



Reclaiming the soul of Modern Church

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Some years ago, I went to Taizé. It was August and very hot. Those who have been there in summer will know that the huge tent which is the central gathering place for worship, would have been open on three sides. We were right at the back, so we couldn't see much of what was going on at the central altar, but when the first couple of songs had ended everyone turned around to face another altar, so that we were surprised to find ourselves suddenly very near the front. This little cameo memory has stayed with me for many years – and keeps returning whenever I think about Modern Church. It reminds me of the particular kind of hospitality and freedom which is at the heart of our liberal ethos.

The liberal ideal of freedom

The word liberal embodies the idea of freedom and hospitality. Whilst liberals are not ones to set terms and conditions, we do have an unwritten code of courtesy. We respect each other's honour and integrity, especially in matters of faith, and we strive to uphold religious freedom. In other words, the idea that God can be encountered in a myriad of ways. Being faithful to these two seminal principles means that our members seldom find themselves far from the central 'altar' in our meetings and discussions, as well as in our times of worship. All of our discussions, from conference to council, to the exchanges which take place between one or two people in the bar late in the evening, take us to a new central 'altar', a place of understanding where we encounter the living God in one another. Our central 'altar' is a meeting place for people who are free in the deepest sense, in other words in regard to God and to one another. We encounter God in new and sometimes surprising ways of discerning truth, by which I mean non-propositional truth, the kind of truth which is of the heart as well as the head, truth which is integral to Love.

This capacity for heart-thinking implies that we are able to orientate ourselves within different thought contexts – different ways of sensing truth. This does not mean that we always agree. Our conferences, and council meetings such as this one, suggest something more than simple agreement. They suggest that we value an intellectual freedom which is built on trust. We have learned to

hear one another, to take soundings from one another. But this is only possible when everyone is prepared to let go of one thing in order to discover something new, or, to pick up on the Taizé metaphor, to turn around and face a different altar.

Our ability to let go of one way of thinking in order to face a different central altar is part of what we offer the wider Church. Even if we are still thought by some to be subversive and heretical, our job has been to give permission to think and say the hitherto unsayable, to offer intellectual and spiritual hospitality, especially to people who do not feel that they can say or be what they are in other church contexts. We can only do this because we stand for a particular kind of freedom, the freedom which embodies a turning around and embracing of others where they are, without imposing terms and conditions for doing so.

Questions to consider: Is this still true – i.e. are we still doing this? Given the shift to the extreme right in both Church and politics, do we now need to be more recognisably hospitable to other Christians, for example? If so, how should our voice be more clearly heard? Or, in the context of the secular political forum, should we be making our voice heard in the market place? How might we do this? Should we be more subversive – working underground, as it were?

Turning around

It is this being able to turn around and embrace others which helps the Church to turn around and listen to other voices, including, and perhaps especially, those speaking from outside its own institutional boundaries – the un-churched, the de-churched and the marginalized. So I think our primary calling is two-fold. It is to be prophetic in both Church and world, by being true to the spirit of our liberal Christian foundation.

As liberals, we are sometimes mistaken for what Maurice Wiles in his essay on Worship and Theology would call ‘half believers’.¹ Half believers are not people for whom ‘anything goes’ theologically. Nor are they agnostics, or people of weak faith. ‘Half believers’ are people of integrity. They do not like to live with unanswered questions, even though they know that very few questions pertaining to God can be ‘answered’. They expect more from what they believe, if they are to believe with commitment. At the same time, not all

¹ Maurice Wiles ‘Worship and Theology’ in *The Weight of Glory – A Vision and Practice for Christian Faith: The Future of Liberal Theology*, D.W. Hardy and P.H. Sedgwick (eds.), T&T Clark, Edinburgh (1991) p.71.

liberal Christians have arrived at their particular understanding of the Christian faith in the same way, or for the same reasons. As with any other human society, we each bring a story when it comes to talking about God and our 'God talk' will, to some extent, be influenced by that story.

