

Affirming Liberalism

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Woolly liberalism

When he was Home Secretary Charles Clarke faced criticisms that he was being too soft on terrorism and crime. In response he remarked with less than a perfect command of English grammar: 'I don't like liberals. I am not soft. I am neither woolly or liberal or a woolly liberal. I have never been a liberal in my life. I don't like liberal with a capital L or a small l.'¹ Being a soft woolly liberal is not considered one of the great twenty-first century virtues, especially for a Home Secretary facing the perceived threat of terrorism. And being a woolly liberal in religious matters is probably the greatest insult of all. Some work hard to avoid the accusation. For instance, Paul Avis, Secretary for Ecumenical Affairs for the Church of England, in arguing for the importance of the good liberal virtues of dialogue and openness, nevertheless stresses that what he means is not 'a woolly liberal sell-out' but 'quite the reverse'. He goes on:

The Gospel, rather than the world, sets the agenda. Openness is an economy for the sake of mission. I do not overlook the need for a strong centre of identity in the Church, for clarity of belief as far as this is possible, for a message with a gospel cutting-edge.²

On this model, the world, while something that clearly has to be engaged with and listened to, is ultimately to be sliced through with a relatively clear set of beliefs which are presumably quite distinct from those of the world. The world, it would seem, is opposed to the Gospel.

This sort of language, even when stated in this benign and apparently unthreatening way, provides ammunition for the critics of religion. With its set of certainties and crusading zeal (admittedly somewhat moderated), Christianity is simply not capable of being liberal and tolerant. This means that it would be far better for religious people – together with their unwitting defenders who peddle the multiculturalist agenda – to own up to the real character of religion, which is about hatred of difference and promotion of utter certainty and absolute obedience. Writing in *The Observer* a few days before 9/11, the philosopher, A. C. Grayling, remarked:

¹ Reported in *The Independent* (3 September 2005).

² Paul Avis, *A Church Drawing Near: Spirituality and Mission in a Post-Christian Culture* (London: Continuum, 2003), p. 35.

It is a woolly liberal hope that all religions can be viewed as worshipping the same deity, only in different ways; but this is a nonsense, as shown by the most cursory comparison of teachings, interpretations, moral requirements, creation myths and eschatologies, in all of which the major religions differ and frequently contradict each other. History shows how clearly the religions themselves grasped this; the motivation for Christianity's hundreds of years of crusades against Islam, pogroms against Jews, and inquisitions against heretics, was the desire to expunge heterodoxy and 'infidelity', or at least to effect forcible compliance with prevailing orthodoxy. Islam's various jihads and fatwahs had and have the same aim, and it spread half way around the world by conquest and the sword.³

There is no space here for liberal interpretation. Instead the true colours of all religion are revealed in their gruesome splendour.

At the same time, some less vitriolic critics of religion just do not see the point of being liberal in religion. Indeed they see the decline of anything other than sectarian forms of religion with their absolute necessities as inevitable. Liberal religion might have served an important function in liberating those who had been brought up in authoritarian versions of religion, but it could hardly survive into the future. As the sociologist, Steve Bruce writes:

Liberal theology was both an endorsement and an encouragement of social change. Liberal theologians might dress it up in fancy formulations but essentially they accepted a free-for-all which helped hasten the decline of religion. Very specific liberal projects, such as the re-writing of the faith to make it accord with the presuppositions of 'modern man', were a dismal failure.⁴

Bruce lists a number of factors which have led to the decline and failure of liberal religion – first, an over-emphasis on the goodness of people who consequently do not really need to be saved; secondly, a loss of a sense of obedience; and finally, a sense of the triumph of individualism in religion, so that what is really important is what we get out of religion. All this makes it very difficult to transmit liberal religion to the next generation. Instead, as free individuals, they should simply decide for themselves, and they are hardly likely to opt for authoritarianism. 'Liberal religion,' Bruce concludes, 'is weak because epistemological individualism makes it hard to develop consensus; reduces individual commitment; makes it hard to preserve the belief system from mutation; and weakens the will to reproduce the belief

³ A. C. Grayling, 'Keep God out of Public Affairs' in *The Observer* (12 August 2001) at: http://observer.guardian.co.uk/comment/story/0,,535543,00.html#article_continue

⁴ Steve Bruce, 'The Problems of a Liberal Religion', in Mark D. Chapman (ed.), *The Future of Liberal Theology* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002, pp. 221-41, here p. 233. See also, *Religion in the Modern World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 85-91.

system.’⁵ The only sort of religion that can resist this process, he maintains, is that which can command coercion – in other words the religion of the sect or of an authoritarian church.

