

## Our World

### CULTURE AND WORLD CHRISTIANITY

The wind of Pentecost is blowing world-wide. In 1893, 80% of the Christians in the world lived in Europe and North America. Now almost 60% of Christians throughout the world live in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Pacific. In 1900 there were 10 million African Christians; now there are 400 million, the larger percentage of these being found in the African indigenous Churches. Similarly in Latin America, once the bastion of Roman Catholicism, Pentecostalism is has transformed the Christian landscape. It has been estimated that by 2050 only about one fifth of the world's three billion Christians will be non-Hispanic whites. The era of Western Christianity has passed within our lifetime and the day of Southern Christianity is dawning.

I was brought up believing that Christianity is a Western religion and that the Western Church with its long traditions and missionary enterprise should set the pattern for world Christianity. This is no longer the case. We face a situation comparable to that of the Council of Jerusalem in 49 AD when the mother Church of Jerusalem had to come to terms with the fact that it was no longer at the centre of the Christian world and could no longer impose its traditions and theology on vibrant emerging churches.

Pentecostalism grows because, unlike the mainline more liberal Churches, it affirms an evangelical Biblical faith of the heart, it makes real demands of its members, it uses the music, the symbols and the oral traditions of those it seeks to attract. Pentecostal Churches and indigenous and emphasize the supernatural. Like early Methodism they focus on the poor and the marginalized and offer identity and worth.

Today we are trying to come to terms with three environments for faith. The first is that of pre-modernity. The environment is tribal, hierarchical, communal, and visual. It is reliant on oral transmission and uncritical of its own traditions, customs and myths. The second environment, that of modernity, values reason, fact and democratic ideas. It is critical of what it regards as myths and superstitions. Within this environment wisdom and tradition are expressed in books, history, knowledge and the scientific method. (The Western scientific revolution arose during this phase of modernity because of a philosophical separation of 'subject' and object', 'us' and 'them', the material and the spiritual, the real and the ideal.) Post-modernity describes new features which arose at the end of the last century and which now dominate contemporary Western culture. This environment is highly individualistic, distrusts institutions and replaces history with nostalgia. It rejects the idea of absolute truth and instead values image, intuition, and sensation. (These descriptions of the three environments are very generalized.)

Most of the traditional Protestant Churches in Britain are wedded to modernity. There are therefore real problems facing us because our surrounding culture is becoming increasingly post-modern, while on the world stage new Christians are emerging in a pre-modern environment.

In Britain, many traditional Methodists are suspicious of Pentecostal and Evangelical churches which they sometimes label as fundamentalist. (Fundamentalism is a closed system of belief which is more about speaking and acting rather than to listening and learning. In the world context says, says McGrath, 'fundamentalism is essentially a "reactive" movement which emerges in response to the perception of a threat to the core values of a people or group. What drives fundamentalism on the world stage is fear of Western secularism.) Fundamentalism however, can attach itself to any ideology whether political, evangelical, ecclesiastical, liberal or

Lecture given to members of Hinde Street Methodist Church at High Leigh on 27/10/2012

secular. It can be argued that not only is Richard Dawkins a fundamentalist but so too is Bishop Selby Spang. Both are trapped within their rational reductionist assumptions. It should also be noted that many Methodist church members become fundamentalists when they demonstrate an absolute attachment to pews, their building, or to past programmes and local traditions.

What is happening of the world stage poses huge culture and theological questions over the relationship within our church (and within each of us personally) between faith and knowledge, heart and head.

### THE DECLINE OF CHRISTIAN BRITAIN

Callum Brown charts the inevitable decline of Christian Britain and rightly pours scorn on the facile responses of church leaders who naively think they can reverse the process by changing the ecclesiastical structure or the liturgy. They optimistically expect an upturn which will not happen. The cultural changes which have taken place are of such magnitude that the Church in its present form will only continue 'to exist in some skeletal form'. Before 1800 Christian piety had been located in 'evangelical masculinity', after 1800 in femininity. The 1960's signalled the 'ungendering' of British Christianity which has resulted in a religious vacuum.

