

AN OPEN AND CRITICAL FAITH

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The 19th Century brought a new challenge to Christian faith – a crisis of belief. Darwin argued for a theory of evolution – and old ideas of creation looked impossible. History looked at old documents with a new critical eye. The literal truth of the whole of the Bible no longer seemed possible to maintain. Churches were being built everywhere – the more grand of them looking a bit like this one. Congregations were full but behind the outward facade of Victorian piety the foundations were crumbling. Tennyson was poet Laurite “I falter where I firmly stood” he wrote “and stretch lame hands of faith”. There was a wrestling with doubt. There is an agonising as how you go in being a Christian in a world where old truths are insecure.

One answer was simple. Fundamentalism. Pull the drawbridge. Nothing has changed. What we always believe we still believe. As someone put it. “The Bible says. I believe it. That settles it”. But is what is good in one age always right for another? In America you can see it with those who after all these years still oppose the teaching of evolution in schools. In the same spirit the Southern Baptists in America recently voted to stop ordaining women into the ministry.

Fortunately there was another approach – a Christianity which represented a more liberal spirit. The word liberal comes from the Latin liber, which means free. Liberal faith is to do with freedom, freedom of belief, freedom of conscience, freedom from dogma, it's to do with the open mind. It inspired great theologians, a world wide of new critical scholarship, and great preachers – of whom Leslie Weatherhead, Harry Emerson Fosdick and Donald Soper were some of the best known. All of these agreed on one thing either God is a God of Truth or not a God at all. In the face of a crisis of belief “I cannot park my brain at the door and offer God my heart. I've got to bring intelligence to bear on the ultimate issues of my life. And maybe when I've done this Christian faith may be more liberating, more profound than before”.

Firstly the liberal in religion is against dogmaticism of every kind. I recently read about a man who wanted a revelation from God. "I want a revelation" he told his minister "I want God to speak to me simple and straight". His minister was rather puzzled as to what to advise. Finally the minister said to him "The next time it rains, go outside, look up into the heavens, and ask God for a revelation".

A few days later the heavens opened. There was torrential rain. The man came back to the minister utterly sodden, dripping water everywhere. "I followed your advice" he said "I stood in the rain for over an hour, looked up in the skies and asking for a revelation from God. Nothing happened. Nothing at all. The rain pelted down by face, the water ran down my neck, I just felt ignorant and stupid".

The minister replied "What greater revelation do you need?"

None of us should need to stand in the rain to realise how little we know of this amazing universe. It is a fundamental to a reverent faith at the best we understand a little. Look at

what Paul says in Corinthians. "Now we see in a mirror dimly.. Now I know only in part". As someone once said "Take three steps into anything, and you are over your head in an ocean of mystery".

Too many people imagine the truth is simple and they know it. The liberal begins by saying the one thing you should never do in religion is limit the truth of God to our poor reach of mind. Dogmatic faith is always to be rejected.

Secondly the liberal stresses tolerance. If there is always truth that we haven't seen – it is possible that somebody else has. We need to listen to the views of others and be open to the possibility that amazing, as it might seem we might not be ones who are right.

The sad truth is that often Christians have lacked this quality, passionately believing that they alone had a monopoly of truth. The story is of a man who was shipwrecked on a desert island. Two years later a search party found him. Eagerly he showed them all he had done in his solitude, "Is that the home you built?" they asked, pointing to a group of leaves and boughs. "No" he said severely, "it's the church I built to pray in". They were touched. "And what is the other hut" they asked". "That, said the shipwrecked man disdainfully, "is the Church I wouldn't be seen dead in".

When it becomes intolerant how appalling religion can become. Historically Christians have tortured, killed, and damned each other. People have been whipped through the streets for being Baptists, deprived of their ears for being Quakers. Sometimes we're so sure we're right that anyone who disagrees with us is hardly a Christian at all. We become like Martin Luther saying, "He who does not believe my doctrine is sure to be damned". Here liberals were seeking to renew faith in a way which made it more loving and closer in spirit to that of Christ. Paul "If I have faith strong enough to move mountains, but do not have love. I am nothing".

On September 11 th we saw what bigoted religion can mean. There is something frightening about fundamentalist Islam with its assumption with its assumption that if you disagree with people enough you have a right to kill them. But you can find this kind of intolerance in all the world religions. In America Bailey Smith the head of the Southern Baptist Church said this "God almighty does not hear the prayer of a year". Or in this country more than once I have heard people say that if Roman Catholics are invited to belong to a group pf churches they will not be part of it. The world cannot live like this. Against this the liberal stresses tolerance. - none of us have the whole truth, we must be open to other peoples ideas and committed to freedom of belief. At this point all Christians need to have a liberal spirit.

Thirdly the liberal in approaching in an open and critical spirit and be willing to adapt faith to new knowledge. If you go to New York you can see this symbolised in stone. Make your way to the West Side and there on Riverside Drive you'll find Riverside Church. In the 1920s the fundamentalist controversy was raging in the American Church. In the state of Tennessee they put a teacher on trial for teaching evolution in new schools. In New York fundamentalists attacked the leading liberal preacher Harry Emerson Fosdick and forced him to resign from Ist Presbyterian. In response Park Avenue Baptist Church called him as their minister and built him a new Church on Riverside Drive. If you look over the west portal you will find an extraordinary series of sculptures. There are scientists including Charles Darwin and Albert Einstein. Einstein was so intrigued by this that he visited Riverside and said 'I will have to be very careful for the rest of my life as to what I do and what I say". So in Tennessee

Christians put a teacher on trial for teaching evolution, in New York Fosdick puts Darwin in stone over the church door, It was way of saying all new truth comes from God – so all truth is welcome here.

Some people I know would find that shocking – how can you put a man who has disturbed peoples faith above a Church door – personally I stand and cheer. I think it is says my faith is not a pack of cards which will collapse when new ideas come along. If we follow truth ad honestly as we can we shall find in the end we are following Christ.

How can any church be concerned about the truth if it is not willing to do this? What do you do when Galileo shows the earth goes round the sun or Darwin discovers evolution or biblical scholars demonstrate how the gospels have come to us? At this point simple integrity and honesty demand a willingness to change.

Now of course there are problems and dangers with liberalism. There is danger that if you change what you believe you may lose what is vitally important. You may sell out something that matters. There is a danger that it forgets that as Chesterton said “The point of an open mind is to close it on something solid”.

But how could anyone believe in a God who had no truth to teach us. Doesn't Jesus say when the Holy Spirit comes he will lead you into all truth. Our beliefs are always provisional and open to change. Changes of mind, changes of theology are actually what you expect in a living faith. So if some concepts are no longer tenable or some views of the Bible have to be given up, this is not in any way a denial of faith. It is what it means as the hymn writer says “To follow truth, and thus to follow thee”.

It comes down in the end to this. Christian faith is not something static. It changes and grows as it faces new ideas and new challenges.

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