

Why Liberal Churches are Growing?

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Let me begin by saying something about perspective. Here are some recollections from centuries past about the state of Christianity in our land. There are two types of writing here. First, the churchwardens returns from 1578 in the dioceses of Lincoln, and second, the diary of Oliver Heywood, wondering about a child's faith. Here goes:

Patnum [Pavenham] Our chansell is in decaye and redye to faule dwone, at the defaute of Trynitye College in Cambridge.

Milton Harnes There is a suspicion of whoredom between William Swyngland & John Fletchers wyfe. The vicar hathe cut downe trees in the churche yarde & not employed them upon the cancell nor mansion howse. This may certify your worship that our vicar hathe solde fyve ashe trees which did growe in the churchyard of Milton Ernes, and hath converted money thereof into other tymbre more necessarye for the repairing of his house being in decay...

Carrington John Robertes serveth under our vicar & wee knowe not whether he be lycensed so to do or no.

Clophill We present William Spellinge the 23 of Marche beinge then called Palme Sondaye in the churche & tyme of eveninge prayer, before suche maydes as then had receaved the communion, dyd in theyre seate lye upon his backe verye unreverentlye till the ende of the fyrste lesson, and also other tymes dothe seem to forgette to yeilde dewe reverence in the tyme of dyvvyne service.

Langford Our chancell is owte of repayre in tymbre & wyndowes, at the parsons defaute. Our churche wyndowes are in decaye by reason of fowle that cometh in at the chancell wyndowes which hathe broken them.

Colmworth We have had no service on the weeke dayes not from Maye daye last tyll September & no service on Sancte Peters Eve nor Sancte Bartholemewe Eve nor Michaelmas daye at nyghte & they had iiij children christened iiij wayes, & he woold not let the parishe see his licence & one syr Brian Hayward dyd in the like case. Item William Moore doth withholde certayne legacyes from the poore of Colmworth which his father had geven amonge them. Item Umphrey Austyne churche warden last yere wold not present the lead that was missing oute of the steeple. Item Nicholas Dicons. Item the Quenes Iniunctions or the bisshoppes were not made thes iij yeres nor the catechisme taughte.

One Nov 4 1681 as I travl'd towards Wakefield about Hardger moor I met with a boy who would needs be talking. I begun to ask him some questions about the principles of religion: he could not tell me how many gods there be, nor persons in the godhead, nor who made the world nor anything about Jesus Christ, nor heaven nor hell, or eternity after this life, nor for what ends he came into the world, nor for what condition he was born in - I ask't him whether he was a sinner, he told me he hop't not; yet this was a witty boy and could talk of any worldly things skilfully enough....he is 10 years of age, cannot reade and scarce ever goes to church. *Oliver Heywood.*

My purpose in mentioning these things, from the outset, is to just remind us that whatever shape or form our Christian land took in previous generations, it wasn't liberalism that caused people to take religion less than seriously. Other ages have done this quite well, actually. The Medieval and Reformation periods are often characterised as ages of great faith. Certainly, individuals and communities did die for their beliefs. However, the general scale of apathy and antipathy should not be underestimated. The eleventh century monk, William of Malmesbury complained that the aristocracy rarely attended mass, and even the more pious heard it at home, 'but in their bedchambers, lying in the arms of their wives'. At least they heard mass though; according to one scholar, 'substantial sections of thirteenth century society - especially the poor - hardly attended church at all'.

Were the clergy any better? Hardly. William Tyndale complained that, in 1530, few priests could recite the Lord's Prayer or translate it into English. When the Bishop of Gloucester tested his clergy in 1551, of 311 priests, 171 could not repeat the Ten Commandments – but this is hardly surprising, as there were few seminaries. Did any of this matter? Hardly. It would seem that the impact of the clergy on their congregations was very slight. As Keith Thomas notes in his magisterial *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (1971), 'members of the population jostled for pews, nudged their neighbours, hawked and spat, knitted, made coarse remarks, told jokes, fell asleep and even let off guns', with other behavior including 'loathsome farting, striking, and scoffing speeches', which resulted in 'the great offence of the good and the great rejoicing of the bad'.