It was argued in the 60s that the increasing advance of knowledge and secularization would totally marginalize if not remove religion from the public sphere. This however has not happened. Since the late eighties a new interest in spiritual realities has swept through Western culture. It has tragically by-passed the Churches. John Drane passes a devastating indictment on the institutional Church when he says, 'we seem to have ended up with a secular Church in a spiritual society.' Michael Riddell similarly concludes that 'the greatest barrier to the gospel in contemporary Western culture is the Church'.

Some see hope in the ecumenical dream, believing that renewal will come when the traditional mainline Churches accept each other and pool their resources. These mammoth institutions sadly drag their weary feet when they should be galloping ahead to avoid their own extinction. Little progress can be made, according to Alister McGrath, because ecumenism has 'become the last refuge of the theological bore'. The ecumenical agenda cannot work, he says, because the liberal agenda of ecumenism is irrelevant in today's world of growing conservative evangelical Churches.

John Drane in his *McDonaldization of the Church* latches onto 'consumer choice' when he examines some of the so-called 'growing' Churches in Britain. What is really happening, he says, is that dissatisfied Christians from the dead Churches are either leaving or 'shopping-around' for a more lively Church. Membership growth in one Church precipitates a fall of membership in another in an overall saga of decline.

### FUTURE PATTERNS OF THE CHURCH IN BRITAIN

In his book *Liquid Church*, Pete Ward describes two types of Church; 'solid church' and 'liquid church'. In his analysis of contemporary society, he argues that Western culture is moving to a more fluid form of modernity. He uses the technical word 'modernity' to describe that period in Western history where settlement triumphed over impermanence and reason reigned supreme. Technological innovation, he argues, is now occurring at such an alarming rate that change has become the name of the game. Hitherto, modernity has substituted one solid bureaucracy, institution, set of values, or order of relationships for another. Modernity is now undergoing a liquefying process so that everything is becoming flexible, fuzzy and subject to obsolescence. Our liquid culture has undermined time-honoured values of loyalty to place, tradition and denomination. The Sunday congregation located in a particular place is the central pillar of 'solid

Lecture given to members of Hinde Street Methodist Church at High Leigh on 27/10/2012

church'. 'Solid church' now has all the features of a heritage site and a refuge for a nostalgic community.

In the autumn of 2005 I was with the leaders of Churches Together in England when the following attendance statistics were published for 1998 to 2005:

Pentecostals	+ 34%
Smaller denominations	+ 9%
Orthodox	+ 2%
Independent Churches	- 1%
New Churches	- 8%
Baptists	- 8%
Anglican	- 11%
Methodist	- 24%
Roman Catholic	- 28%
United Reformed	- 43%

Although there was a hint of panic from one member the rest of us were mildly optimistic. The disastrous nosedive of 1990 when over a million people stopped attending Church had not continued. The following day I received an email from the secretary of Churches Together which contained a comment from Grace Davie, Professor of Sociology and Director for European studies at Exeter University:

I have considerable misgivings about projections which examine past and current attendance or membership and use them to predict the future. This kind of forecast depends on the notions that all other things are equal. Never in my professional life have I known a time when this is less likely to be the case.

If the Church in Britain is to endure there appears to be only two choices on offer at the moment. Either Christians join a church with clear evangelical convictions and boundaries demanding a heavy commitment to Christ or one opts for places which provide 'holy space' and which make fewer demands on its worshippers. Traditional churches on the look out for newcomers to run their existing programmes and organisation will probably not survive since faithfulness is in short supply. Theologically illiterate churches or churches attempting to hold their congregations by dumbing down worship or 're-branding' their building or their product will similarly fail. This does not mean that conservative evangelical Churches hold the key to the future. Old-fashioned Biblical fundamentalism may be on its way out in this country even though it may be gaining ground in the US and other parts of the world.

Grace Davie points out that within our consumer culture the 'feel-good' factor is high on the list of people's needs. Evangelical churches with charismatic worship usually provide this 'feel-good' factor but so to does the tranquillity of a cathedral evensong or the mystery of an Orthodox liturgy. Today people want to *feel* something; an experience of the holy. The purely cerebral has little appeal for the younger generation.