For many of us, the story we bring involves some form of rejection at the hands of the Church, or perhaps by people who played a key part earlier on in our lives or in our spiritual formation. These feelings of rejection destroy trust, especially trust in God, and can lead one way or another to a general sense of alienation from anything to do with God or the Church. There are also among us people who simply want the freedom to test boundaries, both intellectually and spiritually, and to move on theologically without necessarily giving up on the Church or on the Christian faith itself. We are a thinking and worshipping community, a complex group involved in a spiritual and intellectual quest for meaning and for truth. We are all journeying. Questions to consider: Share something of your journey. What brings you to Modern Church? What are you hoping to learn from it? What can you bring to its life?

The spiritual quest

But it is with the spiritual quest that I am particularly concerned today. I think Modern Church is called to be something more nuanced than a safe space for doing purely rational liberal theology. Perhaps its true purpose lies in being a space, or 'mansion', in which there is room for everyone, but one which also lends itself to the possibility of a renewed sense of the holy. I personally believe that Modern Church is a context in which it is possible to turn around and 'see God' not with the intellect alone but with the mind in the heart's place.

This has significant implications for all people of faith, but especially for an institutional Church whose spiritual life seems to be increasingly issue-dominated and stifled by managerial concerns. The liberal, the humanist and the secular have much to teach it. The secular is not nearly as secular as we often suppose. People are concerned about their inner life. One could even say that before there is any more talk of renewal and reform, the thinness of the Church's own inner life in God might well do with some renewal and care from those outside its borders.

Perhaps the Church also needs the liberality of spirit which Modern Church has in its own life in regard to each of its members. Liberality of spirit, or freedom in God, is the most powerful counterpoint to extremism and fundamentalism.

This, I believe, is the gist of most of Paul's thinking on organised religion with its criteria for membership. The conditions required for being Jewish had nothing to do with the freedom offered in Christ. The party of the circumcision had got it completely wrong. Paul was about building up a people of faith, as opposed to reinforcing the establishment, with all its terms and conditions for membership and its hold on people's lives. We see this kind of divisive thinking replicated in a hard-core 'conditions for membership' attitude to belonging which in turn feeds into the climate of sectarianism within the Church today, and increasingly in secular politics. It is something which Modern Church has always opposed.

So Modern Church's presence and influence is needed in the market place as well as in the Church. Trump's electoral triumph owes much to Christian fundamentalism, financially as well as ideologically. The dangerously emotive worship which Christian fundamentalism can engender feeds into extreme, and equally emotive, secular politics. But Christian fundamentalism also feeds into a spiritual vacuum created by the Church's adoption of a managerial and strategic approach to being Christ in the world. The emphasis on 'discipleship' in the recent 'Renewal and Reform' document reads more like a recruitment programme than a plan for realising the desire to reach out and love people in a way which blesses them in Christ. It is yet another example of how the Church's spiritual energy and focus is increasingly diverted to more materialist concerns, broadly presented as 'mission and evangelism'. The statistics relating to church attendance suggest that talk of 'disciplining' is not helping it to satisfy the needs of those who are seeking something of the sacred and of the unnameable God when they visit a church or attend its services.

Last year at Council, Professor Elaine Graham spoke of religion in the market place and in particular of the Sunday assemblies which are a growing phenomenon in this country and elsewhere. They seem to satisfy, if perhaps only partially, a need for something resembling the spiritual. This may not be described as a need for God, or even a need for coming together to seek out the ultimate Other, but they endure as safe spaces for the spiritual and embody their own rituals.

The need for ritual suggests that human beings ultimately find completeness in something resembling worship – or in what also might be termed the collective contemplation of the Divine. Churches have traditionally provided a space for a more contemplative style of worship, though its worship has seldom been altogether silent, especially in the last three decades or so. But times are changing. The talkative and rather busy worship of yesterday resonates much

less with people today. Many Evangelicals and people returning to church later in life are looking for greater depth, and more silence and theological substance on a Sunday morning. I believe that Modern Church has much to offer them in this area.

Intellect and spirit

Modern Church is a safe space for people to think about and worship God, from widely differing vantage points. For this to be possible, we have the difficult task of holding together two areas of thought generation, that of the intellect and that of the spirit. The two complement and inform one another. Doing theology always returns us to this place of intellectual integrity, to the knowledge that for theologians, the life of the intellect and that of the spirit are integral to one another. Only consider the difference between two God-orientated disciplines: the philosophy of religion and theology itself. Here, at Modern Church, we are privileged to swim in both these deep and sometimes turbulent waters without the risk of drowning or running aground in either of them. This is because we are also a worshipping community. Questions to consider: Do you think the intellect is sourced from the life of the spirit? Or do you believe the two should be kept separate? Give reasons and account for your own experience.

