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REMEMBERING LONDON: THE STORY OF THE FAITH COMMUNITIES OF LONDON AND THEIR PROSPECTS

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Ken Livingstone reflecting on his many years of involvement in London government noted two major changes in the life of the capital. The population had grown and “it was a more religious city”. His view was confirmed by the results of the 2011 census which revealed that London was significantly more religiously observant than the UK as a whole. Over 48% of Londoners identified themselves as Christians. 20% did not identify with any religion. 12% said they were Muslims, 5% Hindu and 1.8% Jewish. The presence of a plethora of smaller communities makes London a home for every conceivable religious belief including a Jedi community.

This phenomenon has been very little studied by mainstream commentators on London and its future, except in the context of the threat posed by religious extremism. In consequence I propose to give a very brief sketch of the story of faith communities in London, demonstrate their growing diversity and offer some hope that they could play a significant and constructive part in London’s future.

The Museum of London houses evidence of prehistoric religious belief in the London Area but Londinium itself was a creation of the Roman Empire.

Religious life in London was diverse in the 2nd century when the Empire reached its apogee. Traditional deities jostled new comers from the Eastern Mediterranean. There is a mid-3rd century Upper Thames Street inscription recalling the re-building of a temple of Isis. Excavation has also revealed a Southwark Temple precinct dedicated to Mars.

No one knows who first brought news of Christ to the imperial outpost of Britannia. Such was the excellence of the Roman communications system it would have taken comparatively little time to report the events that had occurred in Jerusalem. Their spiritual significance however was available only to believers and it is unclear when the first Christian arrived in Londinium.

The story of the martyrdoms in Lyons in the year 177 AD, and the subsequent writings of Bishop Irenaeus, indicate the presence of a sizeable Greek speaking Christian community in the Rhone Valley by the last quarter of the 2nd century. We can imagine that along with imported wine and Samian ware some trader from Gaul brought the news of how a prophet called Jesus had been crucified and then raised from the dead.

Constantine, proclaimed at York in 306, eventually became the first Christian Emperor. In issuing the Edict of Milan in 313 he legalized the practice of the Christian religion in his part of the Roman Empire and soon after he summoned the bishops of the West to a Council in Arles to consider the disorders in the North African Church. A Bishop of London, Restitutus, is recorded as having been present in Arles in 314.

Three British bishops attended the Council of Rimini in 359. We know because they asked for state assistance with travelling expenses.



But London in the 4th century still retained considerable religious diversity. The London Mithraeum, for example, was operating until at least 350 but the burial of cult objects later in the century suggests growing Christian influence in line with developing imperial policy.

In the convulsions which attended the evacuation of the legions in the early 5th century, the unique survival of the Roman name “Londinium” suggests that London was not abandoned and has never been entirely deserted since imperial times.

The arrival of the pagan Anglo-Saxons however submerged the Church in the Diocese of London. Essex place names, Wednesfeld and Wedynsfeld, reveal possible centres of the worship of Wodin. Harrow-on-the-Hill was another significant pagan shrine formerly called Gumeninga-hearh.

But major English rulers of the turn of the 6th and 7th centuries felt the attraction to the sophisticated culture of Continental Europe, Rome and the Church. It was in this context that Pope Gregory the Great sent Augustine of Canterbury to Kent in 597.

In 601 there was a second missionary expedition led by a Roman abbot, Mellitus. Augustine consecrated him as Bishop of London in 604. His diocese was to be co-terminus with East Saxon territory at this point ruled by a Cristian convert King Saebert, a nephew of the King of Kent. The same year Mellitus established the first St Paul’s Cathedral.

The Venerable Bede records the pagan reaction which followed the death of King Saebert and the accession of his three sons, all pagans. Seeing the Bishop celebrating the Eucharist they demanded the consecrated bread. Mellitus explained that baptism was the indispensable preliminary. The Essex lads answered “We will not enter the font because we know that we have no need of it, but all the same we wish to be refreshed by the bread”. In vain the Bishop insisted that this was not possible and he was expelled from the East Saxon realm.

The situation remained fluid until the arrival of a Greek monk from Tarsus, the birthplace of St Paul. He was already 66 when he was consecrated Archbishop of Canterbury by Pope Vitalian and arrived in England in 669. With the organisation of the church in the urban culture of the Christian East in mind he insisted on sedentarising bishops who up to this point had often been peripatetic.

