



Faith in a Post-Modern World

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The decisive factor in the history of the twentieth century, which is still gathering strength at the beginning of the twenty first century, is the fact of globalisation. By this I mean primarily the way in which every part of the planet is now entangled with every other part. At the beginning of the twentieth century, travel to distant parts of the globe was difficult, often impossible. Now anthropologists studying forest tribes in New Guinea arrive after a flight of a few hours to find helicopter bases already set up in the jungle. In 1900 the intellectual resources of faraway cultures were largely locked away in untranslated and inaccessible manuscripts. Now we have access in our own homes to the knowledge of the world, in translation and with commentaries, via satellite and computer networks. The toys of British children are made in China, and British telephone calls are routed through Bangalore. Multinational firms can move factories to any part of the globe, and waves of immigration transfer populations from one part of the world to another.

In such a globalised context, Christianity has to be reconceived as one stream of religious life in a wider global pattern. When this is done, the rather sobering fact is that the success of Christianity, as the largest religion in the world, seems to be largely due to its connection with past forms of imperialism. Its first major expansion came through its adoption as the official religion of the Roman empire. Later Spanish acquisitions in South America spread Catholicism more widely, and later European, especially British, imperialism led to the cultural dominance of Christianity in many parts of the world. Countries that resisted imperialism also resisted the Christian faith that went with it. Most notably, East Asia, India and the Islamic world – a competing world of imperial expansion – remained resistant to Christian hegemony.

This alliance with empire has been a mixed blessing, since it associated Christian faith in the eyes of many with thoughts of military conquest and world domination. Yet within the Gospels there is a very clear condemnation of violence and the lust for power. Jesus condemned not only killing, but even anger, and told his hearers not to resist evil (Matthew 5, 22 and 39). He taught his followers that if they wished to be great, they must be the servants of all (Matthew 20, 26). There is an inbuilt moderating influence on power in the Gospels, and while Christian faith may have partly spread through imperial expansion, it also carries an ineliminable message that such power must be humanised and redirected for good. In the twentieth century Christianity, as a world religion, was still struggling to maintain a balance between assertions of cultural superiority and a rediscovery of its core values of loving service and liberation for the poor. But it is arguable that it was a century in which the faith was slowly disentangled from many old imperial associations, and its centre of gravity began to move from the West to the Southern and Eastern hemispheres.

In Europe and North America, rich scientifically advanced cultures developed within which the Enlightenment values of freedom of belief and critical enquiry flourished. I have argued that such values were rooted in the religious upheavals of the Protestant Reformation, but they also unleashed almost uncontrollable destructive forces. Reason and belief in objective goodness, two pillars of traditional Christian faith in a wise and good Creator of the universe, came under critical scrutiny. For some critical thinkers, goodness was seen as simply the realisation of individual desires, whatever they are. Reason was seen, by David Hume among others, as the slave of desire.

The desire for power, to be realised through superior strength, was legitimated, and the way was prepared for the two most destructive wars in world history. By a terrifying perversion of the Hegelian vision of a dialectical historical progress leading to the implementation of a truly just society, Marxist-Leninism advocated the violent overthrow of liberal societies to make way for the dictatorship of the proletariat. In reaction, Fascism advocated a nationalistic and authoritarian rule of the strong, the dictatorship of the Fuhrer. In the clash between these dictatorships, a generation of Europeans and their allies throughout the world came to the brink of extinction.

The twentieth century showed that liberalism is not enough. What is also needed is some conception of the Good that can inspire devotion and positive commitment. Both Communists and Fascists could appeal to a great cause, worthy of the self-sacrifice of its devotees. But in both cases the conception of the Good was fatally flawed, because in the end it relied on the appeal to naked power and contingent desire. An adequate conception of the Good should be one which discerns what is intrinsically and supremely worthwhile, and which sees that the goal of realising such a good cannot be attained by means that are themselves violent and destructive. In a liberal society such a conception can only be embraced on a voluntary basis, but Christians might well think that it is of the greatest importance that there is a strong and effective witness for good in a society that permits the widest possible freedom.

Towards the end of the twentieth century it was still doubtful whether, in the Western world, there was such a widely shared conception of the good. The growth of philosophies of materialism continued to throw doubt on the very idea of goodness itself. Humans were often seen as accidental by-products of a blind evolutionary process whose desires - basically of lust and aggression, with an admixture of limited altruism - had been genetically determined millions of years in the past, and had now become largely counter-productive. The very idea of a shared or objective good disappeared.

The growth of liberal or critical Christianity failed to reach the general public, who consequently tended to see Christianity as an outmoded set of pre-critical beliefs. This was not helped by the rapid growth of fundamentalist Christian groups, especially in the United States, who, in turning against the negative aspects of liberalism, turned against liberalism itself, in all its forms. So faith became acceptance of whatever was written in a sacred text, beyond the reach of reason and in the face of science and a reasoned concern for the welfare of all sentient beings.

When 'Western values' are spoken of in a global context, people often have in mind a set of societies in which there is a widespread scepticism about any objective values, and in which the stress on individual choice threatens to undermine all bonds of social unity. Christianity is seen as a failed and largely obsolete minority interest, existing in tension with the dominant scientific and moral trends of Western cultures. Yet the West talks of 'human rights', 'democracy' and 'freedom' as though they were moral absolutes that the West has a destiny to safeguard - even though Western culture has undermined any basis for speaking of moral absolutes at all. So these absolutes are widely seen as subterfuges for protecting the sort of freedom from interference and freedom to accumulate wealth that maintains the social and economic superiority of the West at the expense of the rest of the world.