The meaning of liberal

Furthermore, we claim a Christian foundation and with it a Christian identity – which is as valid as anyone else’s Christian identity, incidentally. We are an international society promoting liberal Christian theology. We must therefore be mindful of the rock from which we are hewn, and sometimes we have to drill deep and hard to rediscover the wealth that lies beneath our feet, so to speak. In other words, if we are to have anything to say to those looking to move on in their faith journey, and anything to bring to the life of the wider Church, we must continually rediscover the value, or true worth, of what our liberal tradition means for us as a Christian foundation, and what this unique treasure might bring to the religiously fraught times in which we live. But we cannot do this without first returning to the source of our own liberality.

Here, the distinction between liberalism and liberality is important because the two are inherently different. To be liberal is to be free. But a word which ends with an ‘ism’ contradicts the notion of movement and thereby of freedom. Freedom signifies life. It is always dynamic. Fundamentalism, Biblicism, Christianity are all lifeless terms, as is liberalism when it is worn as C.S. Lewis

might have put it, 'like an old coat'. Some of the criticisms which liberals encounter in the context of Church and faith, suggest that we are perhaps in danger of doing this, or that we have simply allowed the secular/rational project to take over where we left off,² with the result that people turn to the Sunday Assemblies for the spiritual sustenance they require in order to sustain their humanity.

Again, all of this suggests that the search for the rational in theology is doomed unless it is sourced from the life of the spirit.³ And here there is a quid pro quo. We need the life of the spirit to inform rational religious discourse if spirituality itself is not to be superseded by the purely emotive. Emotion is not about life in a liberal sense, even if at times it emerges as a corollary to spiritual experience. Genuine spirituality works with the rational while also requiring a certain acquiescence of the human will, the will to turn around and look at how we stand both individually and collectively in relation to God.

Such acquiescence clears the way for the dynamic movement of God's Spirit or *pneuma*. As Jesus implied in his conversation with Nicodemus, there is no way of telling how this will happen but it will always be felt as a new and life-giving force at work in any one of a number of human contexts. The life of the spirit, as it reinvigorates the soul of liberalism, and the soul of Modern Church, is the oxygen we vitally need if we are to invigorate the life of the Church and enable people to move forward in their own faith journey.

Questions to consider:

1. What does liberality, as opposed to liberalism mean to the group as a whole?
2. Is liberalism truly liberal?
3. What aspects of contemporary life do you think are most in need of what a liberal theological society such as ours has to give?

Furthermore, becoming detached from our life source could lead to a fundamental loss of confidence in what we are all about which, to quote from our aims and objectives, is 'to encourage open, enquiring and non-dogmatic approaches to Christianity, confident that Divine revelation has not come to an

² Theo Hobson argues that this is happening because 'emergent Liberal Christianity is inadequately rooted in Christian practice' *Reinventing Liberal Christianity*, ch.3, Eerdman's Publishing, Cambridge UK, (2013).

³ The danger here lies not so much in the life of the spirit being totally occluded by the rational but, as the Guardian recently put it in relation to current world events, in our search for the rational being altogether doomed. Guardian Journal, The Long Read, 8th December, 2016.

end and that God invites us to believe in ways appropriate to the 21st Century.’ So we have to be careful not to allow our liberal vision of freedom to be rendered down and reduced to yet another ‘ism’, simply for want of oxygen. We have to beware of falling into the trap of liberal dogmatism which, like other ‘isms’, could lead to an inward looking collective form of self-worship – amounting to a sort of protectionism. S.T. Coleridge puts it well when he says that: ‘[Those] who begin by loving Christianity better than Truth, will proceed by loving [their] own Sect or Church better than Christianity, and end in loving [themselves] better than all.’⁴

The search for meaning, for some form of spiritual ‘altar’, or place for encountering the living God together (even if it is not named as such) suggests a corresponding need for worship which will sound a measured note of Godly wisdom into these times of fractured social, political and religious life– and into the life of the wider Church, especially where it is inward looking or adopts protectionist attitudes to the Christian faith. Thinking and worshipping together, as we travel from different vantage points, moves us to a new dynamic midpoint.