In 675 Erkenwald was appointed to London having founded Chertsey Abbey where he was Abbot and Barking Abbey for his sister Ethelburga. His fame as a healer and saint endured and survived the Norman Conquest.

The fire of 1087 destroyed the Saxon Cathedral of St Paul but the relics of Erkenwald were miraculously preserved. Bishop Maurice set about building the great mediaeval St Paul’s, which became the largest Cathedral north of the Alps. Erkenwald had a presence in St Paul’s and his shrine was eventually placed behind the high altar. The veneration of Anglo-Saxon saints was part of an effort to bind the kingdom together.

Churches multiplied in London between 960-1200. They began as either private chapels or neighbourhood community or guild places of worship and assembly.

Life for most people was precarious. Disease, fire and sudden fluctuations in trading conditions exposed Londoners to frequent and devastating changes in fortune. Continental visitors noted the alarming violence of the capital. The population grew as young people were drawn in from all over the countries to serve their apprenticeships or to study at the Inns of Court. It made for a volatile mix exacerbated by social divisions between rich and poor and the various guilds. Riots were not unusual. In this context the existence in these centuries of a single united church, observing the same rites and festivals was a powerful contribution to social peace and reconciliation between quarrelling neighbours. The mass ceaselessly repeated in a myriad of gloriously decorated churches and chantry chapels constituted a great uniting energy.

The mediaeval city had over a hundred churches and countless other ecclesiastical institutions, chantries, monasteries and hospitals. But in the brief reign of Edward VI in the middle of the 16th century there was a virtual Cultural Revolution and much of the treasury of mediaeval English art was destroyed in a campaign of iconoclasm while the unity of the old Western Church disintegrated. Different Christian confessions in a city grown obstinately metaphysical became a source of division rather than reconciliation.



Despite efforts to prevent the accession of the devoutly catholic Mary, daughter of Henry's discarded Queen Katherine, the Princess came to the throne amid general rejoicing and set about reversing the legislation of her brother's reign and reconciling England to the Roman obedience but her reign was not sufficiently long to embed the counter-reformation.

Her successor, Elizabeth presided over a cautious and defensive conformism which disappointed a growing puritan party which agitated for a more thorough going reformation – in Patrick Collinson's words “an extensive programme of national renewal which aspired to reform popular culture, everything from maypoles, football, plays and pubs to speech and dress codes and above all the use of Sunday now called the Sabbath – a set of values which applied the Old Testament to life as much as some Muslim regimes apply sharia law, and yes it included the death penalty for adultery although puritan ministers lacked the power of imams and ayatollahs to activate it.”

There was continuing discontent that the Church of England was lagging behind the “best reformed churches of the Continent” and active criticism of aspects of the Church's polity continued to grow as Elizabeth's reign came to an end.

Her successor James I as King of Scotland had been brought up under Presbyterian influence and with his accession his every word was eagerly scrutinised to detect where he stood on the contentious matters of Church order and liturgy.

The reign of James I was overshadowed by the Christian civil war, which was already devastating Europe and our nearest neighbours, France and Holland. James tried to play the Rex Pacificus and to identify the common ground, to make peace with Spain and even to contemplate a Spanish match for his son Charles. All this enraged the hotter English Puritans who pressed for intervention in the European war on the Protestant side.

The liturgy and polity of the Elizabethan Church, however, remained virtually intact. But the critics were not silenced and with the attempts of Archbishop Laud abetted by Charles I to enforce a ceremonious uniformity the puritan onslaught became even more intense.

In 1641, as the royal government and the apparatus of censorship broke down, John Milton, educated at St Paul's School, published his blistering “*Of Reformation in England and the causes that hitherto have hindered it*” Milton hails “the bright and blissful Reformation” which by divine power “struck through the black and settled night of ignorance and anti-Christian tyranny.” He identifies two main obstacles, which “have still hindered our uniform consent to the rest of the churches abroad” - the retention of vestiges of the old world in symbols and ceremonies – “gewgaws fetcht from Aaron's old wardrobe and the flamin's vestry” and above all episcopacy. “It is episcopacy that before all our eyes worsens and slugs the most learned and seeming religious of our ministers who no sooner advanced to it, like a seething pot set to cool, sensibly exhale and reek out the greatest part of that zeal and those gifts which were formerly in them, settling in a skinny congealment of ease and sloth at the top.”