Such cultural confusion may be the price that a liberal society has to pay for the freedom it prizes. But there is a place here for an assertion of the value of persons as beings whose distinctive capacity is to realise positive potentialities for good in co-operation with others. In fact at the heart of liberalism, particularly as it is found in Immanuel Kant and John Stuart Mill, is the belief that the freedom of the individual is important precisely because it makes possible the realisation of personal and cultural excellences, of moral and intellectual virtues, for all.

When Kant propounded his theory of moral autonomy, he did not have in mind a belief that individuals are free to decide for themselves what desires to follow. His moral theory was as far as it could possibly be from the view that individuals are free to invent morality in accordance with their dominant desires.

He argued, however improbably, that Reason itself could legislate universal moral principles that all ought to agree with, and that were absolutely binding, whatever individuals happened to desire. Reason did not merely try to work out what desires were preferable for a happy life, or what compromises might have to be made between the competing desires of various individuals in order to get a secure and stable society. The voice of Reason was absolute, and Kant asserted the principle of autonomy in the belief that Reason spoke in every individual, and should not be subject to the whims and taboos of tyrants or traditions.

Kant was in fact asserting the Protestant principle that every person has the right to follow conscience, rather than defer to external authority. He argued that the voice of conscience is clear and absolute, and it is not some genetically programmed or socially reinforced compulsion. It is the voice of Reason, the same Reason that sustains the life of the cosmos itself. When Kant saw duties as divine commands, that for him had an intensity and seriousness that is hardly possible for a fully secular moralist.

While the voice of Reason is not subject to the strength of desire, it is not unrelated to desire. Kant knew well enough that humans have desires, goals and distinctive capacities. In the *Metaphysic of Morals* (not the more widely read *Groundwork to the Metaphysic of Morals*) he states that the necessary ends at which Reason aims are the happiness of others and the perfecting of one's own physical and mental powers. The notion of 'self-perfecting' is central to Kant's moral philosophy. He accepts the Aristotelian principle that it is mental capacities that are most distinctively human, and that the best life for humans is one in which such capacities can be freely expressed. The orientation of the mind to knowledge and understanding, to the creation and appreciation of beauty, to empathy with others in shared experience, and co-operation with others in common pursuits - these are the perfections that a liberal society will encourage, but never compel, humans to pursue.

For Kant, the Categorical Imperative sorts out which of these perfections can be universally willed, for all people at all times. Most of us might think that this stress on the universal is rather Procrustean, since different perfections might be appropriate for different people, and in different degrees. But the main point is that for Kant freedom from external authority is important, not just for its own sake, but for the sake of the pursuit of personal perfection that it enables. Freedom to dissent is necessary in the face of authoritarian systems that restrict knowledge and repress creative thinking. Informed critical enquiry is necessary to help place knowledge on firmer foundations and to motivate a continual search for deeper truth. Moral autonomy is necessary to counteract reliance on rationally unjustifiable and repressive traditions and rules. In all these aspects, critical freedom exists in the service of the flourishing of the human person and the perfecting of the life of the mind. The justification of a liberal society lies in its commitment to moral personalism, to the widest possible realisation of personal excellences in a society committed to the pursuit of the common good.

What does this have to do with Christianity? More than many people might think. It is not, in my view, an accident that Kant lived in a Christian environment. His commitment to the moral importance of the human person, to the realisation of distinctive human excellences, to the ideal of making such realisation possible for all, and to the obligation to orient such commitment to the pursuit of the common good - all these elements form part of what might appropriately be called a transcendental personalism. This is a humanism that makes persons and their flourishing of fundamental moral value. But human persons have that value because they exist in the image of, and in potentially conscious relation to, the supreme personal reality of the divine.

Without such an ontological primacy of the personal, humanism might be seen as an arbitrary, even self-interested, preference for the human species. Talk of 'distinctively human excellences' might be seen as an elitist form of cultural snobbery - after all, for the great Utilitarian Jeremy Bentham, pushpin was as good as poetry. The desire that everyone should pursue such excellences might be seen as a form of repressive liberalism, paradoxically insisting in the name of freedom that everyone should do the same sorts of things, and have the same basic sorts of desires, as oneself. And talk of a 'common good' might be seen as a

concealment of the conflicts of interest and desire that in fact characterise all societies.

Humanism, in the sense of valuing human persons for their distinctively human - or better, personal - qualities, needs a stronger foundation than an arbitrary preference for the human species and for what Mill called the 'higher pleasures'. Christian personalism provides such a foundation, in its core belief that the whole universe is the creative expression of a supreme personal reality, and that its purpose is the emergence of communities of persons who can ultimately share in the understanding, creativity, compassion and bliss of the creator. For such a view, human lives have a purpose, which is part of the purpose for which the whole cosmos exists. That purpose is primarily to come to greater knowledge of truth, beauty and goodness, to love the good and beautiful, as it is found in the created order, in the lives of other persons, and supremely in the being of the creator itself. The duty of obedience to law is transformed by the attraction of love for the personal ground of all being. Human persons are loved, not because they are supremely good, but because the God who is supremely good wills that they should grow and flourish, and that we should help them to do so. On this view, humanism is rooted in the purpose of the cosmos itself that personal values should flourish; it is motivated by love for the beauty of the supremely personal reality that underlies all things; and it is sustained by the hope that persons will finally achieve their proper perfection in unity with God.

