

**Why the Future Belongs to Liberal Faith,  
by Canon Professor Keith Ward**

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**Affirming Liberalism**

I want to stress that I am talking about liberal faith, not just liberalism in general, but rather what it is to have a definite Christian faith and to be liberal in holding that faith. I am going to be arguing that Christianity is essentially liberal in one or more of the senses in which I am going to define it. I am going to make seven points about liberalism, outlining seven characteristics of a liberal faith, not all of which everybody might want to accept, though at least one of them will be accepted by everybody, I suspect. So everyone is liberal in one sense, and that may be quite an important fact, since it means that no-one can simply be opposed to being 'liberal', just as such.

First I want to say something about the nature of religious faith. I think that if you look at all the main religious traditions of the world you will find that they all do have something in common. They affirm that there is a reality - the most fundamental reality of all - which has the nature of consciousness, wisdom, intelligence, bliss, compassion and hope; and that is called by some of us 'God'. Others such as Buddhists do not call it God, but they certainly believe in a fundamental reality - *Nirvana* - which has the nature of consciousness and bliss. This reality not only exists, but it is possible for us to have a conscious relationship with it, which will transform our lives so that we mediate its reality in our world.

For me that is religion. There is a fundamental religious commitment in a situation where there is no absolute theoretical certainty. You commit yourself absolutely to the reality of one being of consciousness, bliss and compassion and you commit yourself to a life of formation that will lead you to be conscious of that being and be able to mediate it through your life. That is religion in general, and I find a great commonality between world faiths in that general sense.

When you consider Christianity, the ultimate spiritual reality is of course mediated through the person of Jesus. I think the person of Jesus reveals God - that ultimate conscious reality - in a new way, as a being of unlimited love and reconciliation, and that revelation also carries on into the life of the Church through the Holy Spirit. That commitment becomes more defined by being a commitment to what is revealed of God in the person of Jesus, and then by recognition of what happens in our lives as we open ourselves to the Holy Spirit. To me that is an absolute irrevocable commitment, but it is not a theoretical certainty. Kierkegaard says that, "faith is an objective uncertainty held fast in passionate inwardness". Most of life is like that, or at least it ought to be. It is rather like getting married: you make a passionate commitment with a bit of theoretical uncertainty! Faith is that kind of personal commitment, and a very important part of faith is that it is like a commitment of life made in response to a personal encounter. I do not want to make God too small, too much like a human person. But I do want to say that in Christ we are able to relate to the supreme spiritual reality underlying the universe in a very personal way. So that is the faith

dimension, and I think it is perfectly possible to have an absolute practical commitment when you cannot say you are theoretically certain.

What I have said is already slightly liberal, since people who are very illiberal would insist on theoretical certainty when such a certainty is not possible. That is almost a definition of an illiberal person; they claim to be certain of something when no theoretical certainty is possible. Also, people with illiberal views may say that only the Christian faith is a way to God, and that all other religions are false, and should be ignored. A more liberal view would expect that the Christian God of unlimited love desires all to be saved (1 Timothy 2, 3), and therefore God must be present and active throughout the whole world in some way. Further, the great religions sincerely seek to worship God or to find supreme spiritual reality, so God will surely make the divine known to them in some way. Christianity may be the fullness of truth, or Christian faith may be complete in ways that traditions that do not believe in God, for example, are not. But a liberal view will see Jesus as formed within a Jewish tradition – so Judaism is a non-Christian religion within which God is at work - and as part of a wider global searching for God. Knowledge of that wider global tradition may help to put out Christian faith in perspective. In any case, we can hardly know whether or not God is at work in other religions without learning a great deal about them. I believe that such a study will disclose God at work throughout the world, seeking to bring people closer to knowledge of God. You can believe that, while believing that God has disclosed the divine nature and purpose in a special and distinctive way in Jesus and the Church.

So you are already liberal, in one sense, if you admit that your own religious beliefs, especially when you get down to details, are far from theoretically certain, and if you are prepared to find disclosures of God in many non-Christian traditions. Many wise and conscientious people disagree with you, after all, and you may even have changed your own views over the years. So you have to be a little bit humble about the absolute truth of your own religious views. You have to accept that other people may be right – though obviously you do not think they are. You certainly have to accept that other people have a right to their own religious opinions, and you will be wise to think that you might even learn a lot from them.

Liberals respect difference; we expect there to be difference, and we do not claim to be infallible; so it seems that human diversity is very important, and there is surely something to be learned from it. However the fact diversity does not undermine your own personal commitment - and that is very important to remember.