By 1645 the Archbishop had been beheaded, Bishops abolished and the Book of Common Prayer proscribed. The passions of the Civil War, however, in which a greater proportion of the male population of England perished than was killed in World War I, created martyrs and most significantly a royal martyr for the Church of England which could no longer be dismissed as a Church of the luke-warm and timeserving.

We have a precious London eye witness of the effect of these events in the person of Samuel Pepys.

After a period in Huntingdon where the roots of the Pepys family were, the young Samuel became a London schoolboy at St Paul's from the age of thirteen for the next four years.

St Paul's was also the most strongly Calvinist of London schools in Pepys's day. The High Master had campaigned for the abolition of bishops which came to pass in 1645 the year before Pepys's arrival at his school. St Paul's Cathedral next door was at the time used as a shopping mall and for stabling. The school was intimately connected with the Cathedral not least by its sanitary arrangements. The boys' urinal was the space



between two buttresses on the North side for which the school paid one red rose per annum; hardly sufficient one might think to disguise the stink.

Later by the beginning of his diary period Pepys had turned against enthusiasm and was a supporter of the Restoration but the schoolboy Samuel was a puritan and a republican. Just before his sixteenth birthday he was an eye witness to the martyrdom of Charles I and remembers telling his friends at St Paul's that if he had to preach a sermon on the King's execution, his text would be "the memory of the wicked shall rot".

A period studying in Cambridge led to a softening of his youthful puritanism. Just before the Restoration, although Pepys was not a member of any particular congregation, we know from him that he had annoyed his more puritanical mother by attending a number of then illegal Anglican services. He was attached to the liturgy of the Prayer Book. On April 8th 1660 Pepys was on board ship on his way to Holland supping with the ship's chaplain. After supper they sat disputing, "the parson for and I against extemporary prayer very hot".

The diary records frequently comments on sermons but principally as rhetorical exercises. He marks them in the manner of a severe housemaster. He does not record being touched by preaching. A good service for Pepys was like the one he attended at St Alphege Greenwich on January 13th 1660 where he noted "a good sermon, a fine church and a great company of handsome women".

By this stage in common with so many others who had lived through the civil war and the ensuing reign of the godly, Pepys was privately a sceptic. He confides to his diary that Montagu had told him that in matters of religion he was "wholly sceptical" and Pepys comments "as well as I". He nevertheless continued the habit of reading the Bible to his household every week as we learn from the entry for one Sunday in September 1661 which was the first time he had not held the family reading because he was drunk and "durst not read prayers for fear of being perceived by my servants in what case I was."

He had learnt to be suspicious of enthusiasm and a horror of "enthusiasm", corybantic ecstasy and the like continued to be typical of the Church of England until comparatively recent times.

On January 7th 1661 Pepys wrote "this morning news was brought to me to my bedside that there hath been a great stirr in the City this night by the Fanatiques who have been up and killed six or seven men, but all are fled. My Lord Mayor and the whole city have been in armes." That night on his way home, Pepys and his party "were in many places strictly examined more than in the worst of times there being great fear of these fanatiques rising again. For the present I do not hear that any of them are taken".

This was the rising of the Fifth Monarchy Men led by Thomas Venner who had come out of a service at their chapel in Coleman Street to conquer the world for Christ the King. They were to terrify the city for 3 days, taking refuge by night in the woods at Kenwood near Highgate. On the 9th Pepys found many fellow citizens in arms so he returned home "[though with no good courage at all, but that I might not seem to be afeared] and got my sword and pistol, which however I have no powder to charge".

When the new Parliament convened on May 8th 1661 one of its first acts was to insist that every member should receive the sacrament according to the rite of the Church of England. Sheldon and the bishops were now in a position to restore the old church without compromise with the Presbyterians. There was a drive for uniformity understandable at a time when memories of the Civil War were still so raw.

The Civil War has been romanticised. It has been seen in the words of "*1066 and All That*" as a duel between puritans who were right but repulsive and cavaliers who were wrong but romantic. In truth the hundred thousand lives lost represented as great a proportion of the population as the losses in the First World War. After some years of slaughter on principle and homicidal religious zeal it is not surprising that a period of cynicism followed.