This haphazard, semi-secular, quiet (but occasionally rowdy and irreverent) English Christianity, continues well into successive centuries. James Woodforde's *Diary of a Country Parson* provides an invaluable window into the life of the clergy and the state of English

Christianity in the eighteenth century. Again, a close reading of the text suggests that whatever secularisation is, it is not obviously a product of the Industrial Revolution. Woodforde clearly thinks it is reasonably good to have ‘two rails’ (or thirty communicants) at Christmas or Easter, from 360 parishioners. Such figures would be low by today’s standards in some rural communities. Woodforde tells us that the only time his church is ever full is when a member of the Royal family is ill, or when there is a war on. Generally, the context of his ministry is one where he baptizes, marries and buries the people of his parish, but the week-by-week Sunday attendance is not something that would get many ministers into a frenzy of excitement. But Woodforde is not bothered by this – not because he is lazy – but because the totality of his contact with his parish constitutes his ministry. He is *with* his people in all their trial and tribulations, not just his congregation. He is their man for all seasons; an incarnate presence in the midst of community that waxes and wanes in its religious affections.

Statistical surveys continually support the thesis that Britain is place where the vast majority of the population continues to affirm their belief in God, but then proceed to do little about it. So church attendance figures remain stubbornly low. Yet this is not a modern malaise, but is rather a typical feature of western societies down the ages. Granted, there have been periods of revival when church attendance has peaked. But the basic and innate disposition is one of believing without belonging; of relating to the church, and valuing its presence and beliefs - yet without necessarily sharing them. Or, as one wit puts it, ‘I cannot consider myself to be a pillar of the church, for I never go. But I am a buttress – insofar as I support it from the outside’.

So what are the churches to do about the statistics that apparently point to the imminent funeral of organised religion? Is the future really so bleak? It seems unlikely. Whilst it is true that Britons are rapidly turning from being religious assumers to religious consumers, and are moving from a culture of religious assumption to religious consumption, in which choice and competition in the spiritual marketplace thrive, there seems to be little cause for alarm.

So our churches may need to panic a little less about the apparently bleak statistics, and concentrate a little more on maintaining religion as something that is public, accessible and extensive, whilst also being distinct, intensive, and mysterious. So, dare I say from the outset that in considering liberalism and growing churches, we could do with a little less flight and fright; and even less neuralgia, depression and

anxiety. There is a great deal in good, sensible, broad, generous and capacious faith to celebrate. And even in liberal churches – whatever they may be – I think we want to celebrate the life and hope they bring to the broader ecclesial ecology. So, then, what of liberalism? Allow me to paraphrase a parable of Jesus.

Two men went to the temple to pray, one a Conservative, the other a Liberal. The Conservative went to the front of the temple, knelt down, and prayed thus with himself: ‘I thank thee Lord that thou hast not made me like this Liberal - weak on doctrine, weedy morals, watered-down creeds and wishy-washy ideas.’ But the Liberal stood at the back, reflecting coolly on the irony of the situation. He prayed thus: ‘Lord, keep me open to the ideas of others, even though they are probably wrong.’ ‘I tell you’, said Jesus, ‘Neither of these men went away justified.’

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, to be Liberal is to be free (Latin: *Liber*). The freedom that Liberals enjoy is endemic to their spiritual and theological nature. The *Oxford English Dictionary* qualifies ‘liberal’ and ‘Liberalism’ by pointing out that Liberals are ‘free from restraint’, ‘free in speech or action’, ‘free in giving, generous’, ‘open-hearted’, ‘free from narrow prejudice and open minded’, and ‘open to the reception of new ideas of proposal or reform’. Moreover they are ‘of political opinions’ and ‘favourable to changes and reforms tending in the direction of democracy’.

To speak of Liberalism in this kind of way may sound unusual to some. For some time now Liberal thinking has been the *bete noire* in theology, as well as in social and political theory. Liberals have been blamed, variously, for the first World War, second World War, Holocaust - all kinds of moral problems, lax ethics in the 1960s, introducing sex education to combat ignorance, not condemning ignorance where there is no education, and all kinds of theological compromise. In my view none of this is particularly fair or accurate. There should be some form of distinction between Liberal Protestantism - which was a theological movement of the 19th and early 20th century - and the more general Liberal perspective that has been within Christian theology since its inception.