**1.** The first point of the seven I want to make about a liberal faith is very specifically Christian. It may be contentious among Christians, but I believe it very strongly. It is that a fundamental fact of the Christian faith is freedom from the absolute authority of any written text. This is a fundamental and biblical Christian principle. The reason I say this is because Paul (or whoever wrote Ephesians chapter 2 verse 15) said it first. The writer makes this point as clear as you can get; "Christ has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances."

What is the Law? It is the Torah - everything written down from Genesis to Deuteronomy - and also the traditional Jewish material in the Talmud, developing the 613 laws. The astonishing statement is that Christ has abolished all of it, and not just some of it.

Some people say that he has abolished simply the parts we do not like; the sections about stoning the Amalekites, and stoning your own children if they get drunk, (something which Richard Dawkins is very fond of quoting!). However Jesus

abolishes not just those parts but also the parts we do approve of, like: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and love your neighbour as yourself;' - they are all abolished!

This statement, though it is thoroughly Biblical, is so astonishing that it can easily give rise to misunderstandings. It does not mean that you can simply give up the Old Testament or the moral rules that Paul is fond of quoting from time to time. God has spoken, and still speaks, through the Bible, and we cannot understand Jesus at all without knowing about the Torah, the Biblical law. It has much to teach us. But it does not provide us with a set of clear rules that we must simply obey as they stand, because they are written in the Bible.

To put it briefly, for a Christian all Biblical rules must be assessed by comparing them with the life and teaching of Jesus. Jesus has become our Torah. 'Christ is the end of the law' (Romans 10, 4), in that he both brings it to an end as a set of binding rules and also fulfils it in his own person. The fulfilment of the law in the person of Jesus is as important as the abolition of the 613 laws of Torah.

So when we read that disobedient and drunken sons may be stoned to death (Deuteronomy 21), we must reject that rule as incompatible with Jesus' teaching of unconditional love. But when we read that we must love God with our whole hearts, we gladly accept that rule, because it is the ruling principle of the life of Jesus. As is often said, we 'pick and choose' - but we have a clear principle for doing so. Whatever measures up to the teaching of Jesus can be chosen. Whatever fails to do so must be rejected.

It is for this reason that Paul says that 'the commandments...are summed up in this one rule: 'Love your neighbour as yourself' (Romans 13, 8 - 9). Of course we should pay close attention to the Ten Commandments, and indeed to all the rules of Torah. But we must interpret them in the light of Christ. In that light some of them have to be drastically revised (rules commanding the death penalty, for instance), and others have to be re-interpreted (the rule about keeping the Sabbath, for example).

This does not make Biblical morality less important. It reminds us that the true Biblical morality is that 'we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code' (Romans 7, 6). The way of the Spirit is not easy; it is the hardest way in the world, if it is taken seriously. But it is not a way of obeying some clear rules, and accepting them without question because they are in some written text, even if that text is the Bible.

One example is that monogamy - the marriage of one woman to one man - is nowhere recommended in the Bible, except for bishops! However, by the time of Jesus all Jews accepted that monogamy was the norm for marriage. Yet monogamy was not right because it was in a written text. In fact the rabbis had to deal with texts that said it was fine to have lots of concubines. You could have lots of wives too, though apparently wives could not have lots of husbands! So the written text, just as it stands, even for a Jew is not absolutely binding.

One might think that Jews are bound to the written text, but that is not true. Even for the most orthodox Jew in the world, most of the Torah is obsolete; all the laws about temple ritual and priesthood are obsolete; all the laws about the conquest of Canaan are obsolete. Rabbi Ben Hannaniah in 300 AD said that we can no longer identify the six nations that are to be conquered, so that all the commands about conquering the Holy Land are obsolete! It is not true that you can just look at something within the Old Testament and say we have to do that, and it is binding. Rather you have to consider very carefully in what light we are to interpret these statements.

Most of the Torah was written in the Bronze Age and society has changed enormously since then. In a very different world these rules need to be rethought. You will not find many Jews today caring very much about the need to not boil a kid in the milk of its mother, which is part of Torah. What you do find today is that Jews take very seriously the need not to mix milk and meat dishes, and that statement comes from the ordinance that you mustn't boil a kid in the milk of its mother. How do you make these changes? You need to be a rabbi to do it properly, which makes the point that rabbinic use of the law is interpretative, it is creative. It looks at how Torah is to be interpreted in new situations. In fact it is not inflexible at all; that is a complete misunderstanding. It is all a matter of how you interpret it. That is the important thing. It can be interpreted in lots of different ways.

It seems that Jesus obeyed Torah; completely - he never disobeyed it. One main piece of evidence for this is that according to Matthew chapter 5 verses 17 – 19, Jesus says that anyone who taught that even the least important of the 613 laws of Torah should not be kept, would be the least in the kingdom of heaven. However, then Paul came along and said, the law is abolished; you needn't even obey any of it!