Our civil war was just a part of a terrible sequence of destructive wars in the 17th century to which religious divisions made a major contribution. They devastated the continent of Europe. Our West European Enlightenment emerged out of horror and disgust with what religious fanaticism had done to our continent.



When I studied history dilute Marxism was still the fashion and so the religious character of the war was sedulously edited out. Contemporaries, however, were in no doubt. It is not just a coincidence that it was during the last decade from 1638-48 of the horrifying Thirty Years War that Galileo published his “Dialogue concerning Two New Sciences” and Descartes his “Principles of Philosophy” while Newton was born. As Richard Tarnas wrote in his fine book *The Passion of the Western Mind*, “The fragmentation brought about by warring Christian absolutisms argued the need for another type of belief system more rationally persuasive and less controversially subjective.”

Of course this position was not incompatible with being a Christian believer of various kinds. Newton certainly was as you can see from his voluminous writings on the Book of Daniel. And there is another example connected with St Paul’s. Sir Christopher Wren’s father was ejected from his home and living by enthusiastic Protestants during the Civil War. His uncle, Matthew spent 15 years in the Tower for the same reason. As we have seen from Pepys’s Diary the early years of the Restoration were haunted by the fear that sectaries of various kinds would make a come-back. Wren’s answer is in St Paul’s and the City Churches. God is a God of beauty and order, quite like an architect, and not a God of volcanic and irrational enthusiasm. A bishop was among the prominent founders of the Royal Society and in England the divorce between a scientific approach to life and faith was never so pronounced and absolute as it often was on the Continent.

One of the reasons why the political culture of this country is different from that of our Continental neighbours is that religion in the past two centuries has never been the defining issue in the battles between left and right. This arises from one of the consequences of the religious settlement in Pepys’s time. Despite their best efforts the three main Christian traditions in England failed to achieve what they all desired, which was to create a religious monopoly. Puritans in the Commonwealth, Prelatists at the Restoration and Papists in the reign of James II all attempted to establish a monopoly. They fought each other to a standstill and without intending it, opened the door to pluralism. When it became necessary to confront the injustices of the established political and economic status quo in the 19th century, the early Trades Unionists, the Tolpuddle Martyrs, were not led by Marxist agitators but by Methodist lay preachers. In England, however much you might have disliked the Church of England, it was never necessary to oppose Jesus Christ to agitate for change.

In countries which combined an authoritarian tradition with a religious monopoly, where Christ seemed, bizarrely, to be an ally of the status quo then in those countries, Russia, Prussia, France, Spain and Italy, religious monopoly spawned large, left wing, atheist parties. By contrast, in England the membership of the British Communist party had at no point ever equalled the membership of the Lord’s Day Observance Society.

In much of the rest of Europe especially in France the Enlightenment tradition was more closely identified with anti-clericalism. Laicite is still a force in French politics and led President Chirac and Premier Jospin to intervene famously to expunge positive references to the Christian contribution to the history of Europe from a significant EU text in support of the French view that nothing valuable happened in European culture between the death of Marcus Aurelius and the birth of Voltaire.

It is of course true that the great killers in the 20th century were the secular Messianic states, Hitler’s Germany and Stalin’s Russia with their pseudo-scientific visions of how to build a secular, populist heaven on earth. But still obstinately, despite most recent evidence, the orthodoxy of the Pig and Whistle is that “the worst wars in history have been religious wars”.

In Pepys day there were strenuous efforts to rebuild a confessional state but he is a guide to the ebbing of obstinate metaphysical zeal and its replacement by a sane conformism and a lively curiosity about the wonders of the natural world revealed by the microscope and the telescope.

The early 19th century saw the definitive end of the confessional state in England with the repeal of the Test Act in 1828 and Catholic emancipation the following year. Government assistance was no longer forthcoming for church building to accommodate the rapidly expanding population and instead there was an assault on the remaining endowments of the Church in Ireland. These developments led to a renewed crisis of Anglican identity.