Prophetic liberalism

Those of us who have an interest in the survival of a tolerant and liberal approach to Christianity into the future need to be address these critiques, which is why I want to begin with the bold claim that a certain amount of woolly liberalism is necessary for the functioning of a healthy Christianity. This is something that needs to be re-asserted in the contemporary church, particularly when there are so many who would like to confine Christianity solely to its more dogmatic and sectarian forms. And I would contend that the reason for this is extraordinarily simple and uncontentious: whatever else religion might be it is a human practice open to all the distortions of human sin which means it simply demands to be scrutinised and criticised. That is something that would be understood by the Hebrew prophets and virtually every reformer since. For the greater glory of God there is thus a responsibility to open up our practices and beliefs to critical scrutiny. This, I think, is where a dose of liberalism becomes necessary for all Christians. Liberalism is consequently far more an attitude of mind than a church party, and it can even look prophetic.

Now, I would not want to belong to anything called a liberal party in the church. My religion is really quite traditional Anglo-Catholic, but my disposition and attitude is liberal. It doesn't take much to reveal the ironies, hypocrisies and idolatries of Anglo-Catholicism. But at the same time the continued vitality of religion requires that it be practised, cherished and loved and approached with reverence and awe. This means that the liberal will have a love/hate relationship with the religion that he or she professes. Even Karl Barth, not usually regarded as a liberal theologian, understood this process. He likens the need for constant critical vigilance to a rather vertiginous walk along a mountain ridge:

On the narrow ridge of rock one can only walk: if one attempts to stand still one will fall either to the right or to the left, but fall one must. There remains only to keep walking – an appalling performance for those who are not free from dizziness – looking from one side to the other, from positive to negative, and from negative to positive. Our task is to interpret the Yes by the No and the No by the Yes, without delaying for more than a moment in either a fixed yes or a fixed no.⁶

⁵ ‘The Problems of a Liberal Religion’, p. 236.

⁶ ‘The Word of God and the Task of Ministry’, in *The Word of God and the Word of Man* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1928), pp. 206-7.

Liberalism is thus more an attitude of mind, a process of engagement with living religion, than a form of religion itself. This means – and here I am different from some who label themselves ‘liberal’ – that sectarian and dogmatic varieties of Christianity have a crucial place, even within the Church of England. These types can be persuasive and convincing, especially in the process of evangelism – but they need to be carefully circumscribed and scrutinised lest they become idols which define themselves as bounded systems over and against others. That was precisely what Barth was trying to do with the religion of his own upbringing. And that is where a liberal disposition comes in.

As a disposition and a way of engaging with religion, then, liberalism is not a church party like the others – there was no revival that led to liberal Anglicanism, and there never was a straightforward set of beliefs and practices associated with liberal religion. Those of a liberal disposition, for instance, took different sides in the ritualist controversies. This is hardly surprising since methodological scepticism and critical engagement do not necessarily favour a particular set of practices. Instead the liberal disposition will subject the diverse practices of all types of religion to critical assessment and appraisal. This means that there will be many different varieties of liberalism as liberals subject the various types of religion to scrutiny. Indeed almost from its inception, members of the Church of England across its traditions have seen it as their job to ask the difficult questions about the religion they were professing. And in the last 150 years or so most Anglican ‘liberals’ have used the term as a description of a way of approaching their particular variety of the Anglican religion – there were ‘liberal catholics’ (a term pioneered by Charles Gore) and ‘liberal evangelicals’ (a movement associated with Vernon Storr) and even ‘liberal’ radicals. And it is also obviously true that there were also many illiberal practitioners of all these forms of religion.