Christianity is fundamentally the belief that in the personal reality of Jesus humans have seen a foreshadowing of the purpose of the cosmos. They have seen expressed in Jesus' life and death a self-giving love that puts the flourishing of persons first. They have seen in Jesus' remembered person the normative finite image of a personal reality that appropriately invites total devotion. And they have seen in Jesus' resurrection a prefiguring of their own final destiny to find true personal fulfilment in God.

In all the cultural confusion of the liberal West, there is a way to be found between a reductive liberalism that finds the springs of human behaviour in desire and the lust for power, and an anti-scientific fundamentalism that reacts by clinging to a nonliberal, literalistic interpretation of ancient religious texts. Such a way would seek to re-establish a transcendental personalism, founded on a vision of God as a supreme, self-giving, unlimitedly loving being, whose nature and purpose has been disclosed to humans in and through the personal reality of Jesus Christ.

In the modern world there is an important place for a liberal and personalist Christian faith, which is prepared to re-think ideas of God in a scientific age, which stresses the vital importance of spiritual and liberating experience, and which is open to learn from the wider religious life of humanity. But in the twentieth century there have also been Christian reactions against liberalism. I think there are two main reasons for that.

First, there is a suspicion that the Enlightenment inevitably leads to secularism, and to a loss of the sense of the importance of religious faith. Religion becomes an optional extra for those who like that sort of thing. Second, is the suspicion that liberalism is bound up with a sense of Western superiority and cultural elitism. I do not think these suspicions are well founded, just as I do not think that Christian faith is necessarily connected with the imperialism of the old Roman empire. Yet there are historical connections here which, however contingent, need to be explained and counteracted.

It is true that there is a form of anti-religious secularism that mocks the wide diversity of religious beliefs as evidence that all religious opinions are equally absurd and unjustifiable. The freedom of expression and critical enquiry that mark Enlightenment thought have given rise to free expressions of anti-religious sentiments and destructive criticisms of religious beliefs. After the Enlightenment, membership of a religious institution does tend to become a voluntary option, and the possibility exists that most people will not opt for such membership. In that sense, the Enlightenment has led, certainly in Europe but increasingly in the United States, to secularism, and to a widespread indifference to religious faith.

In that situation, some Christian writers have reacted by seeking to defend forms of thought that are critical of the Enlightenment, and that some call 'post-liberal' or 'post-modern'. I have agreed that liberalism, in the sense simply of freedom of belief, enquiry and criticism, is not enough. Taken on their own, such freedoms leave you without any positive moral values or goals, except that of making your own mind up in any way you like.

Of course most Enlightenment thinkers did not want such freedoms to be taken as the only, or even as the most important, values. What they perceived was that critical enquiry and argument promote and do not undermine a genuine search for truth. Liberal values, in other words, are largely instrumental to the creative pursuit of values that are truly intrinsic or worth-while for their own sakes, values such as truth, beauty and friendship.

But where do such values come from? In the splintered world of the twentieth century, it may seem that human values are irreducibly diverse, and that there can be no universal agreement on just one set of 'rational' or 'self-evident' values. 'Modernity' is sometimes said to be the view that human reason can somehow work out just one set of universal values or principles, and that all that is needed to obtain universal agreement is to distinguish reason clearly from prejudice and tradition, and apply rational methods more efficiently to social and moral issues. Alisdair MacIntyre has given the name 'the Enlightenment Project' to 'the project of discovering new rational secular foundations for morality' (After Virtue, Duckworth, London, 1985, p. 117). He argues that this project has collapsed. In the face of such collapse, we need to return to our differing cultural traditions of morality, located as they are in particular world-views and social practices, and stop looking for some universal basis for morality.

His own preference is for a basically Aristotelian approach to the virtues, as excellences that tend to fulfil the human telos, and he recognises that in the modern world this may mean a re-instatement of a fundamentally Christian view of reality, which can underpin the belief that there is such a telos, or end for humans as such. It will also mean the acceptance that there will be differing moral and religious outlooks, with no common or universal basis, and that both our morality and our basic standards of rationality will be tradition-constituted. But they will be none the worse for that, since everyone else's ultimate standards will be tradition-constituted also. It would seem to follow that we can and should look in the post-modern world for a conversation of differing traditions, that can lead us to expand our own tradition as much as possible by encounter with others, but that can never reasonably claim to have the one ascertainable and obvious truth as its foundation.

Having said all that, we may seem to have undermined the secularist claim that science has superseded religion, and that universal standards of evidence and inference in effect rule out religious beliefs as obsolete. Then we can simply speak from a committed Christian position, and say, 'We cannot justify our position. But neither can you justify yours. These are just different starting points, and ours is as good as yours'.

It is possible then just to take the Bible as given, and to argue that any attempt to justify it is already a capitulation to secularism. Biblical revelation does not need independent rational foundations. But no knowledge has universally accepted foundations, so it is no worse to start from the Bible than from anywhere else. Moreover, if Christian faith is response to divine revelation, and is directly evoked by God, we might expect that there would be independently rational and non-theistic foundation for it anyway.

Secularism is thus challenged at its core with a view that refuses to accept its foundational principles, and that insists on the epistemic right of Christians to live and think by their own distinctively Christian principles.