Here I am not concerned with the former of these movements, which although it has contributed a great deal to liberalism in the past, is undoubtedly part of ‘historical theology’. I am more concerned with the more broad and general definitions of liberalism which carry weight as currency in both theological and in social terminology. By this I mean

that liberalism - at least in Britain - has three hallmarks which make it quite distinctive.

Firstly Liberalism is always receptive to contemporary culture, science and the arts. Liberalism, because it is concerned with freedom, is first and foremost concerned with pursuing wisdom and the truth wherever it is to be found. There is therefore no fundamental or absolute discontinuity between the truth that is out there and the truth of Christianity. As Simone Weil puts it, succinctly: 'Christ likes us to prefer truth to him, because before being Christ he is truth. If one turns aside from him to go toward truth, one will not go far before falling into his arms.' Characteristically, Liberals are generally opposed to dogmatism and exclusivist positions, and are open to counter truths or alternative insights that belong to other groups and parties.

Secondly Liberals tend to be sympathetic and syncretic to applying their knowledge and insights to particular situations. This requires on the one hand respect for revelation, texts and traditions, yet at the same time making sure that the hermeneutical methods are praxiomatically relevant. Gay, Black liberation and political theologies tend by and large to be infused with the liberal spirit; they are about freedom for individuals and communities, and at the base of their method lies a relative freedom in the exposition of the material of Christianity.

Thirdly Liberals tend to stress that Christianity has ethical and political implications. Liberals are not content with Christianity being seen as a propositional religion concerned with correct dogma and simply holding fast to the creeds. Liberalism believes that Christianity is relational, and is therefore fundamentally about *how* religion takes on social evils such as poverty, war or racism. Correspondingly liberals tend to be quite optimistic about the prospects for society, believing that the Kingdom of God can at least start to come on Earth if the Christian faith is *lived* out in society - even possibly in a compromised form - rather than simply *taught* to society. Yet this is to be done with humility and patience, not arrogance and speed, even though it may need to be radical at times. That said, what else might we want to say about Liberalism today? What can it contribute to our understandings of mission and ministry?

Liberalism is by no means a form of theological perfection. I am aware, as many others are, of the shortcomings of Liberal thinking in the past; its contribution to Church and social teaching has not always been what it should be. Liberalism, in its desire to make itself accessible and understood in the modern World, has sometimes been guilty of enhancing its own self-importance while reducing the credibility of the Christian faith. This is certainly not what many liberals intend and one

should certainly draw a distinction between serious Liberal thought and other forms which simply glide over hermeneutical difficulties, and are more vapid in their treatment of doctrinal and moral issues.

Put more simply, the purpose of Liberal thought is *never* to compromise Christian faith, but simply to rediscover the means of maintaining it and developing it in the present. There is no question that this is a huge task leading in all kinds of directions. Liberalism, if it is to succeed at all in the next century, and indeed take a lead, must adopt an air of humility and be prepared to work in dialogue with other faith expressions; that would of course enrich and make sense of Liberalism right at its core - in other words a deeply dialogical form of faith and intellectual development.

This requires liberals to recognise that they are not a party within the Church, nor indeed within society, but a particular genre of thinking and way of being - a particular way of belonging in the World which seeks truth and the common good in the face of a complex and fast changing environment.

Liberalism therefore, always needs to qualify itself. Far from being a problem for Liberals, these are its very opportunities, and can in fact be a kind of blessing in disguise. To be gripped by the gracious liberality of God is indeed to be set free, but this freedom can never be prescriptive; the horizon always beckons. Christianity is a journey and a pilgrimage - there are as many questions as answers, but most of all there is dialogue and pursuit of wisdom in the journey towards truth. For Liberals, this journeying is a form of a directional plurality; that is to say knowing where you are going, or at least agreeing that we can at least start from different points and arrive in a broad location in which God can be present and yet difference celebrated and understood nevertheless.

Thus, and as David Jenkins put it, rather remarkably at his enthronement service in 1984:

I face you therefore as an ambiguous compromised and questioning person, entering upon an ambiguous office in an uncertain church in the midst of a threatened and threatening world. I dare to do this, and I, even with fear and trembling, rejoice to do this, because this is where God is to be found. In the midst, that is of the ambiguities, compromises, the uncertainties, the questions, and the threats of our daily and ordinary worlds....