Consequently, with Alec Vidler, I would claim that ‘in the economy of the Church there is a need for both types’ of religion – ‘the unreasonably confident and the astringently sceptical; both have their indispensable contribution to make to the mission and message of a church’.⁷ And that is certainly true for me: I am by nature a man of a liberal and sceptical turn of mind, and I am quite well aware that such an attitude is not likely to appeal to the majority. Nevertheless I would want to contend that the ‘unreasonably confident’ need to have somebody to turn to who is happy to point to idolatry or to criticise any tendencies to latch onto voguish ideologies and prevalent moods. The ‘perennial office of the liberal in the Church and in society’, writes Vidler, ‘is to be critical and astringently so ... He must be

impartial in his criticism, which is to say that the formation of a liberal party in the Church is a double contradiction in terms. Liberals will always be in a minority. Their role is a subordinate, but a salutary, and antiseptic or aperient, one'.⁸ This means that sometimes the liberal vocation will be to purge the constipated religion of the parties; at other times it will be to point to complexity and to obfuscate and to confuse. Some things just aren't that simple; and it can be important to challenge false simplicity. This may mean disclosing sillinesses and being far from certain, which is why liberalism gets labelled woolly. Consequently, whatever variety of religion one has (and for an Anglican that religion might be catholic, or evangelical, or charismatic, or middle of the road, and all points in between), it needs an injection of astringent liberalism if it is to function healthily. If that is the case then it might be said that there really is such a thing as a liberal prophet. We do not so much need another party, as people of a liberal disposition in every party.⁹

The Broad Churchmen

There are many who find this whole approach highly dubious. To be sceptical in religion and to adopt a critical stance will be to distrust the truth disclosed through revelation and instead will lead to a vague universalism. This is what Cardinal Newman wrote late in his life about the failings of the liberalism which he had reacted against in the early years of the Oxford Movement:

Liberalism in religion is the doctrine that there is no positive truth in religion, but that one creed is as good as another. ... It is inconsistent with any recognition of any religion as *true*. It teaches that all are to be tolerated, for all are matters of opinion. Revealed religion is not a truth, but a sentiment or a taste; not an objective fact, not miraculous; and it is the right of each individual to make it say just what strikes his fancy. Devotion is not necessarily founded on faith. Men may go to Protestant Churches and to Catholic, may get good from both and belong to neither. They may fraternise together in spiritual thoughts and feelings, without having any views at all of doctrines in common, or seeing the need of them. Since, then, religion is so personal a peculiarity and so private a possession, we must of necessity ignore it in the intercourse of man with man. If a man puts on a new religion every morning, what is

⁷ Alec Vidler, *Essays in Liberality* (London: SCM Press, 1957), p. 27.

⁸ *Essays in Liberality*, p. 25.

⁹ In saying this I want to differentiate the sort of liberalism I have in mind from other forms of liberalism which have been more partisan and dogmatic in their expression. Many critics (including most obviously Karl Barth) have seen liberalism and liberal theology as little more than an apology for the inevitability of progress, which has obviously been shattered by so many of the cataclysmic events of the last hundred years. Herbert Spencer's words ring rather hollow: 'Progress is not an accident, but a necessity. Surely must evil and immorality disappear; surely must man become perfect' (Herbert Spencer, *Social Statics* (1892) (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 32).

that to you? It is as impertinent to think about a man's religion as about his sources of income or his management of his family. Religion is in no sense the bond of society.¹⁰

In part, I think, Newman is accurate in his understanding of liberalism in religion. It is a way of approaching truth that does not confine it to the Church. This means that, according to Newman, it has no space for positive revelation, and consequently it is bound to be a private matter and to lose its social impact. For Newman faith requires far more – first a belief in the supernatural foundations of the church and its revelation, and secondly, obedience to her teachings. But where Newman misrepresented liberals in religion is in his claim that they deny ‘positive truth in religion’. What he failed to perceive is that liberalism is a second-order activity where the truth of revealed religion is tested as faith seeks understanding. For this to happen the religious system cannot contain the whole of the truth; at the very least – and this is surely at the heart of a doctrine of sin – it must point to the limited nature and fallibility of human knowledge even in religious matters.