This may give Christians greater confidence to speak out from a committed Christian position. The problem

is that it may also cut them off from conversation with their wider culture. While seeing themselves as bringing all culture under the banner of Christian faith, they may in fact make Christians an even more separate minority culture, and marginalize that culture in a more severe way than liberals ever did.

George Lindbeck, in his influential book *The Nature of Doctrine*, suggests that a 'post-liberal' approach to Christian doctrine is needed. He proposes that we should see Christian doctrines as grammatical rules for speaking within the church community, which is a distinctive cultural/linguistic community. Professor Lindbeck divides views of Christian doctrine into the categories of 'propositional', 'experiential/expressivist' and 'cultural/linguistic'. He argues that propositional views belong to a pre-modern time, when it was thought that doctrinal propositions simply mirror external reality. The medieval church, for example, could define doctrines as universal truths that were in principle accessible to all rational persons, and were establishable by reasoned proofs of God and of Christian revelation. Such dogmatic confidence was, however, undermined by Enlightenment sceptical arguments.

Experiential/expressivist views, he says, are characteristic of liberal modernism, and claim that doctrines simply express inner feelings or experiences. This certainly avoids the charge of ontological over-confidence. But it seems to reduce religious beliefs to matter of subjective feeling, and to confirm a widely held Enlightenment view that religious and moral beliefs are basically matters of private opinion.

Cultural/linguistic views he associates with post-liberalism or post-modernism, when language is seen to be constitutive of communities and views of reality. Traditions are constituted by distinctive concepts and a whole web of conceptual relationships, which have no external foundations, but each form of life has its own characteristic internal rationality and rules of discourse. At its extreme, such a view holds that different conceptual frameworks are incommensurable, and so it is useless to try to compare them, and even worse to try to move concepts, taken out of context, from one framework to another. But in less extreme form, this view holds that the set of concepts we have learned in our community governs the ways we will identify and describe both the external world and our inner feelings. Language comes first, and basic metaphysical views and experiences will be determined by the sort of conceptual scheme we have, in the community of which we are part.

I am sympathetic to the proposal that there are basically different world-views which have no agreed common basis, so in that sense there is no external or universal foundation for such views. Indeed, commitment to liberalism does not entail acceptance of the Enlightenment Project of finding some universal secular basis for morals and metaphysics. On the contrary, it entails freedom to choose many different projects of our own, and so it is inherently pluralistic. Liberal Christians must accept that people are free to have different beliefs. A Christian world-view must be quite different in many respects from an atheistic one, and there seems little prospect of obtaining agreement between them.

But I do not like the proposal that propositional views, which claim objective truth, are somehow pre-modern and perhaps obsolete. Christian faith makes assertions about objective reality, and is in that sense propositional, even if many of its formulations are metaphorical or very inadequate. No doubt dogmatic beliefs should not be imposed by force, and it can no longer be thought that they are the only possible beliefs for intelligent and morally sensitive individuals. Nevertheless, most Christians do wish to affirm that God really does exist, became incarnate, is Trinitarian in being, and reconciles the world to the divine in Jesus Christ. These are objective propositional claims to truth, even though they cannot be established in a tradition-independent way.

Nor do I think that experiential/expressivist views are just expressions of inner feelings, without any reference to objective reality. For Schleiermacher, the main supposed target of the phrase 'experiential/expressivist', and his spiritual successors, experience is not some sort of subjective feeling-state. It is precisely the proper mode of access to the unique objectivity of God. Experience is experience of the objective reality of God. The point of an experiential approach is to stress that religious beliefs are

ultimately founded on experience. Such experience may be objective and historical (as in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus), or inward and personal. But it does give rise to claims about objective reality, to which a sort of experience that is not publicly repeatable, measurable and predictable, but is nonetheless capable of being veridical, is the most appropriate form of access. Of course our description of such experiences is shaped by our concepts and tradition, as can be clearly seen by comparing the differing descriptions of experiences in different religious traditions. Yet those concepts themselves resulted from reflection upon a cumulative set of experiences, grouped around a central paradigm. They do not just float in abstract conceptual space, without any basis in experience, even if they sometimes (as in some discussions about the Trinity) develop what can seem like over-elaborate logical intricacies that have almost, but not quite, lost touch with experience altogether.

The contention that doctrines are best described as grammatical rules descriptive of a linguistic system given by the Bible or by conciliar definitions, threatens to make them seem purely conventional and accidental definitions. It is true that statements like, 'Speak of God as three' or 'Do not speak of God as three' are parts of wider conceptual schemes like that of Christianity or Islam in which they are embedded. But to imply that they are just rules for how Christians or Muslims ought to speak might imply that they do not refer to objective reality at all.

It can be helpful to see how such statements have developed gradually over many years, as parts of wider conceptual schemes that have grown and changed in an organic way. I agree that such conceptual schemes provide a general way of interpreting reality that enables us to see the world in which we live in a distinctive way. These perhaps are the main points Prof. Lindbeck wishes to emphasise. But speaking of them as grammatical (syntactical) rules underplays their semantic content, their intention to refer in some way to objective reality. The statement that 'God is three' is not just a recommendation of a way to use the word 'God'. It claims God is really threefold in being, and it is ultimately based on the experience of Jesus as the act and image of God, of the Spirit as the dynamic presence of God within the heart, and of the transcendent reality of God as the objective source of all reality.