This is a puzzle. How is it that Jesus taught that you must obey even the least part of Torah, but then the church decided, as recorded in Acts chapter 15, that you need not keep all of Torah? For example, you needn't get circumcised, but you still have to eat kosher food. Later on the Christian church decided that you needn't keep Torah at all, it wasn't binding on any Christian. How could that happen? It was a revolution; it changed the nature of religion, from a religion of obedience to a revealed law to a religion of life in the Spirit; 'The letter kills but the spirit gives life' according to Paul (2 Corinthians 3, 6).

Christ has abolished the law in its written form, but of course Christ is the Torah in personal form, and that is why Torah obsolete, because it is the person of Jesus Christ that shows what God is like and what we should be like. Jesus reconciles, loves, heals and forgives; loves people of very different theological opinions; and teaches that the Good Samaritan, a heretic, was a person to be valued and respected, and indeed a better neighbour than all the Jewish priests. His life has become our Torah.

In the teaching of the early church, then, the Torah is definitely rejected despite the teaching of Jesus that you should keep it. This is because of the insight that the person of Jesus had replaced the written law. This is an absolutely revolutionary insight. The revelation of God in Christ is most fundamentally a deeply personal revelation. When Jesus said, 'The kingdom of God has come near. Repent' (Mark 1, 15) he was saying, 'Here it is, in me!' God's rule is a personal rule, it is the rule of the Spirit in the heart, which was prophesied in Jeremiah and was fulfilled in the person of Jesus. The point about revelation happening in a person is that it is not in particular words.

We do not have many of the particular words that Jesus actually spoke, in the language in which he spoke them. Jesus almost certainly spoke Aramaic, and we do not have much Aramaic in the New Testament, only about five or six words. So already we have translations and these are edited translations. Very rarely do we have the actual words of Jesus. But that does not mean we don't have the person of Jesus. It does not mean that we do not have insights into what Jesus was like, even though his life is portrayed in different ways in four very different gospels.

This suggests that Christian revelation is not primarily in words, it is in a person and in a personal relationship. Words can point to that and can help to invoke it in you, but

they can never capture it. So my point here is simply that the very nature of Christian revelation is that the word of God is not primarily the Bible. The Word of God is the person of Jesus Christ, just as the Gospel of John says it is.

It is very important to see what Christian revelation is, and to see that it is personal. Therefore you can never adequately put it into words. If you try to convey what a person has done for you, or what they mean to you, the words used will always be inadequate. You will always have to use lots of different metaphors and images, and different people will see that person in different ways. Personal knowledge is essentially difficult to express and almost always ambiguous, reflecting what the knower is almost as much as how the person is seen. Yet personal knowledge is exciting and life transforming.

There are many ways of seeing Jesus, four of which we have in the four Gospels. When I say there is freedom from the absolute authority of a written text, I certainly do not mean that we can ignore the Biblical texts. Without them we would know little or nothing about Jesus. I mean that the details of the text (for example, whether the Last Supper was on the Passover night, as the first three Gospels say, or before the Passover, as John says) are not inerrant. So we might have to compare many texts, and assess them all in the light of our understanding of the person of Jesus, before we can decide how we should apply them to our own lives.

But there are always going to be different ways of interpreting Christ – four of them are in the Gospels. All we can do is to be as honest as we can and say, ‘This is how Christ seems to me when I read and reflect on the Gospels; this is the Christ who is known as a spiritual presence to me, and I am not surprised if it seems rather different to somebody else.’ Of course there are limits. If somebody says Christ was a terrorist, then that is rather too extreme to be credible. But a case can be made both for saying that Jesus was an orthodox keeper of the law (as I believe), and also for saying that he sometimes broke the law, for humane reasons. A case can be made for saying that he thought God would bring history to an end very soon, and for saying (as I think) that he used such language metaphorically, but always envisaged something like the growth of the Church for centuries or even millennia. Diversity of interpretation is built into the very form of Christian Scripture, and perhaps we should not try to eliminate it.

For diversity is going to be part of any truly personal interaction. You know if you sit in a room, and you are all asked your opinion of some person, then you will find that you get very different interpretations of that person, even if you all know him or her quite well. You do not say that because interpretations differ, that person never existed. You see people in partly terms of what you project onto them from your own personality. Obviously different personalities are going to see things in different ways, and that is what personal revelation means. It means that you will see God in Christ in different ways, although you will all be able to agree that there are some reported things that Jesus did and said, and you’ve got to start from there. You cannot just make it all up.