During this period also the Cities of London and Westminster were centres of the agitation which eventually succeeded in opening membership of Parliament to practising Jews. Bevis Marks in the City of London is the oldest synagogue in the UK. After the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands and the closure of the Great Synagogue of Amsterdam, Bevis Marks can claim the longest history of uninterrupted Jewish worship in Europe.

The beginnings of greater religious diversity in 19th century London was vastly augmented by the demographic transformation of the capital after the Second World War. Some saw this as a problem and feared that rival faith groups might fight like ferrets in a sack. This was the context for the foundation and development of the Centre of Reconciliation and Peace at St Ethelburga's Bishopsgate as a response to the threat but also to the promise of religious diversity.

Exactly twenty five years ago in 1993, St Ethelburga's Bishopsgate as often before in its story, was heading for closure under the ugly sounding "redundancy procedure". Life was at a low ebb and the Diocesan authorities had decided, not for the first time, that enough was enough. The insurance policy was removed – a prudent decision at the time but seven days later the Bishopsgate bomb went off and this ancient church was reduced to rubble. A photo-journalist, Edward Henty was killed sheltering in the doorway and more than fifty people were injured.

I was Bishop of Stepney at the time. It seemed obvious to me that we could not allow the IRA to succeed where Hitler had failed. My colleagues who perhaps knew more of the details than I did and who had lived with the Ethelburga problem for many years disagreed. I was outvoted 12-1 and it was decided to hold an architectural competition to construct a suite of offices while preserving the one arcade which had survived the blast. The resulting design was turned down by the city planners 18 -1.

By this time I had become the Bishop of London and was able to change the arithmetic in the Diocesan team. With the ready assistance of Cardinal Hume and Janet Sowerbutts, Moderator of the Thames North Province of the United Reformed Church, I set about raising the funds to build a Centre for Reconciliation and Peace to prevent and transform those many conflicts in the modern world which had a religious dimension. The idea from the beginning was to offer the Centre as a gift to all the faith communities but since the quarrel which had ignited the bomb derived some of its energy from an intra-Christian dispute, those originally involved in the building of the Centre came from every part of the Christian Community although we were soon joined by friends from the other Abrahamic traditions.

With all the City Churches, my idea has been to respect and interrogate their stories in the conviction that if we understand their connections and continuities we shall be led to discover the most appropriate extended use for them in our own day. In the case of St. Ethelburga there was of course shocking discontinuity and destruction and as I contemplated the rubble, this moved me to attempt some kind of bridge building between people of faith. Even in 1996, I saw that we were not going to be allowed to take a holiday from history and that the orthodoxy in N.W. Europe that religion would be steadily marginalised as the process of modernisation unfolded was being challenged – not least in the Islamic revolution in Iran.

At the time this was not the received wisdom even though in that year, 1996, Professor Samuel Huntington's book on "The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order" was published.

I had the privilege some three years later of giving a lecture at the Humbolt University in Berlin in which I surveyed some of the evidence which pointed to the need to establish a Centre at St Ethelburga's. The arguments I deployed then of course seemed obvious once the dreadful events of 9-11 in New York had changed the way in which we regarded the very different landscape of the 21st century.

"Religion in many parts of the world is crucial to social cohesion and is therefore likely to be co-opted in any struggle which centres on the identity of any particular group or people. Folk wisdom understands how the highest ideals are bent to the most malign purposes. As Jonathan Swift, an Irish Dean and the author of Gulliver's Travels lamented, "how is it that we have just enough religion to hate one another but not enough to love one another?"



As a believer, I can very easily see the perils of religion and I can sympathize with the position adopted by a great 18th c. clergyman of the Church of England, Bishop Warburton. The Bishop was said to occupy a small corner of reasonableness within the Ark “as much disgusted by the stink within, as by the tempest without”. The trouble seems to be that if we do not exercise our faculty for worship in a worthy tradition then the vacuum is filled by something unworthy. In this century, [I was speaking at the end of the 20th century], that vacuum has been occupied by the ersatz liturgies of the messianic state according to Stalin or Hitler.

Is it possible however to move beyond the idea that reasonable religion serves to occupy the space where cults of unreason may otherwise flourish? Are there positive resources within the traditions and institutions of the world’s faith communities capable of making a contribution to peace making?

There is certainly great resistance to the idea that religion has any positive contribution to make in the Anglo-American world. Religion has often been edited out of grown up Anglo-American discourse and relegated to the realm of private taste. This attitude can have serious consequences.