To be liberal - to be engaged in the task of free thinking and to be freeing people from their situations in which they are enslaved - we must *engage*. This engagement must be intellectual, of course. Yet I must also be orientated towards the World and the Church, in order to bring the grace and power of God to situations through piety, respect, and mutuality. The post-liberal challenge is plurality: how can we harbour cultural diversity in peace? Liberalism needs to face the task of being committed to a form of convergence in which all God's people can be one and begin to move forward, whilst respecting difference.

This means that liberalism cannot be indifferent to passion and proclamation. There used to be a famous jibe about North American Episcopalianism, that in summing up the decade of evangelism, many would comment that 'they thought that everyone who deserved to be an Anglican already was one...'. To be sure, this is funny. But it also captures something of the smugness and elitism that liberalism can be guilty of. The English equivalent is smirking at the Christian Union from the safety of the SCM seminar. But I think I want to say here that this won't do at all. For a start, the Cold War of belief is mostly over. And moreover, liberals need to evangelize. Not merely to convert conservatives to liberals; but non-believers to believers. That, I think, is a real challenge for us; to evangelise.

This is why I think that the enemy's of liberalism are not fundamentalism or conservatism or dogmatism. And I venture to suggest that they never have been. The enemies of liberalism are complacency and intellectual snobbery. In other words, liberals are often their own worst enemies. To be liberal - to be engaged in the task of free thinking and to be freeing people from their situations in which they are enslaved - we must *engage*. This engagement must be intellectual, of course. Yet I must also be orientated towards the World and the Church, in order to bring the grace and power of God to situations through piety, respect, mutuality and plurality.

At the same time, it needs to face the task of being committed to a form of convergence in which all God's people can be one and begin to move forward. The challenge that liberalism will therefore always face is how to be generous, open handed and liberating, acting with integrity in society that is both secular and value-conscious in the spiritual sense. I want to argue that it is at precisely this point that liberalism is able to work both theologically and socially for the common good in a way that makes sense of Christian faith in the modern World. But how might this be in relation to the business of growing liberal churches?

Let me offer *four* brief theses and vignettes to ponder. In offering these, I am of course aware that the title ‘growing liberal churches’ sets up a host of supplementary questions. What is ‘growth’? What is ‘liberal’? What is a church? But bear with, please, as I offer these Four Theses:

1. **Size isn’t Everything...*Market and utility.*** Intensive and Extensive. The inherent problem with maps and labels. Sheffield. Australia example. *Quality versus Quantity* – it must be both, of course. Likewise intensive and extensive. The mixed-economy is a good thing. Don’t keep fighting the cold war. There are too many kinds of smugness that conceal themselves in the supremacy of quality – Brethren types [Lake Wobegon] or forms of liberalism that sneer at success, or regard success as froth, illusory, or as the first flush of naïve faith...Likewise, there is smugness concealed in the supremacy of quantity over quality – that numbers equate to success; that small is failing; that faithfulness is measured by size; that size matters at all. Harmonise quality and quantity – not one to be preferred over another; we are asked to look deeper, below the surface. Some faithful congregations are small, etc...
2. **Don’t be Afraid of Slow Growth...Stadlen...and Hannah Arendt.** Labour, work and action – and the value of labour. The slow, cyclical, repetitive. Salt of the earth – and yeast. God’s slow work. Reflections on organic growth and the daily life of the sower; or yeast in the bread...Or the mustard seed... Or Salt of the Earth. A challenge for us might not be addressing the here and now – but medium and long-term: Pentimento? Invest in schools, youth, etc; in religion, content; soil, not seeds? What shall I do to inherit the KoG? Jesus did not reply ‘well, what works for you?’ We may have to WAIT for our time. Growth is not always success.
3. **Know Your Enemy...not secularism, liberalism or industrialisation; but post-institutionalism.** ‘...the possibility of millions of American religions – one for each of us...faith becomes overspecialised..quasi-therapeutic blandness’ sets in, which cannot resist the competition [with] more vigorous forms of radical religious individualism, with their dramatic claims of self-realisation, or the resurgent religious conservatism that spells out clear if simple, answers in an increasingly bewildering world...*Robert Bellah.* The true growth which is the secret of the upbuilding of the community is not extensive but intensive; its vertical growth in height and depth..... It is

not the case that its intensive increase necessarily involves an extensive. We cannot, therefore, strive for vertical renewal merely to produce greater horizontal extension and a wider audience.... If it [the Church and its mission] is used only as a means of extensive renewal, the internal will at once lose its meaning and power. It can be fulfilled only for its own sake, and then - unplanned and unarranged - it will bear its own fruits. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*.