Let me illustrate this by looking at some of Newman's contemporaries, who are sometimes labelled liberals, but who were more usually designated Broad Church. This was a term first used by A. P. Stanley in a sermon in 1847 where he claimed the Church of England was broad, rather than either High or Low Church. Later, in his famous essay ‘Church Parties’, published in the *Edinburgh Review* of 1853,¹¹ W. J. Conybeare used the term to designate a third party alongside evangelicals and Anglo-Catholics, although he recognised the difficulty of the label. Friends tended to use Moderate or Catholic and detractors called them Latitudinarian or indifferent. In many ways the Broad Churchmen adopted a straightforward and traditional form of Anglicanism, but they also saw the importance of engaging critically with that very tradition. Truth was regarded as resting beyond the confines of any worldly system, and all people had the God-given capacity to pursue this truth, unfettered by any absolutist claims of the past. Contrary to Newman's claim, there was positive truth in religion, but that truth was one and the same truth that could be also be found in the highest achievements of human beings through the centuries. Christianity was thus not *sui generis* but was part of a shared human quest for truth. Nevertheless nothing could contain the whole of truth, which was ultimately to be found only with God.

¹⁰ See Wilfrid Ward, *The Life of John Henry Cardinal Newman* (London: Longmans, 1913), 2 Vols, Vol. 2, p. 460.

¹¹ New edition edited by Arthur Burns in ‘Church Parties’ in Stephen Taylor (ed), *An Anglican Miscellany* (Church of England Record Society 7) (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1999), pp. 213-385.

For the Broad Churchmen, the Christian vocation was principally to be human, a vocation which itself required a discipline and method if it was to be successfully pursued. The call to education in the sense of cultivation of the higher instincts is in many ways the most characteristic feature of mid-Victorian religious life – and it is this aspect that shaped the Broad Church approach to Christianity more than anything else. The most important figure in this movement is Thomas Arnold (1795-1842), headmaster of Rugby from 1828 and the most influential educationalist of his generation. Christianity, he held, was the fundamental moral discipline required to approach life with a set of ideals and with a mind cultivated by higher ends. In a famous letter to John Tucker, Arnold wrote:

My object will be, if possible, to form Christian men, for Christian boys I can scarcely hope to make; I mean that, from the natural imperfect state of boyhood, they are not susceptible of Christian principles in their full development upon their practice, and I suspect that a low standard of morals in many respects must be tolerated amongst them, as it was on a larger scale in what I consider the boyhood of the human race.¹²

Education was about the formation of the Christian character which was able to think for itself. In this way the school would function as a microcosm of the great Christian task of the education of the human race.¹³ In this task religion occupied a central place. Dean Stanley wrote about Thomas Arnold's understanding of religion, claiming that, for Arnold,

religion – the relation of the soul to God – depends on our own moral and spiritual characters. [Arnold] made us understand that the only thing for which God supremely cares, the only thing that God supremely loves, is goodness – that the only thing which is supremely hateful to God is wickedness. All other things are useful, beautiful in their several ways. All forms, ordinances, means of instruction, means of amusement, have their place in our lives. But religion, the true religion of Jesus Christ, consists in that which makes us wiser and better, more truthful, more loving, more tender, more considerate, more pure. Therefore in his view, there was no place or time from which religion is shut out – there is no place or time where we cannot be serving God by serving our fellow creatures.¹⁴

For Arnold, then, religion was about the cultivation of a habit with which to approach the whole of life so that good was pursued and evil avoided. This meant that the church was not to be understood as a distinctly religious society, but was instead 'a society for the purpose of making men like Christ, – earth like heaven, – the kingdoms of the world the kingdom of Christ.' The church was something that should pervade everything and could never be

¹² A. P. Stanley, *The Life and Correspondence of Thomas Arnold* (London: John Murray, 1897), 2 Vols, Vol. 1, p. 71.

¹³ On this, David Newsome, *Godliness and Good Learning* (London: John Murray, 1961).