It seems obvious now that US monitoring of Iranian politics ought always to have included the religious dimension but as a report from the Washington based “Center for Strategic and International Studies” has revealed, “the one recorded attempt to do just that within the CIA, before the revolution, was vetoed on the grounds that it would amount to mere sociology, a term used in intelligence circles to mean the time wasting study of factors deemed politically irrelevant.”

In 1999 however this was still a thesis which did not convince many of those who had developed a view of religion as a more or less harmless lifestyle choice with little significance in the daylight world.

I said that the idea was born from contemplating the radical discontinuity and devastation of the bomb but then by sheer chance, I was glancing idly at volume 37 published by the admirable London Record Society and entitled “Unpublished London Diaries. A Checklist.” I happened to see entry 437 relating to a Rector of St Ethelburga’s, J.M.Rodwell and went to the Guildhall to read it on my day off. [You can see what sad diversions are enjoyed by bishops.]

After some biographical notes I was astonished to see a notice of the second and revised edition of Rodwell’s translation of the Qur’an. There were indeed continuities between the story of St Ethelburga’s and its present restored state and purpose.

Soon after making this discovery I was present in this church in November 2004 when the distinguished scholar and modern translator of the Qur’an Professor Abdel Haleem arrived bearing a copy of the version which had just come from the presses of the OUP. Professor Haleem has been an unfailing adviser and friend in the development of the Centre and he did me the honour of presenting me with this precious book. I told him about Rodwell’s connection with St Ethelburga’s and he was immediately able to point to his preface where he discusses previous English translations and recognises Rodwell’s achievement.

“He had a linguistic talent that enabled him to come up with innovative solutions to previously intractable problems. It is easy to perceive the influence of Rodwell’s work on many subsequent translators. Rodwell also instigated the practice of partial numbering of Qur’anic verses, providing some help to those wishing to cite passages from his translation.”

Thus the judgment of one of the most distinguished Qur’anic scholars of our own day.

On the title page of his translation Rodwell printed a quotation from Thomas Carlyle’s celebrated lecture on the “Hero as Prophet” in which the Scottish sage comprehensively rejected the customary negative estimate of the prophet Muhammad. “The lies which well meaning zeal have heaped round this man are disgraceful to ourselves only.” Instead Carlyle proclaimed, “Sincerity, in all senses, seems to me the merit of the Koran.” Carlyle saw the Prophet as a kind of Hegelian agent of reform forging a new unity which propelled the Bedouin tribes to form a great Arab civilization.

Carlyle’s Lecture was originally delivered in May 1840 and represented a no doubt flawed attempt to reach out and understand the roots of a civilization which from time out of mind had filled Christian Europe with fear.



Rodwell's work also had the effect of providing the basis for a more accurate and sympathetic exploration of the Other in Victorian England.

Over the past twenty five years, without grandstanding the Ethelburga Centre has played host to every conceivable kind of faith community. A number of tool kits have been developed which have proved themselves in actual conflict situations. The facilities have been enhanced as a result of the generosity of a Muslim benefactor who presented the Centre with a Gortex and goats' hair "tent of assembly" which emits a wonderful fragrance in Bishopsgate when it rains. Interfaith relations have been deepened with the practice of "scriptural reasoning" originally developed from a Jewish initiative in the US. Believers from different traditions, typically Jews, Christians and Muslims confront contemporary questions drawing on their respective scriptures. There are no polemics but each participant has to speak accountably in the hearing of all the others. Most often the result is a deeper conviction about one's own tradition together with a greater respect for the others. At the same time the Centre has welcomed musicians and artists to celebrate the many facets of spirituality.

All this emerged from a 20th century anticipation of the renewed salience of religious faith and institutions in the 21st and their capacity to be complicit in conflict or a resource for peace building. The anxiety about "extremism and radicalisation" reflected in recent government and police policy announcements demonstrates the continuing relevance of the work of the Centre but the wider landscape has changed and we are having to confront new threats and devise a fresh response.

In 1992, the year before the Bishopsgate bomb the American sage Francis Fukuyama published his celebrated book *The End of History*. You will remember the thesis that with the advent of liberal democracy and market economics, we have reached the consummation of the human project. "What we are witnessing," Fukuyama wrote, "is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of post war history, but the end of history as such: that is the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government."