Statements of Christian doctrine are not just cultural/linguistic rules. They always seek to refer to objective reality, and that implies that they should always be open to insights into that reality that derive from sources outside the Christian tradition itself, narrowly construed.

As I have stressed throughout this book, Christian doctrines are constantly being re-thought, and they can be seen as developments in ways of talking. But such developments occur in response to the problems and challenges of particular cultures. They result from reflections on how the basic Christian experiences of God in Jesus Christ and the church are to relate coherently to new historical situations. This is rarely simply a capitulation to culture, but it is equally rarely the construction of a language uninformed by culture. The re-thinking of doctrine arises from creative interaction with wider views of the world and its history. It arises from a continued concern for objective truth, and for a fuller understanding of truth that can only come with greater knowledge given by science, reflective thought and informed critical enquiry. In any case there is not just one church community, and the churches do not as such speak a different language from the rest of the world they live in. What we need to know is why certain 'grammatical rules' (like 'Speak of God in a threefold way') should be accepted. That requires a return to the sources of belief in history, personal experience, and reflection on them.

Lindbeck claims that the Bible has its own conceptual universe, its own 'internal world', with its own criteria of rationality and intelligibility. 'A scriptural world is thus able to absorb the universe' (The Nature of Christian Doctrine, p. 366). Christians must interpret their lives and the universe in terms of the Biblical narrative. We can set aside critical questions about the Bible, just taking the narrative itself as our guide, a unitary narrative that describes God and his actions, and gives Christians the language for interpreting the whole of their experience.

But the Bible does not just present one unitary narrative. It is a complex mixture of alleged 'words' of God, a history of Israel interpreted as a series of divine acts of liberation and judgment, reflections on divine providence (some of them very sceptical), songs, proverbs, stories, letters and cryptic prophecies of future events.

There is no single narrative in all this. There are many voices in the Bible, though of course Christians construct a 'grand narrative' or a number of such narratives from the text in the light of their beliefs about Jesus, narratives which are not acceptable, for instance, to Jews.

The Christian narrative is just one among many possible narrative strands in the Bible. Even then, it stands in need of the sort of doctrinal integration the church gave it, or imposed upon it, over the first few centuries. The synoptic narrative of the kingdom in Jerusalem had to be replaced by the cosmic narrative of the incarnation. And I have shown how throughout its history the Christian faith has been re-thought, precisely by openness to new insights provided by the culture of the time.

In view of this, it seems that Lindbeck's postulate of a 'Biblical narrative' that provides a 'scriptural world' is false to the diverse nature of the Biblical documents and to the continually revised metaphysics of Christian faith. More worrying, however, is the apparent renunciation of the idea of objective truth. If there is an objective truth, then we would hope that science, religion and philosophy would all ultimately be able to agree. At the present time, disagreements reflect our very limited ability to grasp truth, but they do not cast doubt on the importance of the search for truth. Belief in absolute truth does not entail a belief that we have direct access to such truth. In fact it ought to lead us to doubt that we possess the total truth, since we are so ignorant and prejudiced. Yet it protects us from the thought that truth is merely relative, that all is a matter of opinion, and so it does not really matter what we believe. Insofar as it leads to a renunciation of the idea of absolute truth, post-modern thought is a fickle friend, for it quickly leads to the belief that Christian faith is just an option for those who like that sort of thing.

From the Christian point of view, a secular culture like that of the West in the twenty first century does need to be challenged in many respects. But that challenge is not best made by the assertion that Christian language is just different, and must be accepted without any justification, or by a reiteration of a largely obsolete Biblical or medieval worldview. The modern worldview must be encountered and then transformed. In our world, that means meeting the challenge of secularisation head on.

Despite his rejection of liberal German theology, one of the most important theologians of the twentieth century, Karl Barth, in fact absorbed most of the lessons of liberalism. He accepted critical views of the Bible, but simply did not see the need to refer to them in his positive exposition of biblical narratives. There is a need, however, to make acceptance of critical scholarship more open and apparent. For it is important to say that some Biblical views - about the legitimacy of genocide or stoning to death, for example - are just mistaken, and reflect the limited opinions of specific writers, rather than dictates of God.

Barth also accepted a radically revised view of God as involving the divine nature in time and history, but did not clearly acknowledge his debt to philosophical thought. He gave the impression that his views owed nothing to philosophers, and this again led some of his followers to think that theology should owe nothing to philosophy.

Barth accepted the pluralist view that various competing worldviews can be equally rational or justifiable to their respective adherents, but made the invalid inference that no reasons can be given for accepting a particular revelation. He was right to think that the giving of reasons is very largely an 'internal' matter of exhibiting the coherence and integration of your own scheme of beliefs. But he was mistaken in denying that there could be a common basis of human knowledge and experience to which your belief-scheme needs to be related, with varying degrees of plausibility. All of us speak from a specific viewpoint, but we

have the best chance of approaching truth when we take fully into account the viewpoints of others on what is, after all, the same reality.