¹⁴ R. E. Prothero, *Life of Dean Stanley* (London: John Murray, 1893), 2 Vols, Vol. 2, p. 455.

regarded simply as ‘an institution for religious instruction and religious worship’. This would rob it ‘of its life and universality, making it an affair of the clergy, not of people – of preaching and ceremonies, not of living – of Sundays and synagogues, instead of all days and all places, houses, streets, towns and country’.¹⁵ Arnold was working with a unified vision of nation and church as part of an all-embracing whole, or what he called ‘the “idea” of the Edward the Sixth Reformers’.¹⁶

Arnold, like Samuel Taylor Coleridge before him, regarded Christianity fundamentally as a life rather than a set of doctrines,¹⁷ but a mature life which was disciplined by what Coleridge called ‘manly energy’.¹⁸ The cultivation of what to future generations might have been considered an effete and perhaps even effeminate form of manliness is well expressed by B. F. Westcott, the future bishop of Durham, and one of the greatest New Testament scholars of his generation. In 1849 he wrote to his future wife:

You have often heard my views of life, yet hear them once again ... To live is not to be gay or idle or restless. Frivolity, inactivity, and aimlessness seem equally remote from the true idea of living. I should say that we live only so far as we cultivate all our faculties, and improve all our advantages for God’s glory. The means of living then will be our own endowments, whether of talent or influence; the aim of living, the good of man; the motive of living, the love of God.¹⁹

For Westcott, as for Arnold, the conception of truth is not restricted to the church – instead all faculties are to be improved for the glory of God.

Frederick Temple

A similar approach can be glimpsed in the work of Frederick Temple (1821-1902), headmaster of Rugby from 1850, who went on to become Archbishop of Canterbury. He contributed an essay entitled ‘The Education of the World’ to a collected volume published in February 1860 called *Essays and Reviews*.²⁰ This book of seven essays by men mainly with Oxford connections proved to be one of the most controversial books of theology published in the nineteenth century. Temple’s essay itself was probably the least controversial. Basil

¹⁵ Stanley, *Life of Arnold*, Vol. 2, p. 13.

¹⁶ Stanley, *Life of Arnold*, Vol. 2, p. 12.

¹⁷ *Biographia Literaria* (1817), p. 212.

¹⁸ *Aids to Reflection*, aphorism XII.

¹⁹ Arthur Westcott, *Life and Letters of Brooke Foss of Westcott* (London: Macmillan, 1903), 2 Vols, Vol. 1, p. 145.

²⁰ References to the tenth edition (London: Longmans, 1862).

Willey thought that 'it will stir no emotion in a modern reader save one of boredom'.²¹ Nevertheless, it offers a good example of Broad Church theology. Temple's contribution was based on the supposed and rather far-fetched analogy between the education of the individual and the life of the human race. In both cases there were three stages: childhood corresponded to the period before our Lord's coming; youth and early manhood to our Lord's period on earth; and full manhood corresponded to the period which followed after Christianity was young. Thus even before Christ, the history of the world was one of increasing maturity, although for Temple no stage can ever match the new stage initiated by Christ. He outlines four different aspects of human development. The Hebrews, he claims, 'may be said to have disciplined the human conscience, Rome the Human Will, Greece the reason and taste, Asia the spiritual imagination'.²²

Human beings move on from the necessary rules of childhood (analogous to the Law of the Old Testament) to a situation where instead of mere obedience they begin to exercise their Reason, even though they will constantly falter. Yet as they mature, so they increase in discipline, not by returning to a childish unthinking legalism, but rather to a discipline based on thinking things through. Criticism thereby becomes a religious duty as human beings examine what Temple calls the 'really valuable principles' underpinning their practical life. He writes:

To learn toleration well and really, to let it become, not a philosophical tenet, but a practical principle, to join with real religiousness of life and character, it is absolutely necessary that it should break in upon the mind by slow and steady degrees, and that at every point its right to go further should be disputed, and so forced to logical proof ... the slowness of [the] progress [of such toleration] gives time to disentangle from dogmatism the really valuable principles and sentiments which have been mixed up and entwined in it, and to unite toleration, not with indifference and worldliness, but with spiritual truth and religiousness of life.²³

Growing up is thus about disentangling the truth from its entrapment in dogmatism, and that requires a respectful and cautious liberal disposition.