Market economics, hailed as the engine of progress, were seen, in alliance with liberal democracy, as having put an end to the era of competing ideologies. "At the end of history," Fukuyama argued, "it is not necessary that all societies become successful liberal societies; merely that they end their ideological pretensions of representing different and higher forms of human society."

Yet his vision has an elegiac quality to it. He describes the end of history as a

"very sad time. The struggle for recognition, the willingness to risk one's life for a purely abstract goal, the worldwide ideological struggle which called forth daring, courage, imagination and idealism will be replaced by economic calculation, the endless solving of technical problems, environmental concerns, and the satisfaction of sophisticated consumer demands."

There seems to me much that is still resonant about this picture of the present. Many people see the point we have reached in Western Societies as inevitable rather than as one of many possible choices, a state attained by struggle and a myriad of decisions. Others, however, seem to be rejecting the plausibility and even desirability of Fukuyama's vision of the consummation of the human project. Today it is still possible to dismiss them as "extremists" of right or left but the signs multiply that we are entering a new multi-polar world in which easy assumptions of the superiority of liberal democracy are being questioned. A whole view of history is being challenged. John Gray in an important article in the *New Statesman* described this view as one of "a world without precedent" in which "nationalism and religion will no longer be deciding forces in politics and rivalry for territory and resources will have been left behind". In this view "basic freedoms will be protected in a universal framework of human rights".

This world view associated with liberal democracy is underpinned by a belief in progress and a convergence on the Western model of liberal democracy. But even in our own society this belief in ineluctable progress is faltering. Survey after survey suggests that a majority of people believe that the prospects for the young are less than the opportunities enjoyed by their parents' generation. In particular social mobility seems less plausible as globalisation and AI take their toll on the kind of jobs which generated extensive post war social mobility. There is a particular problem for modestly skilled people and a consequent loss of self-respect and dignity.



A sense that the liberal world view is crumbling has been reinforced by international developments. The various attempts at regime change in Iraq, Libya and Syria have resulted at least in the short term in chaos and there seems to be no end to the war in Afghanistan. Doubt is also reflected in political developments closer to home. “Alternative for Germany” is now the principal opposition party in the most powerful country in Europe. In Italy a strange populist coalition seems to still be making gains by stoking fears about immigration. Gray also points out that powerful currents of opinion in our universities repudiate “the Western civilisation that gave birth to a liberal way of life” by focussing on the evils of imperialism and exploitation by international big business.

More benignly, there has been a hope that if we leave behind any particular national memories then we shall be open to a kinder and more tolerant future. It is indeed true that what we choose to remember shapes the future. We cannot change the past but we are responsible for how we remember it. The power of remembering is such that it has been the ambition of every would-be tyranny to control our memories. In George Orwell’s dystopia *1984* the personnel of the Ministry of Truth work to destroy the records of the past. They print new up-to-date editions of old newspapers and books knowing that the corrected version will soon be replaced by another re-corrected one. The intention is to nationalise personal and corporate memories to make people more malleable. Our memories constitute our identity and deprived of them by degrees we become incapable of questioning anything we are told to believe.

The idea was that the liberal democratic future could be built if we remembered the iniquities of our imperial past but passed over our struggles, successes and triumphs. Pride in being English came to be an embarrassment and so St George and his flag were banished from polite company. The problem is that failure to celebrate and love the story of which we are a part does not in fact lead to greater kindness and tolerance.

One of the most revealing conversations I have ever had was with a young man in the East End when I was Bishop of Stepney. We were in a season of communal tension. It was right to insist that we should respect culture of the various ethnic groups who had made the East End their home but I realised another truth when the young man said “What’s my effing culture then bish?” He had a real sense of poverty of a kind which is very rare in other countries. It does not lead to tolerance but to anger and lashing out. You cannot exorcise the Satanic by creating a spiritual vacuum.

It is also right to celebrate our particular inheritance of law. No one is above the law was the message of Magna Carta. “Is Magna Carta nothing to you?” said Tony Hancock. “Did she die in vain?” I wonder whether school children are still taught that wonderful story of Prince Hal and the Lord Chief Justice. But we have more recent examples. Last month I attended a commemoration of Stephen Lawrence. He was murdered 25 years ago and it is an event which we should not forget. Nor the fact that despite attempts to frustrate justice the law in the person of Sir William Macpherson forced powerful institutions to face up to their failings. That is also a vital part of the English story which is always evolving and incorporating new themes.