Barth's apparently decisive 'no' to natural theology, to relating Christianity to a scientific or philosophical worldview, to a global dialogue of religions, is not after all so decisive. Regrettably, it has seemed so to some of his followers. Christians do need to affirm the priority of God, and to have confidence that God's revelation in Jesus Christ has the power to illuminate every area of human thought and activity. But this is best done by open-ness to and engagement with, not rejection of, all the diverse aspects of modern global culture. That requires, not a view that rejects liberalism, but a more careful analysis of the positive values of liberalism, and of how liberalism is an instrumental but vital part of a contemporary commitment to Christian orthodoxy. Liberalism taken on its own may have the consequence of total scepticism or even relativism. But orthodox Christian belief in the priority of the personal, the reality of the embodiment of the eternal in time, and the final fulfilment and reconciliation of persons in God, is best articulated by a liberal commitment to freedom of belief, the acceptance of informed critical enquiry in the sciences and in history, and the freely chosen creative expression of personal values. Only when those beliefs and values are taken together, can we see the outlines of a truly liberal Christian faith.

The greatest challenge to Western secular culture comes, not from purely intellectual arguments, but from a perceived link between elite liberal culture and political domination and oppression. With the collapse of old imperialisms has come the danger of a new science-based secular imperialism that relegates religious faith to being a matter of private opinion, and that seeks to export a materialistic capitalism to the whole world, threatening to subordinate the third world permanently to multinational, Western based, economic interests. The vast majority of the earth's population belongs to the economically developing world, emerging from the colonial era into a world in which they are still structurally disadvantaged economically, politically, and socially.

It is a theological response from the 'third world' that has most fully developed a distinctive twentieth century re-thinking of Christian belief. This is the response of the theology of liberation. It seeks to challenge the dominant elites of the world, which in the twentieth century were largely Christian, in the name of social justice and of Christian concern for 'the poor'.

Liberation theology is sometimes opposed to liberalism, as the ideology of the underprivileged verses the ideology of the bourgeoisie. But it is better seen as an extension of the basic principles of liberalism to all persons without exception.

Some liberals did argue that the gospel has nothing to do with the affairs of the world and that, as Harnack put it, the concern of Christian faith is solely with 'God and the soul, the soul and God' (Harnack, What is Christianity? Lecture 7). Such a faith might well leave the structures of society untouched, left to be sorted out in accordance with their own, nonreligious, principles. It is no accident that Harnack came from a Lutheran tradition that tended to separate religion quite sharply from political life. This is not necessarily part of a liberal view of Christian faith at all. But since it was associated with some German liberal theologians, it can be seen as a sixth strand of historic liberalism, a strand of individualism, that sees the freedom of the autonomous individual as of great, perhaps supreme, importance. This strand has been important in subsequent social, economic and political life. In those realms it has tended to oppose centralised social control and restrictions on individual economic freedom. Then it notoriously faces the paradox that the unrestricted freedom of some will negate the freedom of many. If we are concerned with the freedom of all to realise their unique gifts and capacities, we will have to have a much more positive view of the role of societies in making possible and extending the realms of possible activity open to individuals. All humans can be truly free only when they co-operate in societies that make many worthwhile exercises of freedom possible. In this sense liberalism is actually in conflict with radical individualism. But it may still oppose the authority of custom and tradition over individuals, who are encouraged to make their own free choices. In religion, it may encourage freedom from hierarchical authority and tradition, and see religious faith as a matter, as Harnack put it, between the soul and God.

Yet if such liberalism is to gain a secure foothold, it requires freedom of belief, expression, and critical enquiry, and therefore it requires the existence of a certain sort of free, secure and self-confident society. It is incompatible with a society that imposes one set of beliefs on all, that imposes censorship on thought and speech, or that allows the freedom of some to impede the freedom of all. In other words, liberalism does have a political agenda. It is not just, as Harnack said, 'inwardness and individualism' (lecture 1). Even Harnack saw that Christian faith is concerned with the 'realised dominion of the good' (lecture 8), with belief in divine providence, and with the destiny of all to be children of God. These thoughts point to the necessity of developing some providential view of human history, and some idea of the sort of society within which humans can live as members of one common family in love. Since persons live in history and in societies, their freedom and independence cannot, or ought not to be, merely inward and individual. It can only exist in a society that nourishes liberty, fraternity and the sort of relationships that are essential to personal flourishing and to interpersonal love. Individual persons can only flourish in community, and so liberalism has to be concerned with the sort of community that best enables such flourishing.

In theory liberal thought should apply to all persons without exception, and its association with bourgeois life styles is thus a practical shortcoming, not a theoretical necessity. Liberalism asks that all should have freedom of thought and access to informed criticism. It asks that all created persons should have the capacity to develop their God-given capacities in freedom. If that is only possible in a society in which all have enough to eat and are not oppressed by a privileged class or a tyrannical dictator, then theological liberalism requires a liberal society that values freedom, and that seeks to provide some sort of equality of opportunity for personal flourishing, and protection against the arbitrary whims of government.

Marxists object to this sort of liberalism on the ground that it does not recognise the existence of a class war between rich and poor, or see that revolution is needed if oppression of the poor is to be ended. Liberal Christians have indeed traditionally sought a common good in which all could share harmoniously, and have opposed the use of violence to attain political or religious ends. Marxist commitment to conflict, violence and revolution are tendencies that Christians cannot share. Yet Marxism can be seen as a deviant form of prophetic religion. Anyone who believes in a creator God will be disposed to hope that the world will progress towards greater justice, and will probably acknowledge that it will have to do so through dialectical struggle, a continued struggle against selfishness and egoism, which perpetually takes new forms and disguises. But when God, and especially the notion of a God who suffers with the poor, is taken away, there may no longer be moral limits on the use of violence to achieve such goals. That is, sadly, what happened to Marxism, ironically turning it into one of the great repressive political systems of history.