The dynamic midpoint

Now, more than ever, our society needs a compensatory steadiness of mind and purpose from a body of people speaking from within the Christian Church, speaking from its central ‘altar’, its dynamic midpoint. I believe that the damaging fallout from the world events of the past few years calls for a renewal of confidence in this dynamic midpoint, a movement which takes us forward as well as more deeply into the life of God. So our task, as thinking liberals within the Church, is to renew a radical vision of the Christian faith, but we can only begin to do this from within our own experience of God as he, or she, is known to us in Jesus Christ.

From this place ‘in God’, we are invited to embody, and not just speak of, a message of hope. Being the embodiment of hope takes us beyond being simply a forum for doing liberal theology. It invites us to take part in the transformation of the Church. Transformation is not the same as change for the sake of change – the sign of a rudderless ship. Transformation is a dynamic forward-moving, hospitable process. It calls for risk, vulnerability and courageous initiative. It is about reaching out to new intellectual horizons.

⁴ S.T. Coleridge, *Aids to Reflection* in Daniel W. Hardy *Finding the Church: The Dynamic Truth of Anglicanism* p.240, SCM Press, London (2001).

We learn from each other in order to reach out to the wider Church, so that it can begin to re-learn the kind of trust and honouring of the other which leads to wisdom. The great peace initiatives of recent history have invariably led to reaching out and learning wisdom. Think of South Africa and Northern Ireland. In the life of the Church, as in the two countries cited, there are certain givens needed for this to happen, notably those which pertain to justice. For the Church, the given of justice will in turn call for the kind of scriptural hermeneutic which tends towards love, and it is love which energises, or provides the forward dynamic, for its ongoing life.

Learning from one another within the forward dynamic of God's hospitable life has enabled Modern Church to endure. That life, that forward dynamic, is also its future. Modern Church is not simply an edifice built on the liberalism of the past, although it embodies that spirit in its DNA. It is 'a living stone, a spiritual house, a holy priesthood.' (1 Peter 2:5) As such it must keep moving forward as a prophetic witness to justice and mercy in the Church and as a credible witness to the Gospel in the world. Its priesthood is sourced from within a shared knowledge of God, who is known in different ways, as part of different and still evolving stories.

All that we learn comes in this evolving process of moving forward while at the same time turning towards each other's central altar. This is not invariably the same thing as agreeing to disagree, although it can be that too. We turn initially in a desire to understand, if only in a limited rational sense, what it is others bring which will allow us all to get a better view of the 'I am' of God, the life giving truth of which the world and the Church is so desperately in need. So our objectives endure but remain vitally relevant to the times in which we live.

Let's return to these finely tuned objectives for a moment. Of special significance in regard to this particular discussion is the fact that we are both open and enquiring while remaining confident in Divine revelation. The objective, or propositional, truth is shaped and informed by the intuited sense of God's 'I am'. Something very important is being said here in regard to our objectives as they pertain to authority and Divine revelation. Authority, in matters of faith, as in all intellectual work, comes with respect for the integrity of another, including those of other faiths – which is another of our objectives. Question to consider: Is it possible to be open and enquiring while remaining confident in Divine revelation?

We begin our thinking process, we conduct our discussions, we gather socially or as members of an elected working group, trusting in the integrity of those

around us. But to trust in another's integrity is not to assume that it is substantively the same as our own. For most of us here to today, being of a liberal integrity means being true, as far as we can, to the loving kindness of God, specifically in the way we do our theology. We may not all agree on any given subject, but we trust in the integrity of all who embrace the kind of liberality we stand for. That trust is sustained through a certain shared affection which connects us to one another as people who want the same thing. In our different ways, and from the contextuality of our lives and faith journeys, we want to see true liberality prevail in the life of the wider Church. We want to see people freed from every kind of religious oppression and, as Modern Church, we want to play a part in bringing about reconciliation and peace in the world, especially in regard to matters which touch on religion. In other words, we want to help bring about the Kingdom.