In other countries the primal needs for security and identity are being addressed by great powers using new technologies in the pursuit of survival and primacy. Could Xinjiang and its Uighur Autonomous Region be the shape of things to come? An alarming article in last week’s *Economist* described the way in which modern technology has come close to realising the dream of Jeremy Bentham of creating a “Panopticon”, a state of inescapable surveillance.

The international liberal order was an aspect of post war American hegemony. “Liberal regimes are not free standing structures of law and rights but political constructions that depend for their survival on hard power and popular acceptance. No constitution can prevent liberal forms of government being overthrown when these supports are lacking.” [Gray] America supplied the raw power which has sustained the rules based international order. Recent events suggest that it is no longer willing to play this role. “Liberal” democracy may come to be seen as an elite project which increasingly lacks democratic credentials.

There has been an attempt to bolster “popular acceptance” by incorporating what Ofsted describes as fundamental British values in the educational curriculum. These “fundamental values” are said to be “democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect”. Worthy as these aspirations are, speaking as a grizzled veteran of Speaker Jack Weatherill’s Commission on Citizenship, it is difficult to translate such



abstract ideas into transformative energy without the inspiration which flows from membership of a nourishing community, a memorable narrative and iconic figures.

Religion has been co-opted quite successfully in some of the states seeking to challenge the present unstable status quo. Governments in Russia, Hungary and Poland have appealed to “Christian values” while political Islam of various kinds continues to shape the Middle East. It is noteworthy that attempts to counter the appeal of “Alternative for Germany” in the federal state of Bavaria by directing that crosses should be installed in public buildings have elicited heavyweight opposition from the churches themselves. Is it possible that those who still cherish the ideals of personal freedom and tolerance could find resources for hope in the Judaeo-Christian culture which created the soil in which liberal democracy grew in the first place?

Is it possible that we could build new alliances on the near universal agreement among the world’s great wisdom traditions that we should strive to do as we would wish to be done by?

Our country is becoming one of unparalleled diversity. London in particular is a laboratory in which the future of the human project on this planet is being explored. Shall we be able to live together harmoniously and creatively or will it be impossible for a city like ours, in which just to take the example of one of our church secondary schools in Haringey, seventy languages are spoken from Albanian to Zulu, can such a city cohere?

Without denying the spiritual contribution of other religious traditions to social wellbeing, churches have been places where it has been possible for people to encounter others with different life histories in an environment formed by worship of the one God. The experience of belonging to a community of the kind exemplified by early Methodism engenders self-respect and provides training in the give and take, the deep listening, which is a condition for genuinely democratic life.

Long ago Aristotle saw evidence that when the demos, a people with a shared moral compass and stories and songs in common degenerates into an ochlos, a crowd of atomised individuals then manipulation by what he called sophists and what we would identify as a partial media becomes more likely. The instability which is the result of fitful gusts of emotion, fear and indignation gives rise to some kind of tyranny although Aristotle never envisaged the resources available to contemporary regimes or the subtlety with which they operate.

Worship and participation in a community of faith rehearses a narrative and directs attention beyond the individual self to the One God in a way which makes individual persons “members one of another”.

For Christians every individual person is unique and unrepeatable, not to be confused or homogenized but we find our meaning and joy in life and an intimation of eternal life as we keep the commandment to love and relate together in God. God enables us to live in this way because this is the nature of God’s own being.

God is one but not a solitary monad before whom we must simply do obeisance and submit. God’s being is a dynamic mutual indwelling between Father, Son and Holy Spirit and we are invited to participate in this Trinitarian life “neither confusing the persons nor dividing the substance”.

The 20th century was marked by a contest between ideologies which opposed the individual and the collective. As we search for a new synthesis it could be that the historic role of the Christian churches, recognised in Alexis de Toqueville’s great work on American democracy, as places where democratic manners are cultivated and individualism is tempered by devotion to a common cause will be pivotal in preserving the best of the liberal democratic tradition in the challenging circumstances of 21st century London.