; on the contrary our liberal stance needs to be defended against those who claim greater certainty than they really have. Nevertheless we do our believing with

- **confidence** – that there is always a proper place for challenging the past and discovering new insights; and
- **humility** – because whatever we believe today, we always have more to learn from others.



About Modern Church

Modern Church is a membership organisation that promotes liberal theology. It encourages open, respectful debate and discussion of matters relating to Christian faith. It offers:

- conferences
- a theological journal *Modern Believing*
- a members' newsletter *Signs of the Times*
- an extensive website
- occasional other publications.

Modern Church was founded at the end of the 19th century as a Church of England society. Now it welcomes all who share its ethos.

Further information

For subscription options, resources in liberal theology, or to find out more about Modern Church visit:

www.modernchurch.org.uk



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formerly The Modern Churchpeople's Union

Modern Church

Liberal Theology

what it is and why the Church needs it

www.modernchurch.org.uk

Liberalism and theology

To be a 'liberal' is sometimes understood as a mark of civilization and toleration, sometimes as a term of condemnation.

The word comes from the Latin for 'free'. In economics, liberals believe property owners should be free to use their property as they wish; they therefore seek to limit government restrictions such as taxation.

In politics, liberals believe individuals should be free to behave as they wish provided that their behaviour does no harm to others. Political liberals often argue that governments should not forbid divorce, homosexuality or sex outside marriage regardless of whether these actions are considered immoral.

In religion the term 'liberal' is usually applied to people who consider themselves free to dissent from conventional beliefs. Liberals are often contrasted with 'conservatives' who defend them.

The word 'theology' comes from Greek words meaning the study of God, and is used to refer generally to the study of religious matters.

Liberals and conservatives

In religion, conservatives often use the word 'liberal' simply as an umbrella term for all Christians with whom they disagree. More accurate uses of the word are usually one of three types:

1. Specific issues

Here conservatives defend the conventional view and liberals propose change. One can be a liberal on one issue but a conservative on another. Religious groups often describe themselves as conservatives because of their stance on one issue, while being accused of liberalism because of their stance on another.

2. General approaches

All living traditions inherit teachings from the past but also question them and develop new ideas. In this sense conservatives generally emphasize the value of inherited views, liberals the new ideas. Some are extremists at one end or the other of the conservative-liberal spectrum; but most are somewhere in the middle, acknowledging the value of both tradition and development.

3. Appeals to authority

Some argue that true believers acknowledge a single supreme authority, usually the Bible, which overrides all human reason. On this view, instead of a spectrum there is a simple division between conservatives who accept God's word in its entirety and liberals who doubt any part of it.

Affirming liberal theology

Although this kind of appeal to authority is impractical (not least because of the many biblical texts which conservatives and liberals alike ignore) many conservatives today are attracted to it because one biblical text condemning an act – like homosexuality – seems sufficient justification for denouncing others as unchristian.

Modern Church was founded in 1898 to defend new scholarship in religious faith.

Like today, new insights in the sciences and biblical research were challenging traditional beliefs and many fearful Christians sought refuge in an infallible Pope or Bible.

By affirming the value of new research Modern Church argues that religious truth is never simply a matter of reading the answers from past authorities. New insights are always possible. We draw on Scripture, reason, tradition and experience and expect them to shed light on each other.

Religious understanding therefore comes from many different sources. Because no one source of information is infallible, we value dialogue with other faiths and unbelievers.

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