### LIMINALITY

Few expected the Church in Britain to survive after the apocalyptic strife of the seventeenth century, yet God raised up Methodism to spread scriptural holiness. Throughout my forty years of ordained ministry church leaders and Western theologians have predicted the demise of Christianity before the onslaught of secularism. Empty pews, white haired congregations and warbling choirs suggest that the Church is finished. The writings of Bishop Spong make excellent sense when viewed from the reasoned intellectual perspective of Cambridge but look

distinctly out of place from the perspective of Cuba, Korea or even from some of our inner city black Churches. The prophets of the 60s had predicted the ebbing away of religion as the 'God of the gaps' was marginalized by the advance of scientific knowledge. It has not happened like this though some, like Dawkins, still think it should. We are living in a culture where DIY religion thrives. In a post-modern environment the Spirit is in while the Church is out.

I stated in my Presidential year that Methodist stands on the edge of Pentecost. Pentecost however does not mean Pentecostalism. It does not mean revival or the restoration of past models of Church. God is making all things new and Pentecost therefore means transformation through judgement and openness to the Spirit. Pentecost is blessing and brokenness. It is about 'liminality'. Victor Turner uses this word previously applied to 'rites of passage' to illuminate the plight of Churches. Their marginalized and depressed state, he argues, places the Church on the 'threshold' of what he terms 'reaggregation' It is a state of betwixt and between. Liminality is depicted in the questions 'Who are we?' & 'Where do we go from here?'

Liminality is a threshold between death and life, life and death. It is the pupa stage between being a caterpillar or a butterfly. Ezekiel's valley of dry bones is a snapshot of 'liminality'. The Corporate liminality of a Church has been accompanied by the personal liminality of its members. Personal liminality describes those threshold experiences of transformation which take place from time to time within one's own life journey when we painfully 'cross over' from the old to the new through repentance and faith. It can only happen if we are prepared to leave or are driven from our comfort zones, and are prepared to learn new things and do new things. If we think we know it all then we shut out the possibility of the new and die.

Since I was President in 2005 I have travelled the connexion preached in 329 different churches and led 168 study days, seminars and conferences in churches, circuits and districts. Numbers present have ranged from over 300 to 12. I have seen traditional churches and fresh expressions of churches which are growing and vibrant as well as those which have no future. I have spoken to hundreds of people. There are many who are thrilled and excited about what God is doing in their place. There are those who are frustrated because of the intransigence of congregations. There are those who are depressed and given up on Methodism. I have learnt the following lessons:

**It a church is prepared to let go of its time-honoured programmes, take risks and do new things - they move on and a new future open up.**

**If individuals are prepared to leave their own comfort zones, then God blesses them.**

I have also learnt that there are considerable obstacles preventing people and churches from moving on.

- *Power*
  - Some persons have held positions of power in the church for years and are reluctant to give up.
  - Some have high status outside the church and cannot empty themselves of power when they are in the meetings of the church.
  - Some extremely talented persons have their own projects and agenda's which are all important to them.
- *Faithfulness to tradition* (usually associated with buildings) - 'You are not changing anything here' - 'It has worked in the past and will work again' - 'But this is precious to me!' - 'we have always done it this way'

Lecture given to members of Hinde Street Methodist Church at High Leigh on 27/10/2012

- *Unwillingness to learn* and a resistance to any suggestions from outside. - ‘who does he think he is coming in here and telling us what to do?’ - ‘We have some very clever and experienced people here, we know what we are doing’

Some Methodists regard the 24<sup>th</sup> May 1738 as the birth day of Methodism. I do not. Instead Methodism was born on April 2<sup>nd</sup> 1739, when George Whitefield invited John Wesley to preach to the miners in Bristol. On 31<sup>st</sup> May Wesley’s journal records:

I reached Bristol and met Mr Whitefield there. I could scarce reconcile myself at first to this strange way of preaching in the fields; having been all my life so tenacious of every point relating to decency and order, that I should have thought the saving of souls almost a sin if it had not been done in church.

It was a liminal moment for Wesley. Two days later he wrote:

At four in the afternoon I submitted to me more vile, and proclaimed in the highways the glad tidings of salvation, speaking from a little eminence in the ground adjoining to the city, to about three thousand people. ... “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He hath anointed me to preach the good news to the poor. He hath sent me to heal the broken-hearted; to preach deliverance to the captives and the recovery of sight to the blind...and to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.”

The Methodist Church in Hinde Street is presented with decisions very different from that single decision which Wesley had to make. Both, nevertheless, have one thing in common. Both stand on thresholds which open up a new possibilities. Wesley seized the moment! Hinde Street?