So my first point is that Christianity is essentially a religion of freedom from written law (‘We serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code’ (Romans 7, 6), from unquestioning acceptance of religious texts on authority, and from unreflective obedience to specific written rules. All written texts, as they stand, in the Bible or not, need to be brought before the person of Jesus Christ, and

assessed by how far they measure up to the standard of his life and teaching. “For freedom Christ has set us free” (Galatians 5, 1).

2. I have spent a long time on that first point, because I think it would be found contentious by many Christians, because it goes to the root of what Christian revelation is, and because I think it is fundamentally important. But I would like to stress that even those who have a different view of Christian revelation might nevertheless accept some of the other defining characteristics of liberal faith. So it is important not to insist on accepting the whole package before calling yourself a person of liberal faith. It is quite possible to be liberal in some, but not all, the respects I am expounding.

I hope many Christians would be able to accept the view of Christian revelation briefly set out here. I hope all Christians would at least be able to accept that this is a fully Christian and orthodox view, even if they do not share it. And I hope that even if some do not share it, they may nevertheless agree with some other aspects of a liberal faith, which I will now go on to discuss.

My second point is much shorter. It is based on the most important of moral principles, that you should love your neighbour as yourself. Nobody is going to deny that the principle is a very important part of Christianity. If you ask the question, ‘What does love require?’ then it is clear that at the very least love requires understanding. You do not love someone if you do not try to understand what has made them what they are, and what it is like for them to believe the things they do. If you only read newspaper headlines and believe that is what a particular person was saying, you do not love them. To love them you have to get beyond the headlines and make some effort to understand how they see things from their point of view.

Often you do not have a lot of time to do that, so you just say, ‘I don’t understand them properly’. But if you do not understand them, at the very least you should not hate and oppose them – at least if they are not doing something destructive and obviously harmful. Love makes it impossible to say of anyone, before I have tried to understand them, that they are depraved and corrupt, and that I have nothing to learn from them. This is because one important part of love is that you learn from the people you love. Love is not all about giving. Love is also having the ability to receive and letting the other person know that you want to receive from them because they are worth it. Love requires understanding, and because human beings are very different, it will entail an acceptance of diversity.

This point is very simple; as Christians we ought to love, and love means we should accept diversity. That is partly why churches exist! Churches exist to force us to meet people we do not really like, and we would not otherwise associate with, and if you have a church where that is not really true, then it is not really a church. Whilst it is nice for liberals to have a liberal group, it cannot be the only group there is because there are some who are not liberals but are still committed Christians. They should be in our church; we should be able to say to them that we accept diversity and we respect their freedom of conscience, and that should not stop us living together in ordinary kindness and friendship. This means minimally, that at least I am not going to misrepresent what others say, and I am not going to stop them standing up for what they believe, on condition that they do not stop me standing up for what I believe either!

The Anglican Church has always tried to include different interpretations of Christian faith. The way this works out in practice is that some parish churches stand in a broadly Calvinist tradition, some in an Anglo-Catholic tradition, and some in a liberal tradition. Few churches could manage to embrace all those traditions at the same time.

So it is sensible to let those traditions develop, stressing their own distinctive emphases. Yet it is important that they belong to one church, responding in diverse ways to the revelation of God in Christ, but also seeking to learn from one another, and united in friendship, in loyalty to Christ, and in celebration of the dominical sacraments. Liberals in particular will accept such diversity as God-given, and should seek to strengthen bonds of friendship between Christians of diverse attitudes and interpretations.

There is a conspiracy in some churches, or some parts of churches, to stop people saying what they believe and think. That is a pity, because we want the church to be a community of love, where people should feel free to say what they think without feeling that somebody is going to tell them they are wrong - or at least that somebody is not going to tell them their view is outside the boundaries of Christianity. Often people are afraid to say what they think. For example, the broadcaster Malcolm Muggeridge once spoke to some ladies in a village church, about what they really believed. It turned out to be rather amazing and unexpected. He suggested they told the vicar what they thought, to which they said, "No it would worry him too much!" Malcolm Muggeridge then went to talk to the vicar and suggested that because he had been to theological college and knew some theology, he should preach about it, to which he said, "That would worry my congregation too much!" So there is a place for some open honesty in the Church, so that we can admit that there are things we are agnostic about, and that our opinion may be only one of many that are held within the broader church. We need some humility, and an acceptance of diversity as a gift of God.

3. My third point is taken from Article 21 of the 39 articles of the Church of England. It says "General Councils of the Church may err and have erred even in things concerning God." The Church of England in general affirms the great classical creeds, but it does not hold that they are inerrant. This is because the creeds were issued by General Councils of the Church. They may have erred, so perhaps we should not say, "We believe" but "They thought!" That is an exaggeration, but there is a serious point here, which is the Reformation principle that people should be free to dissent from any human authority, and that includes, for Protestants anyway, General Councils of the Church, and popes and even bishops. Freedom of dissent and freedom of conscience are fundamental Reformation principles.