4. **Embody and Practice Passionate Coolness...** ‘Confronted by the wistful, the half-believing and the seeking, we know what it is to minister to those who relate to the faith of Christ in unexpected ways. We do not write off hesitant and inadequate responses to the gospel. Ours is a church of the smoking flax, of the mixture of wheat and tares. Critics may say that we blunt the edge of the gospel and become Laodicean. We reply that we do not despise the hesitant and half-believing, because the deeper we look into human lives the more often we discern the glowing embers of faith’. [Runcie]. What are liberal churches: open, eager to explore; easier with paradox; but not tribal? Passionate about ... but in a non-exclusive way? Capable of detachment? Passionate coolness? Space to be/ explore? Time? Impartial – but partial? Smoking flax? Laodicean? Tepid and proud? Mild?

That said, the first Christian communities that emerged were marked by difference. When Christians began to understand that their beliefs and practices no longer ‘fitted’ with the worship of the temple and synagogue, they began to meet in their own homes, and perhaps in meeting rooms too, just as Jesus and the disciples had once eaten together in an upper room.

They chose a modest title to describe these gatherings – the Greek word *ekklesia* – which simply means assembly. What does this mean for us? In the Hellenic world of the first century [CE], every major town had its own *ekklesia* – the assembly that dealt with civic matters, law, commerce and the general policing and welfare of the population. Such assemblies would have been run by men, and normally it was only men who could attend.

But Christian assemblies were, from the beginning, different. Women would be present – and they might speak too. Children might be there also. Apart from Jews, there might be Greeks, gentiles and other ethnic or national groups. And, most revolutionary of all, slaves were also admitted. In other words, from the very beginning of Christianity, its assemblies were radically inclusive. Or, put another

way, Christians converted the way that we understand assemblage: their *ekklesia* was for everyone. Belonging to this community (of God) or faith no longer depended on where or to whom you were born; it rested solely on the willingness of the individual, family or other group to be converted, and then to belong. It is also important to remember that for these first ‘converts’ to Christianity, there was no New Testament, no creeds, and very little in the way of church structures. But it still meant leaving one religion for another. So converting to Christianity, for the first generation of believers, was often a costly business; it meant believing that Jesus was the Son of God, and then being filled with the Holy Spirit – but it could also mean persecution and martyrdom. Nonetheless, it was a simple faith, but with a radical message – and it spread like wildfire.

One of my favourite writers, Anne Lamott (*Travelling Mercies*, 2002), has helpfully reduced the Daily Office to its bare essentials. Just one word is needed for Morning Prayer, apparent: ‘whatever’. And just two for Evening Prayer: ‘ah, well...’. I would also add my own version of a Midday Office – and here again, just one word: ‘Help!’. In her book *Travelling Mercies*, Anne Lamott describes seeing a miracle at church, and it is one which rather surprises her. She relates how a member of the congregation, a man named Ken, was dying of AIDS – his partner having already died of the disease. She writes:

There's a woman in the choir named Ranola who is large and beautiful and jovial and black and as devout as can be, who has been a little standoffish toward Ken...She was raised in the South by Baptists who taught her that his way of life – that he – was an abomination...

But Kenny has come to church almost every week for the last year and won almost everyone over. He finally missed a couple of Sundays when he got too weak, and then a month ago he was back, weighing almost no pounds, his face even more lopsided, as if he'd had a stroke. Still, during the prayers of the people, he talked joyously of his life and his decline, of grace and redemption, of how safe and happy he feels these days.