Yet Marx did say things of great importance to twentieth century theologians. He stressed that persons can only be free in relationship, so that they cannot be considered as isolated inward units. You cannot be free to hear a symphony if there is no orchestra or system of training in music – both social facts. He stressed that the material conditions of existence must be changed if personal values of creative freedom are to be expressed properly. He saw the necessity for a 'vanguard' of the final classless society, which could lead the way towards a better future for the poor and oppressed.

In all these respects, Marx contributed to a re-thinking of the sort of theological liberalism that held aloof from political life, and remained content with an inward liberty, largely for those who could take external liberty for granted. Theologians of liberation do not renounce liberalism, understood as a search for the creative freedom of persons in community. They renounce liberalism only as a theology of pure inwardness in a world where huge numbers of people starve and die because of social oppression or indifference. Liberation theologians have to find their way between a Marxist-Leninist commitment to the violent overthrow of repressive social structures and a supine acceptance of social injustice. But they see that salvation or liberation involves social and political freedom, not just an inner spiritual freedom.

That was, after all, true of Hebrew thought, for which any talk of individual salvation hardly makes sense. It is the people, the community, who are to be liberated from their political oppressors, and that is God's will.

Israel's liberation from her enemies is a political liberation, where the people will have self-government, peace will be preserved, and the rules of social justice will be implemented.

What has complicated the issue for Christianity is that Jesus seemed to renounce violent or overtly political action, in going to his death without protest. That has given rise to the impression that Christian faith has no social or political agenda, but is just concerned with inner feelings or other-worldly hopes – that is certainly how Marx saw it, and he despised what he saw.

It must be remembered, however, that Jesus lived in a country under military dictatorship, which was just about to be destroyed and eliminated. He preached to Jews who had in Torah a code of social justice, and Jesus, according to Matthew, preached that Torah should be obeyed with the whole heart.

Jesus renounced any Messianic role as one who would overthrow Rome by some sort of revolution, but he lived in anticipation of the coming of a kingdom of justice. He called people to live by the laws of justice. Any attempt at violent revolution would have failed – as it did just a few years later. It seems fairly clear that his message was to seek justice – ‘blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled’ (Mat. 5, 6), but to renounce violence as a path to justice – ‘love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you’ (Mat. 5, 44). It is simply untrue that Jesus' gospel had nothing to do with the affairs of the world. His reported words show that he longed for justice, but was not prepared to kill for it. There are other, harder, ways, and the cross gives the clue to what they are – not supine acceptance of fate, but active self-sacrifice for the sake of true human liberation.

The kingdom did not come. But what replaced expectation of an imminent end of the world was the calling and obligation of the church to continue Jesus' role of making the material world a true sacrament of the divine will. As Jesus in his own body made the material a sacrament of the divine, so the church as the body of Christ has the vocation of making the physical and social world in which humans live transparent to the divine presence and purpose. That means actively changing the world, and changing it so that it is liberated from estrangement and despair to become a channel of forgiveness, reconciliation and love.

Possibly Harnack was unable to see this because he was blind to the Jewishness of Jesus, to the social teaching of Torah, and to a sacramental view of the church as an imperfect but genuine continuation of the incarnation, as called to foreshadow the kingdom. But if the church is to be the body of Christ, it must forgive, reconcile, heal, feed the hungry and care for the outcaste just as Jesus did. If the church is to prefigure the kingdom, it must seek to embody in the world a society committed to the rule of the divine law of love. The church has a social and political role, to seek justice, but by sacrifice and reconciliation, not by hatred and violence. This may be what Jesus meant when he said, ‘I have not come to bring peace but a sword’ (Mat. 10, 34) – not a sword that he would wield in anger, but a sword wielded by others that would pierce his heart, and the hearts of his followers.

This historical vocation of the church was compromised by its collusion with state power. For liberation theologians, it is important to disentangle the church from such collusion, and to recall it to a vocational role of being the servant of the divine will, which is to show unlimited love, and to show special concern for those who are disadvantaged or outcaste. Some medieval views of the church saw it as the Ark of Salvation, in which a few could be saved from the terror of judgment to come that would fall on the outside world. For the theology of liberation this has been replaced by a recognition that what distinguishes the church is a call to serve the world in love and to proclaim both in word and deed union with God's love for all, not just for its own members – ‘The church ...is interested in one thing only – to carry on the work of Christ...to save and not to judge, to serve and not to be served’ (Gaudium et Spes, Vatican II, 1965, para. 3).

To serve the world entails caring for the true good and flourishing of all. If the church preaches liberation

from sin, then it must also proclaim liberation from social conditions that derive from or that exacerbate sin. Any social structure that encourages greed, hatred or the frustration of the abilities and opportunities of whole classes of people must be opposed by the church. The Liberation theologians saw that most human societies stand condemned by this criterion. Racial, sexual and religious discrimination are in opposition to the divine will for the flourishing of the created gifts of all finite persons, not for a privileged class, race or sex. If racial groups have been enslaved and oppressed, as they have; and if women have been regarded as an inferior sex, as they have; liberation theologians call for action, especially within the churches themselves, that will redress such gross injustices. Black theology and feminist theology are just two twentieth century movements that express a new sense of the social relevance and calling of the Christian gospel - though they both sometimes despair of the churches ever really having the will to break with its past social and elitist alliances. The gospel calls for a preferential option for the poor, not because God only loves the poor, but because they are the ones who are oppressed or ignored by society. The rich may need pastoral care, but they need no liberation from conditions that prevent them from creatively realising their own potentialities.