Temple claimed that even when applied to the Bible and the truths of the Christian faith this liberal method would not necessarily lead to despair. Indeed, the process of testing might make faith far more secure:

²¹ Basil Willey, *More Nineteenth Century Studies: A Group of Honest Doubters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956), p. 141.

²² *Essays and Reviews*, p. 23.

²³ *Essays and Reviews*, pp. 55-6.

The substance of the teaching which we derive from the Bible will not really be affected by anything of this sort. While its hold upon the minds of believers, and its power to stir the depths of the spirit of man, however much weakened at first, must be immeasurably strengthened in the end, by clearing away any blunders which may have been fastened on it by human interpretation.²⁴

The goal of religion is thus to clear away the human blunders that have served to conceal the truth – in different language it is about freeing the Word of God from the words of men. This means that the study of the Bible can be no different in kind from any other earnest truth-seeking intellectual pursuit:

Not only in the exercise of religious truth, but in all exercise of the intellectual powers, we have no right to stop short of any limit but that which nature, that is, the decree of the Creator, has imposed on us. ... If we have made mistakes, careful study may teach us better. If we have quarrelled about works, the enlightenment of the understanding is the best means to show us our folly.²⁵

To be liberal was to be an adult and to recognise that God had granted to us the powers of criticism, '[f]or,' Temple writes, 'we are now men, governed by principles, if governed at all, and cannot rely any longer on the impulses of youth or the discipline of childhood'.²⁶ Criticism was the sign of human maturity and human beings ought to recognise that they could not return to some ironclad truth beyond the possibility of critique without at the same time returning to the naïvety of childhood.

In the controversies that followed the publication of *Essays and Reviews*, Temple wrote to his friend, A. C. Tait, Bishop of London (and Arnold's successor as headmaster of Rugby) to emphasise this point. The critical study of the Bible, he wrote,

imperatively demands freedom for its conditions. To tell a man to study, and yet bid him, under heavy penalties, come to the same conclusions with those who have not studied, is to mock him. If the conclusions are prescribed, the study is precluded.

Freedom plainly implies the widest possible toleration.²⁷

Critical study, which is the mark of human maturity, forces tolerance on the church; and without it ignorance would continue. Temple goes on:

²⁴ *Essays and Reviews*, p. 57.

²⁵ *Essays and Reviews*, pp. 57-8.

²⁶ *Essays and Reviews*, p. 58.

²⁷ 25 Feb 1861, cited in William Benham, *Life of Archibald Campbell Tait* (London: Macmillan, 1891), 2 Vols, here Vol. I, p. 291.

I know what can be said against a wide toleration. It may be said that it would issue in wild and extravagant speculations. So it would, in a few instances. But you know perfectly well that there is not the most distant chance of the great mass of sober Englishmen running into anything of the sort. If therefore you tolerate extreme opinions, their very existence in the Church is a guarantee that the moderate opinions are held from conviction, not from fear of consequences. But if you drive extreme men out of the ministry, the inevitable result is to poison the minds of the laity with the suspicion that the clergymen who remain teach what they do, not because they believe it, but because they fear the fate of their brethren.

I for one joined in writing this book in the hope of breaking through that mischievous reticence which, go where I would, I perpetually found destroying the truthfulness of religion. I wished to encourage men to speak out. I believed that many doubts and difficulties only lived because they were hunted into the dark, and would die in the light.

I believed that all opinions of the sort contained in the book would be better if tolerated and discussed, than if censored and maintained in secret. And though there was much error mixed up in these opinions, yet certainly not more than in what was allowed, and even encouraged. What can be a grosser superstition than the theory of literal inspiration? But because that has a regular footing it is to be treated as a good man's mistake, while the courage to speak the truth about the first chapter of the Book of Genesis is a wanton piece of wickedness. A wide toleration would in time set all these matters in their true relation; for if neology has strong defenders, certainly the commonly received opinions have no lack of able men to maintain them.²⁸

For Temple, the quest for truth could not be restrained without dire consequences for intellectual honesty and for an intelligent ministry. This required a wide toleration, even of extremes, since only then would more moderate men begin to think issues through. Indeed without this approach the church would be guilty of hypocrisy. This meant that the veils of secrecy and clerical control had to be removed, and investigation had to be carried out in the open.