So on this one particular Sunday, for the first hymn, the so-called Morning Hymn, we sang “Jacob's Ladder” which goes, “Every rung goes higher, higher” while ironically Ken couldn't even stand up. But he sang away sitting down, with the hymnal in his lap. And then when it came time for the second hymn, the Fellowship Hymn, we were to sing “His Eye Is on the Sparrow”. The pianist was playing and the whole congregation had risen – only Ken remained seated, holding the hymnal in his lap – and

we began to sing, "Why should I feel discouraged? Why do the shadows fall?" And Ranola watched Ken rather sceptically for a moment, and then her face began to melt and contort like his, and she went to his side and bent down to lift him up – lifted up this white rag doll, this scarecrow. She held him next to her, draped over and against her like a child while they sang. And it pierced me....

The challenge that liberalism always faces is how to be generous, open handed and liberating, acting with integrity in society that is both secular, plural and value-conscious in the spiritual sense. I want to argue that it is at precisely this point that Liberalism is able to work both theologically and socially for the common good in a way that makes sense of Christian faith in today's World.

The argument for a new Liberalism is, in fact an argument for a different kind of form of spiritual architecture for the Church. We now need to see innovation hand in hand with composition - people who inhabit the Church and those outside it need to see that its public face reflects the past (for example tradition), and yet critically offers the best in new paradigms. This kind of vision recognises, as only liberalism can, that the Church does not belong to its members but performs the duty like any other public building or symphony, and is part of the community. Part of its task is functional, part is aesthetic and part is to be a place that is distinct. It has to be textually relevant, mechanistically reliable, organically sound and symbolically rich. And it is a gift to the other.

The whole of this agenda, stemming from the architectural or musicological analogies, recognises that liberalism now finds itself in what I would call a 'post-foundational situation' in which social and ideological reflectivity is vital both to recognise and work with. Foundations remain extremely important here: for the diversity, the continuity, and particularity of society at the turn of the Millennium requires imagination and creativity if there is to be an appropriate theological response. In a society in which many choose to believe in God, yet not belong to a Church (our post-institutional age), the task of Liberalism is to meet this cultural ambiguity with a searching faith at precisely this point. This must be done with education, intellectual challenge, mystery and awe, but above all with a commitment to others who do not share our theological construction of reality. Ultimately, the keeping of Liberal faith is not a possessive exercise that is designed to protect the interests of Church or party. Rather, it must be manifest in a form of giftedness in which the treasure of the Gospel is maintained on a trustee basis for the whole of society.

The prayer then, for all liberals in the third Millennium, is that we will continue to recover and rediscover the graciously liberal God who is the true author of the *Liber*. A free and open society is in the end a manifestation and a mirror of a free and open creator in which the gifts of the Spirit and the fruits of life can blossom and flourish. The totality of Liberalism must not only work for this intellectually, but also pray for it, alongside striving for it socially and politically. True liberalism, therefore, will always be new and renewed, for to collapse into its own tradition would be to lose its sense of vocation. The task for liberals, as ever, remains this: how to can integrate faith with society in a way that makes sense for the present world. And this to be done, please, with passion, enthusiasm and coolness on the one hand. And on the other, with sharp and respectful thinking, wit, irony and humility, always mindful that it as we travel we ‘arrive’, yet the destination remains just beyond our horizons. I more or less started with a parable, and I hope you won’t mind if I conclude in the same way.

Jesus told another parable. There was a woman who lived on her own. She had no neighbours or close friends, but there was an old man who lived half a mile away. The woman had a house and a garden, and at the foot of a garden, she had two apple trees that were her pride and joy. Once she was called away to see a sick relative. She gave the keys of the house to the old man, and asked him to check the house, but he was too infirm to tend the garden. She thought she would be away for a few days, but she was in fact gone for a few years.

From far away she heard of drought and storms, and she feared the worst. But when she did get home, things were pretty well as she had left them. She went into the garden, which was very overgrown. But the apple trees were still there, and in full bloom. She drank it all in, and her heart filled with delight and thanks. Then she went to the tool shed, got out her pruners, went to the apple trees, and started to cut away at the dead wood. And she thought of the time when there would apples for herself and for her neighbour. (From Bill Countryman, *The Truth About Love: Reintroducing the Good News*, SPCK, 1993, p.86).

As I said, it is all about gift. My prayer, then, is this.

From the arrogance that thinks it has all truth
from the laziness that settles for half-truths
from the cowardice that fears new truth
Good Lord, deliver us.

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