It is strange to remember that Pope Pius IX in 1864 wrote a 'Syllabus of Errors' in which he said that 'progress, liberalism and modern civilisation' were not things that the Pontiff ought to reconcile himself to. Also to be condemned amongst the eighty things he did condemn, was freedom of religious expression.

Even Anglicanism, which is rightly said to be very broad in the views it includes, has in the past said that there should be only one religion in England. It was not very long ago that one could not teach in Oxford or Cambridge if you were not an Anglican minister, so our liberal inheritance is rather new-found. However the Roman Catholic Church in the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s, quite unequivocally stated that Christian faith requires freedom of religious assembly and religious belief, and freedom of conscience. It looks as though all Christians are agreed on this now. That is the fundamental liberal position. Almost all Christians are now liberal in that sense, in that they permit, and might even encourage, freedom of conscience. But we should not forget that it was a hard-fought battle to establish this Reformation principle.

If you really permit freedom of religious belief, then you must live with people who come to different positions on issues than you do, both moral and religious; that is as long as they are really conscientious serious, and they are not just choosing evil for some selfish purpose. People might come to different positions and you will have to live with that. It is also important to say that you do not have to agree with them. Respecting difference does not mean agreement with others. There may be differences but they should not impede our friendship and relationship.

This is very important for the Church of England and the Anglican Communion in general at the moment, that differences of theological or moral belief should not impede friendship. That is a requirement of faith, and springs from the requirement of love. The teaching of Jesus about the unity of his disciples is very important, but it need not imply an institutional unity. It may speak of a much deeper friendship, which accepts differences. This means that there have to be different sorts of churches. It is true that we all go to different to different types of churches, but we can be friends with people who hold very different views. We must not force people to like or agree about the same sorts of things. That is the Reformation principle: freedom of conscience.

4. The fourth liberal point is about the search for truth. This point is influenced by the philosopher John Stuart Mill, and it is a classically liberal position. On matters that cannot be decided unequivocally, the best way to find the truth, if you are seriously concerned for the truth, is to encourage critical debate and enquiry. The principle of critical debate and enquiry is fundamental to the British educational system. That is what you do if you teach; you promote debate and enquiry, and informed criticism. You do not just tell people what is right, you actually try to convey to people what the scholarly opinion is, or what the range of informed opinions is, and try to get people thinking for themselves about the views that can be held. It must be informed; you cannot tell people just to make it all up. For example, you cannot tell people to just make up the doctrine of the Trinity. You have to know what people have said about this and make a judgement on it, but criticism is very important in the search for truth. The point about this of course, is that Christianity is concerned about truth; Jesus said "I am the Truth." That seems to involve that we ought to be very concerned to find the truth.

Two things seem to be important here. First of all, there is an absolute truth. As a liberal I would say there definitely is an absolute truth. Your opinion is not as good as mine! I mean by this that everyone's opinion is not equally true. There is only one truth and it is absolute.

But the second thing you have to say is, we do not know who, if anyone, has got the truth! We cannot ever be sure that we have the truth. So although there is an absolute truth, it is very difficult to decide who has it, if anybody, and that is the liberal principle; that all human claims to knowledge are provisional. It is not relativism; it is not that there is no truth, or even that your view is as good as mine, but it is the view that the truth is very difficult to find.

Just think about the history of physics for example. It may be that you think that God should just have revealed the law of relativity to Moses. Then we needn't have had all the trouble of discovering it. But something would have been lost if that had happened. It is good for people to discover things for themselves. The theory of relativity was only discovered after a lot of argument and criticism, and in the end

fortunately there was some empirical verification. In religion also there is a lot of argument and criticism, even about how to interpret what we may believe to be God's revelation. But we are not going to get any verification until we are dead - and we cannot really wait that long.

The difference in religion, as opposed to science, is that you are never going to get conclusive verification of your beliefs; nobody is. That means you are always going to be stuck in the position of debate and enquiry. That seems to me to necessitate humility about one's own views. I can say I believe this proposition and that I am committed to it, but I cannot be certain that it is true. I can see that other people can come to different conclusions and that they do. In the end all I can say is that God will have to choose between us. However I presume that God will not condemn either of us for having an honest opinion.

It immediately follows that nobody who conscientiously believes there is no God after full enquiry, can be condemned by God for being an atheist. That is not a Christian possibility. Nobody who decides conscientiously that Christ is not the saviour of humanity can be condemned by God for believing that. I think God would say, "I'm glad that you believed that conscientiously, only it just happens that I am here, and you are wrong!"