Modern Church and the purposes of God

As to Divine Revelation itself, between us I'm sure that we could produce many a scholarly dissertation on the subject. But it is not the primary task of Modern Church to produce scholarly dissertations, notwithstanding its academically rigorous journal and conference papers. Our primary task is to respond to God's invitation to walk with him so that we can discern his purposes for the world and for the Church in ways appropriate to the 21st century – and help the Church do the same. So Divine revelation waits, in a sense, on Modern Church's response to God's invitation to realise God's Kingdom. In other words, to make the Kingdom happen. We have a continuing responsibility to make it possible for others 'to see God afresh', or, to borrow again from our objectives to work with 'an open enquiring faith willing to discover new insights'. In other words, to apprehend with both Church and world, the truth which matters most - the love and mercy of God which is at work in the world - even if it is not always fully visible in the life of the Church. In doing this, Modern Church becomes a bearer of hope.

We could say that being a bearer of hope is Modern Church's primary calling, given the times we are living in. As the politics of Church and world become increasingly mired in neo-conservatism, the liberal voice, and the voice of Modern Church, is mission at its best. Its purpose is not to convert, by fair means or foul, but to liberate. To this end, Modern Church is more than a protest movement, defined by what it is not, and what it is against, as opposed to what it is, and what it is for. Question to consider: Do you agree with this? Is Modern Church mission at its best?

Confronting Power

Our thinking is to be sourced within the love and mercy of God so that it can also bring hope to a world much troubled by the abuse of religion and of religious power, and to a Church still plagued by injustice, arguably for similar reasons. Separating the work of the intellect from the life of the spirit makes even the best religion, and the Church itself, vulnerable to the abuse of power – through exercising a manipulative hold on people’s emotions or allowing itself to be stifled by rarified intellectualism on the one hand, or by managerial reductionism on the other. Both suggest that theology which is not rooted in the sacred ultimately withers on the branch.

Liberal Christianity, as it is rooted in a post-enlightenment intellectual climate suspicious of the sacramental, is not immune to this. In his book *Reinventing Liberal Christianity*, Theo Hobson argues that ‘emergent liberal Christianity is inadequately rooted in Christian practice’ by which he means liturgy and the ritual, or ‘cult’ that enriches the intellectual life. He goes on to say that ‘detaching Christianity from this cultic basis leads only to an empty, bloodless form of Protestantism.’⁵ To this we could add that ignoring the kind of liturgical practice which feeds spiritual hunger and helps to shape theological reflection creates a power vacuum, so allowing for the perversion of religion through the abuse of power by charismatic movements or individuals eager to take advantage of it.

The abuse of religious power also occurs when authority, including intellectual authority, becomes detached from love. Power is not the same as authority. It is possible to be powerful and have little or no genuine authority (as with certain media and business moguls) and equally possible to have real authority but little or no secular power, Christ himself being the supreme example of this. In potentially emotive religious contexts, and in those where there is no real authority, we very soon get a power vacuum. This allows good religions to become the means for individuals to become dangerously powerful, think of the numerous Christian sects which still cause immense damage to people’s lives. Then there are the inquisitions, crusades and persecutions of Christian history which bear witness to the kind of hatred, ethnic as well as religious, which the abuse of religious power can generate. We are now seeing the same phenomenon at work in the context of another good religion, Islam, the religion of peace. There are also signs, in the wake of the recent US election, that the European pogroms of the last century may soon be repeated in the

⁵ Theo Hobson, *Reinventing Liberal Christianity* p.77.

USA, but now they are directed at Muslims, as a result of the collective fear generated by the same violent abuse of religious power.

These aberrations of good religion make the religions concerned (and perhaps all religion) literally unbelievable, because they have nothing whatsoever to do with a holy God. To be a liberal Christian is to live in celebration of freedom. So Modern Church, with its liberal Christian foundation, has work to do. Modern Church is tasked with speaking good religion into the context of a society in which many people are looking for a sense of the sacred, of the genuinely holy.

But how do we speak of God and of the holy in an age where so much which ought to pertain to God is articulated through the short hand of social media, hidden amongst the flotsam and jetsam of catch phrases and acronyms loosely borrowed from the idea of religion, and borne along on an ever swelling tide of information – or misinformation?