Such an interest by the church in social and political life at once involved it in the greatest political upheaval of the twentieth century, the spread of revolutionary Marxism across the globe. Marx was no lover of religion, seeing it as a bulwark of conservative and reactionary social forces. He saw human history as a dialectical process of social and economic conflict that would culminate in the final revolution of the proletariat against exploitative capitalism, and the establishment of a classless society in which all would be free to fulfil their own capacities. Marxism is 'materialist', in that it takes the facts of economic existence – 'the modes of production and exchange' - as the real driving forces of history. Beliefs and moral values are by-products of these forces, and there is no such thing as absolute truth. 'Truth' is what is accepted by the dominant class of society. Marxism is 'dialectical', in that it does not see society as harmoniously striving towards the common good. Class struggle is an inevitable factor in history, and the oppressed classes must continually overthrow their oppressors, until at last, when the proletariat rule, there is no one left to overthrow. So Marxist-Leninism teaches that violence is essential to accomplish the final liberation of the poor. Talk of love and tolerance is a defensive mechanism of the rich to prevent social revolution taking place.

Marxism is a genuine post-Enlightenment or post-liberal philosophy. It is born from Enlightenment concerns for equality and liberty, for a historical and scientific approach to human thought and human nature, and for an ultimately optimistic view of how human action can change the world for the better. Yet it sees its parent, the Enlightenment, as mired in a self-deceiving ideology that lives in luxury by repressing the desires and ambitions of a huge underclass, which is regarded as not enlightened or capable of civilised behaviour. Marxism teaches that ideas and beliefs are only a scum on the surface of the will to power. It penetrates the deceit that there are some absolute truths known to a privileged few, whom others should just obey, and sees that it is rhetoric and power that will survive in the struggle for existence. It no longer claims to have 'the true' view. It only claims to have the view that is historically destined to win. It will out-narrate and out-fight the opposition, and usher in a new age in which the oppressed workers are at last liberated from the chains that bind them.

The Instruction on Certain Aspects of the Theology of Liberation, issued by Cardinal Ratzinger in 1984, places the Catholic Church, at least, firmly in opposition to all such post-liberal views. Truth is not just a by-product of economic struggle. Conflict is not essential to society. Violence is not a justifiable means to a moral goal. History will not inevitably end in a wholly classless and just society, unless human hearts are first changed to love the Good. Religion is not essentially a justification for social oppression and inequality. On all these points the Instruction seems to be right.

Yet liberation theologians like Gustavo Gutierrez, the Peruvian theologian who significantly influenced the Medellin meeting of Catholic Bishops in 1968 to declare a 'preferential option for the poor', and who wrote *A Theology of Liberation* in 1971, have rarely, if ever, agreed with such points in any case.

Gutierrez unequivocally believes that a morally demanding God is the creator of all things, and what God demands is a search for truth, reconciliation through love, and a turning of the heart to God as the beginning of human liberation. It is precisely because this God was incarnate in one who suffered and died for the sake of the poor, that the church is commanded to opt for the poor and to seek justice for all. Gutierrez speaks of a 'mystical dimension' as well as 'a prophetic dimension' in the role of the church. The church must teach both the contemplation of the God who is perfect beauty, and also seek to change history so that it can become a channel of God's beauty to all who inhabit the earth.

Inner liberation, the liberation of the heart from hatred to love the God who is unlimited love, may sometimes be the only thing open to a person who is oppressed by political forces. But such liberation is unreal unless it seeks, where possible, to mediate God's love to the world in practical and material ways.

Jurgen Moltmann, one of the founding fathers of liberation theology, says that 'the church represents the future of the whole of reality and so mediates this eschatological future to the world' (*The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, SCM 1977, p. 196).

This means that the church must work, as it always has done, for liberation from hatred, greed and ignorance in the individual. But it also means that the church must work for liberation from oppressive conditions in the economic realm, from anything that has been socially imposed and so is socially removable, anything that frustrates the flourishing of created beings.

Marxism may be accused of a Utopian belief that economic change will of itself bring about a happy and just society. Liberation theology is not committed to that view. It is aware that happiness and justice, in the sense of genuine concern for the flourishing of all created beings, can in the end only spring from hearts converted to God and filled with God's love. Yet, in commanding that we love all created beings, God wills that we genuinely care for them, and that means removing conditions that impede their flourishing. The church not only proclaims that the kingdom has drawn near. It proclaims that we are to be co-workers in making the kingdom visible – as Moltmann puts it, in making God's future present. This is not Utopian, because it gives no guarantee that the just society will result from our efforts. That is in God's hands, but the responsibility for working towards it is in ours.

So a major twentieth century re-thinking of Christian faith is a realisation that the role of the church in the world is not to provide a secure path to heaven for a few who will escape the general doom of the world. It is to work, through acts of charity and reconciliation, for the liberation of every human being, and even, so far as it is possible, for the liberation of all created things, from all that frustrates the fulfilment of their God-created capacities. There is no guarantee that our efforts will realise such an ideal, but there is an absolute divine command to try. The church exists, not for its own sake or even for the sake of its members. It exists for the sake of the world and its liberation. But any dispassionate observer might say that a good place to begin the search for liberation might be within the church itself.