It is by informed critical enquiry that you find truth, and if you have a serious concern for the truth, you will not censor books; rather you will encourage debate and discussion. I do not think we should make everybody have debate and discussion, so that it becomes compulsory in church that everyone must discuss the theory of relativity or the doctrine of Pelagianism. Yet I do think the churches must accept that such debate is a good and necessary thing on the way to truth. Even if you do not want to take part in it, you must not condemn it, and you must not make the mistake of thinking you do not need to have such debate in order to know the truth.

For most of us that will mean there are lots of things we are going to be fairly uncertain about, perhaps because we do not read Greek. I should not really say this but I have been to Bible studies where nobody knew any Greek at all but they spent hours discussing the meaning of some New Testament text in English; a complete waste of time! Well it's not a complete waste of time, but if you are trying to get to the real meaning of the text and it is in a different language, then you are in trouble; you are not going to get the real meaning. You can still get spiritual illumination from it, but what would be wrong would be to say, "I have got the correct interpretation." You can say this is how the text speaks to you, but you would have to say you do not know if you understand it properly. You need to consult some scholarly commentaries, or have a conversation to find out how it speaks to other people, and this leads on to my fifth point.

5. The fifth point is about the nature of faith. There is an old mediaeval definition of faith as, "the acceptance of certain propositions as true on authority." You accept certain propositions on the authority of the church or the Bible. Martin Luther rejected that definition of faith, and defined faith as "personal trust in Jesus Christ". That is very different. Faith as personal trust does not entail any particular beliefs except the very vague one that there is somebody called Jesus to whom the Bible testifies, and that he is, in some undefined sense, Lord. You need some beliefs, but you do not need to know that Jesus is the second person, coequal with the Father and the Spirit in the Holy Trinity. You do not need to know that, and it may or may not be true. You can be agnostic about that, and why not? Most theologians seem to be

these days. What is important about faith is not that it includes technically correct definitions of many obscure doctrines, but that it is a transforming encounter with God in Christ.

Hence there is a very strong personal and existential basis for faith, but it is faith as encounter, not faith as assent to propositions. I am putting the stress here on the way in which faith is known by its fruits, by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5, 22). When you have faith those are the things that are produced in human lives.

This was, I think, the approach of Martin Luther to faith. It is also a liberal approach, which was classically formulated by the German nineteenth century theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher, sometimes called the 'father of liberal Protestantism'. Faith is personal transformation by the power of God. It is not intellectual acceptance of certain propositions. There is of course a relationship between those two things, but it is a rather vague and flexible one.

6. My sixth point concerns the way in which our knowledge of the world has changed completely since the time in which the Bible was written. When parts of the Bible were written the Earth was thought to be a flat disc floating on a big sea and the stars were thought to be hung on a bowl which was just hanging around above the Earth. There were no extra terrestrial beings, there were no galaxies; there was no big bang.

In 1953 the structure of DNA was discovered. Before that, despite Darwin, nobody knew how hereditary worked, and that is something that is transforming the world. In the same way in 1953, the smallest computer in existence took up a room bigger than the one we are in. If you think how quickly things are changing, then it would not be surprising if some of our knowledge was different from that of the biblical writers.

We have to ask how religious beliefs fit into such a rapidly changing world. A liberal in this sense might be defined as someone who wants to take seriously well-established scientific theories, and wants to see how they relate to ancient religious beliefs, and also who expects there will be some differences. Faith will take modern science into account, though it will not be wholly defined by science. You will not hold to a version of faith if it is contradicted by well-established modern science.

I will give just one example of this which is very obvious. If you accept the theory of evolution - which virtually every biologist does - and you ask questions about original sin, the fall, and whether death came about through the sin of Adam, you will have to rethink that completely and say: death was there with the dinosaurs long before the first human being. So death is not the result of Adam's sin, death was there a long time before. What about original sin? The doctrine of original sin actually contradicts the Darwinian doctrine that you cannot inherit acquired characteristics. For example if you go to the gym and get very muscular, your children will not and cannot inherit the results of all that exercise. It was a complete waste of time! What your children inherit is set at the time of birth; it is in the sex cells and what you do in the gym will not make the slightest difference. Of course the fact you are healthy might make a difference to their education and so on, but genetically it will not make any difference. Original sin, if put in the form that because of something Adam did, his descendants were genetically impaired, such a view contradicts all evolutionary theory. We have to rethink that.

In case you feel uncomfortable about getting rid of original sin, because you like it so much, a lot of Christians have never believed in original sin! The Eastern Orthodox churches do not accept it. The concept began with Augustine and was passed into the Latin churches and into their tradition, but you will not find it in the Orthodox churches. It is perfectly orthodox not to believe in original sin, if that makes you feel happier!