Perhaps a key to answering these questions lies in realising that we need to know less in order to understand more, at least when it comes to doing theology. We are not here simply to supply alternative answers to the big questions of faith. We are here to bear witness to ongoing revelation. As Richard Hooker might have said, we ‘deduce’ the purposes of God ‘collectively’, and we strive to make sense of them for the times we live in. Question to consider: In what ways could Modern Church make this clear to those who see us as not being really ‘Christian’?

And this returns us to the Taizé model. People gather at Taizé from all over the world. They have no common language, apart from the language of silence. Out of silence grows empathy and compassion and a sense of God and the holy. If you want to communicate with someone, you have to make yourself understood in whatever spoken language is common to you both – if there is one. Worship is conducted in as many languages as possible at Taizé – Latin, French, Spanish, German and English to name only a few. Singing alongside several hundred people in a language which is entirely foreign to you calls for a degree of acceptance and trust. You have to let go. You have to trust that everyone means the same thing, or is heading to the same place, in this shared encounter with God. You have to let go in order to move with the measure of the dance.

Whatever thought processes have led you to Taizé also lead you to a place of ‘letting go’ of what you take for granted, letting go of a priori thinking, letting go of your own thought language. But the thinking itself does not stop. It gets

translated, or perhaps transformed, in and through the worship. In other words, worship enhances the thinking process, as the thinking process enlivens worship. It translates the purely rational into a sensed reality of the living God. Worship allows, indeed obliges, the thinking process to be sourced from a different place, to be sourced from within the love of God.

Augustine argues for something along these lines when he says that the human heart is restless until it finds its rest in God. The same is true of the intellect. We are restless, especially as theologians, until we find our intellectual bearings within that heart-thinking place, where the rational is brought together with the spiritual and so reveals God in new and surprising ways. The heart-thinking process makes it possible for us to behold God at a subliminal level, to behold God from the edge of the Church's life, or from just below the surface of religion itself. It is also where we, as liberals and as Modern Church, encounter the world in its own need for God and for the hospitality of Jesus Christ.

Questions to consider

Our ability to let go of one way of thinking in order to face a different central altar is part of what we offer the wider Church. Even if we are still thought by some to be subversive and heretical, our job has been to give permission to think and say the hitherto unsayable, to offer intellectual and spiritual hospitality, especially to people who do not feel that they can say or be what they are in other church contexts. We can only do this because we stand for a particular kind of freedom, the freedom which embodies a turning around and embracing of others where they are, without imposing terms and conditions for doing so.

1. Is this still true – ie are we still doing this? Given the shift to the extreme right in both Church and politics, do we now need to be more recognisably hospitable to other Christians, for example? If so, how should our voice be more clearly heard? Or, in the context of the secular political forum, should we be making our voice heard in the market place? How might we do this?

We are a thinking and worshipping community, a complex group involved in a spiritual and intellectual quest for meaning and for truth. We are all journeying.

2. Share something of your journey. What brings you to Modern Church? What are you hoping to learn from it? What can you bring to its life?

Here, at Modern Church, we are privileged to swim in both these deep and sometimes turbulent waters [the philosophy of religion and theology] without the risk of drowning or running aground in either of them. This is because we are also a worshipping community.

The life of the spirit, as it reinvigorates the soul of liberalism, and the soul of Modern Church, is the oxygen we vitally need if we are to invigorate the life of the Church and enable people to move forward in their own faith journey.

3. Do you think the intellect is sourced from the life of the spirit? Or do you believe the two should be kept separate? Give reasons and account for your own experience.

4. What does liberality, as opposed to liberalism, mean to the group as a whole? What aspects of contemporary life do you think are most in need of what a liberal theological society such as ours has to give?

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5. Is it possible to be open and enquiring while remaining confident in Divine revelation?

Modern Church is not simply a protest movement, defining what it is not, and what it is against, as opposed to what it is, and what it is for.

6. Do you agree with this? Is Modern Church *mission at its best*?

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7. In what ways could Modern Church make this clear to those who see us as not being really 'Christian'? How might we dispel this idea? Some practical suggestions...

LC, 10th March 2017