Benjamin Jowett, Regius Professor of Greek at Oxford, and shortly afterwards Master of Balliol, whose essay in the volume, entitled 'On the Interpretation of Scripture',²⁹ was the longest and probably the most important, wrote to A. P. Stanley about the purpose of the book. The object of the essayists, he claimed, was to liberate the truth,

to say what we think freely within the limits of the Church of England. ... We do not wish anything rash, or irritating to the public or the University, but we are determined not to submit to this abominable system of terrorism, which prevents the statement of the plainest facts, and makes true theology or theological education impossible.³⁰

As so many of those who entered into the controversy noted, what was at issue was the nature of truth, and precisely how that truth was to be understood and circumscribed. The defenders

²⁸ *Essays and Reviews*, p. 292.

²⁹ In *Essays and Reviews*, pp. 399-527.

³⁰ E. Abbott and L. Campbell, *The Life and Letters of Benjamin Jowett* (1897), Vol. 1, p. 275.

of orthodoxy who restricted critical thought, Stanley held, were the real terrorists. Most churchmen, however, thought otherwise. For instance, Samuel Wilberforce, Bishop of Oxford, noted in the *Quarterly Review* that he could not see how the writers could ‘with moral honesty maintain their posts as clergymen in the Established Church’.³¹ A letter of censure from nearly all the English and Welsh bishops followed soon after publication.³² Huge petitions were gathered from Evangelicals and Anglo-Catholics in a rare moment of common endeavour. A court case dragged on for a number of years, finishing in 1864 with relatively indecisive conclusions which did not silence the authors permanently.³³ Pusey, never prone to understatement, thought that the crisis provoked by *Essays and Reviews* and the failure of the courts to censure the writers was ‘a struggle for the life and death of the Church of England’.³⁴ ‘Without some combined effort to repudiate the Judgment,’ he wrote to Wilberforce, ‘the Church of England will be destroyed or will become the destroyer of souls.’³⁵ But the Church of England survived, and much of what the authors had written soon became acceptable even for clergy to hold. Temple himself was consecrated Bishop of Exeter amid controversy, but went on to become Archbishop of Canterbury with no objections except to his advanced age.

Conclusion

The point of this lengthy excursion into Victorian theology is not primarily to defend the Broad Churchmen. After all, theirs was often a rather elitist and nationalist understanding of Christianity. Instead I want to stress the role of critical thought in strengthening religion through testing: very few liberals ever sought to create a new form of religion. Instead virtually all tried to reinforce the credibility of the brand of religion through which they experienced the power and beauty of God. There were few who tried to remove this essentially irrational core which was the foundation of religious practice and the Christian life and to replace it with some kind of rationalist faith. As Temple shows, the contention of most Broad Churchmen was that religion is strengthened through the activity of critical thought.

³¹ *Quarterly Review* (January, 1861), p. 302.

³² *Life of Tait*, Vol. 1, pp. 282-3.

³³ On this see Ieuan Ellis, *Seven against Christ: A Study of Essays and Reviews* (Leiden: Brill, 1980); and Josef L. Altholz, *Anatomy of a Controversy: The Debate over Essays & Reviews* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1994).

³⁴ Pusey to Stanley, 23 February 1864, in H. P. Liddon, *The Life of E. B. Pusey* (London: Longmans, 1897), 4 Vols, Vol. 4, p. 63.

³⁵ Pusey to Wilberforce, 13 February 1864, in Liddon, Vol. 4, p. 52.

Or, in the words of St Paul: ‘When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became a man, I gave up childish ways’ (1 Cor. 13.11).