In general the point is that science is going to make a difference. We are in a universe where, with a bit of luck, we are going to exist on this planet for a few billion years. If we manage to escape from this planet then we could exist for many billions of years, or rather, something like us would. I know one physicist who says that because of evolution, in another 10 million years, which is not very long cosmically, it is most unlikely that there will be any human beings around, except possibly in zoos, because a new and superior species will have evolved. Christianity has to take this into account, so what are we going to do about that?

When we read parts of the Bible, human beings seem to be at the centre of the universe, and when their history comes to an end then the universe will have stopped. Now physicists will tell us that is not true; humans are going to evolve into trans-humans, super intelligent beings, who have no relation to the human species at all, just as we have no relation to chimpanzees. What do Christians do with this, and where does Jesus fit into that?

I think there are good answers to all these questions but the fact is, they have to be faced. You have to say that when the early theologians in the fourth to the eighth centuries tried to fit their faith in Christ and the revelation of God in Christ, into the best scientific views of the day, they were bound to be wrong to some extent because their science was wrong. Aristotle was the favourite scientist and almost everything he said was wrong. So now we live in a world where we are not quite sure who is right any more; it could be Heisenberg, Niels Bohr, Albert Einstein, Isaac Newton. They are the people who probably have got some of it right, so Christianity has to come to terms with this fact. This could be called a liberal standpoint, in that you are prepared to rephrase your faith in terms of new knowledge of what the universe is like.

I am sure it can be done and it is a positive and exciting thing to do, and what I would like to see Christians doing is to take science at the cutting edge, and to put God right on that cutting edge. We are not going to say that we are terribly worried about science and we had better be creationists, or say that all cosmology is wrong and evolution is wrong and that we are going to be defensive all the time. To keep away from all the things that are taught in schools about science, believing that the scientists have got it all wrong, is not a good message to be conveying if you think that God is the rational, intelligent creator of a wonderfully beautiful universe.

A much more positive message is that science is discovering amazing new facts about the glory of God as revealed in creation - the beauty of mathematical laws, the amazing complexity of DNA and so on - and it is almost impossible not to be struck by the intelligence that underlies the nature of the universe. Christianity says that is not just intelligence, it is intelligent love, and there is a destiny for beings in this universe, whether human or not, who can become conscious of the creator of all material things.

Now that's an exciting message, that consciousness, intelligence, wisdom is at the root of reality, and science is uncovering it in new ways.

In other words, the new is good; we have to get out of the old way of saying that the older a belief is the better. There are still some people who think that if a view is very old that is a better view. For example, if you have got the secret of the great Pyramids that has got to be better than having the secret of DNA. That is not true, it is the new that is more likely to be true. We can still say that we have a personal relationship to the God revealed in Jesus Christ through the present action of the Holy Spirit, of course, but none of that tells us how big the universe is. It glorifies God more to know the universe is millions of times bigger than we ever thought, and that there are probably other intelligent beings living in other universes with whom God is equally concerned. That is a greater God, and a greater reverence for the created universe or multiverse or megaverse or whatever it is these days. Therefore taking science seriously is a very important part of faith and it means that we can no longer say that faith is just sticking with old and obsolete views of the cosmos. You can keep the experience of God, but your view of the context in which it occurs, has to be new, because there is much new knowledge of our universe.

7. The seventh point I want to make about a liberal Christian faith concerns the concept of salvation and the role of the Church in the world. Christianity is certainly about salvation, but if you look at the notion of salvation in the Old Testament, it is the salvation of the community - the people of Israel from the oppression and justice of its enemies. Salvation was not an individual thing. For a Jew it would not make sense to say that one person could be saved and other people couldn't; the whole nation and is saved or nobody is; and the nation is saved from oppression and injustice. The recovery of this Biblical insight turned nineteenth century German liberalism towards various forms of liberation theology.

There is a distinctively liberal view of salvation (though I would not claim that only liberals have such a view), which is that salvation is material as well as spiritual, and you cannot have one without the other. As the Salvation Army has always said, there is no point preaching to men's souls if they do not have enough to eat. The first thing you do is give them food and clothing and if possible justice, and that is a Christian requirement.

If you look at the big problems in the world today you are bound to think of ecology; of the survival of the planet; of what we do with our own resources; of the vast injustice by which we buy cheap clothes at the price of child labour elsewhere; of the tribalism that makes us fear and hate other cultures and people who are different from us. Those are the major world problems. Does Christianity address these? I think it does, and the particular emphasis that I want to draw attention to is growing within the Christian churches. It is a serious concern that the church should not be the place where some people are saved out of the horror of the world. Rather the church is the place that should be transforming the world to become more the place that God wants it to be, where all human beings - and in fact all sentient beings - flourish. So salvation is the flourishing of all sentient beings. Until that happens salvation has not come.

Ultimate salvation must lie beyond this world, when all sentient lives will exist in a new ('resurrected') form in God. We cannot guarantee that true justice will ever be fully realised in our world, and Christians should certainly not try to bring it about through violence. Nevertheless it is the vocation of the Christian Church to try to

bring peace and justice to the world. It is not enough just to offer a happier life after death, and be content to let the world go to its own destruction.

The old question, 'Are you saved?' is actually a very selfish question. It is like people who pray for a car parking space...if you were a true Christian you would pray that the other person in front of you would get the car parking space! In the same way to ask the question, 'Are you are saved?' is a very self-interested question. You should be asking the question, 'Is the world saved?' By this you would mean: is it fulfilled, do humans flourish, do animals flourish, does the creation flourish? To which the answer is no!

Perhaps God calls us to be co-creators in transforming the world, in making people consciously aware of a God who wills the flourishing of all creation. Some people call that humanism, and of course it is humanism, but it is religious humanism; it is Christian humanism. Christians want the flourishing of humanity, but it is more than humanism, because Christians want the world to flourish in conscious loving relationship to God.

That is why the church was founded, that is why the church came about; that we should be the hands and feet and eyes and ears of Christ in the world. As the Body of Christ the church should do what Jesus did; heal, reconcile and speak forgiveness to nations. The Church, at least in part, has always done that and still does. Yet insofar as 'liberal' means having respect for human rights and freedom, and being generous and open-handed, this is a liberal faith. It does not see the Church merely as the door from a doomed world to eternal happiness. The Church is also called to be God's agent of fuller life, of true human flourishing, both in society and in individual lives.

So to conclude I do not think that liberalism is a new sect that we are starting up here. I think Christianity has always been liberal, but that at times it has had difficulty with this because it gets side tracked; for example by doctrines of particular interpretation of the Bible said to be infallible or inerrant; or by the belief that I am wholly right and everyone else is wholly wrong. There are ways in which religious faith can lead people to be intolerant and feel superior to other people, and of course it should never do that.

Let me recapitulate the seven points I have made about the positive liberal approach which I think any Christian can adopt, whether they are evangelical or catholic or whatever. Liberalism has always been a tradition of the Anglican Church, and it is important to retain it. They are simply these.

First of all the New Testament seems to teach that we are free from the law. We need to think through exactly what that means. I think it means that we are called to become more like Christ but that we are not necessarily bound by the specific written regulations that are found in the Bible.

Secondly, love of neighbour requires understanding our neighbour, which in turn requires respect for the views of others, an attempt to accept human diversity, and to learn from it.

Thirdly, what might be called the Reformation principle: you always have a right to dissent, you always have freedom of conscience. You must make sure that this is

true, and it is true in Britain I think, but there are many countries in the world where it is not true.

Fourthly, that a serious concern for truth requires that we encourage, at some appropriate place in our church life, informed critical enquiry. We believe it is important to be critical; not to be defensive and to repress disagreement, but to face the strongest criticisms. Only in that way can we be really demonstrate that we are concerned about truth.

Fifthly, that the nature of faith is a personal encounter; that it is transformation of life; it is growing in love and joy and peace. That is what faith is about - God being known by us and working through us. It is not primarily about acceptance of set of intellectual propositions. So true Christian faith is compatible with a range of intellectual beliefs, which seek in different ways to express the intellectual presuppositions or implications of that faith.

Sixthly, the knowledge that we have about the world today is fantastically different than it was even fifty years ago; and we have to take that into account. Indeed there is lots of work being done on this, lots of Christians who are at the forefront of scientific discovery and enquiry. Francis Collins, the Director of the human genome project for example, is a committed Christian, who finds in his scientific work signs of the wisdom and beauty of God. And many leading British Anglicans, like John Polkinghorne and Arthur Peacocke, are doing this work of relating the Christian faith to new knowledge.

And seventhly, salvation is not meant just for the few, except in the sense that a few may be called into the fellowship of the church, that thereby they may help to transform the world. If Christians have a special calling and vocation it is not that we alone of all the earth may be saved, but that we should work for human fulfilment throughout the world.

These are seven major strands of liberalism, and that is why I think liberals do not have to be a separate church, or even a separate part of the church. However, these things do need to be encouraged and sustained when they are in peril, as they might be for various reasons. So we should all speak for freedom in Christ, for tolerance, for understanding, for truth, for compassion, for love. Who could be against those things? If these are the things we are for, then the future belongs to liberal faith.