Of course some people who start to think things through will jettison their faith, but for many others the opposite will prove true: faith will be strengthened through testing. The irrational heart of faith in God will rest on more secure foundations, but the detritus of the centuries will begin to be cleared away, even though we might well place new obstacles in the way. This process of testing will undoubtedly shake certainties – and things may even become woolly – but that is often a good thing. After all, this side of eternity we ‘see in a mirror dimly’ (1 Cor. 13.12). Things that are dim are usually fuzzy and unclear, which is why critical thought ends up so woolly. As Samuel Wilberforce said of *Essays and Reviews*: trying to understand what the authors meant was like ‘grasping at a nebulosity or seizing upon a sepia’.³⁶ But it seems to me that it is an inevitable part of the human condition. This means that those of a liberal disposition can carry on being religious; they can carry on doing those strange religious things which allow them to glimpse something of the glory of God. But as they do so, humility, reticence and caution will be their typical demeanour. As with so many of the mystics, the light will often be shrouded in mist, and the colour of religion may well be the colour of an English sky – a shade of grey that can last for months at a time.

Liberals live in a symbiotic but often uneasy relationship with others who share their faith. But they need to be tolerated lest people forget to ask the questions and lose sight of their fallibility. In the wake of *Essays and Reviews* Bishop Tait expressed his own sense of exasperation.

The folly of the publication of *Essays and Reviews*, [has] ... so effectually frightened the clergy that I think there is scarcely a Bishop on the Bench, ... that is not useless for the purpose of preventing the widespread alienation of intelligent men. ... Meanwhile I feel my own vocation clear, greatly as I sympathise with the Evangelicals, not to allow them to tyrannise over the Broad Churchmen; and to resist that tendency which is at present strong in them to coalesce with the High Church party for the mere purpose of exterminating those against whom the cry is now loudest. ... What is wanted is a deeply religious liberal party, and almost all who might have formed it have, in the alarm, deserted. ... The great evil is that the liberals are deficient in religion, and the religious are deficient in liberality. Let us pray for an outpouring of the very Spirit of Truth.³⁷

It is not clear to me that things have changed. Deeply religious liberals are still needed – and they exist across the parties of the Church of England. In a crowded church political

³⁶ Cited in Standish Meacham, *Lord Bishop: The Life of Samuel Wilberforce: 1805–1873* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), p. 221.

landscape there does not seem to me to be space for another party, but instead it is the responsibility of all those who approach Christianity with that sense of critical enquiry and testing to return to their churches of whatever hue and to prod and disturb and assist in the process of human maturing – so that all Christians can begin to put away childish things. That is why I am a liberal Catholic and not just a liberal. Liberals in their different churches will not necessarily have an easy ride – they may even disturb the certainties of those churches as they challenge them to think things through. But they will also assist those churches in their quest to see God face to face, and to recognize the distortions that emerge as we gaze on God through the scaly eyes of human sin, distortions that often masquerade as divine certainty.

There is thus something to affirm in liberalism, not as a new church party, but as a kind of para-church movement, living off the wider religious body, yet helping that body to grow freely. There is, however, little point in being liberal in the church unless one is deeply religious. And if we are serious about that, we have to face up to the fact that being liberals who are not deficient in religion will be a struggle and it may well meet with conflict, but it remains vital for the future of a vibrant intellectually-credible Christianity, which seeks for God among the cluttered world of human certainties. This means, as Vidler wrote:

The liberal vocation, faithfully exercised, is not only humbling but also reconciling. It has the effect of showing that no party or school of thought or phase of orthodoxy is ever as right as its protagonists are inclined to suppose, and that men, including Christian men, have much more in common both of frailty and strength, both of falsehood and truth, than the makers of systems and sects acknowledge.³⁸

This task is an enormous responsibility but it is also exciting and motivating. Indeed it is nothing short of what Dr Pusey called ‘a struggle for the life and death of the Church of England’. And it may even be the case that the liberal vocation might have something to contribute to politics as well (despite what Charles Clarke might have said) – but that is for another time.

³⁷ *Life of Tait*, Vol. 1, p. 325.

³⁸ Vidler, *Essays in Liberalism*, p. 26.