



Fifty Years of Theology 1928-1978

The Vindication of Liberalism

ARTHUR J. LONG



THE ESSEX HALL LECTURE FOR 1978

This is the Essex Hall Lecture for 1978, and was delivered in Cambridge on April 6 1978. Essex Hall is the headquarters of the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches, and stands on the site of the building where the first avowedly Unitarian congregation met over two hundred years ago. The lecture was founded in 1892, and many distinguished persons in various fields have contributed to the series. The delivery of the lecture is one of the leading events during the annual meetings of the Assembly.

A list of previous lectures still in print will be found in the catalogue of the Lindsey Press.

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reputation to repudiation



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FIFTY YEARS OF THEOLOGY 1928 — 1978

The Vindication of Liberalism

AMONG a considerable collection of quotations and illustrations acquired as the result of more than thirty-five years of preaching and lecturing, I happen to possess some words ascribed to Booker T. Washington, one time American slave and a great pioneer of black education in the United States. They are taken from a comment which he made on a European tour. "I registered a firm resolution that, if I could prevent it, I would not enter a single palace, museum, gallery or cathedral. I have never been greatly interested in the past, for the past is something which you cannot change. I like the new, the unfinished and the problematic." (1)

To be interested in the new, the unfinished and the problematic is, of course, highly commendable. The dangers of looking backwards are frequently underlined in myth and folk-lore, the most obvious instance being the tragic story of Orpheus and Eurydice. Jesus himself once warned us that the man who looks back is not fit for the Kingdom, and on another occasion, he urged us to remember Lot's wife. But to concentrate on the present and the future at the expense of the past, is perhaps one of the most common failings of liberalism, a failing which, in the present lecture, I will do my best to avoid, taking my cue from some words of a very distinguished former Essex Hall Lecturer and a former Principal of the Unitarian College Manchester — Dr Alexander Gordon. "We look back, that we may look forward. We scan the past that we may gain lessons for use in the present, as we strive to build for the future." (2)

Appropriately enough for the jubilee occasion which we are now celebrating, my backward glance will cover the fifty years which have passed since the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches was formed in 1928. I wish to trace in outline the development of theology and religious debate during these years, in the hope that this will throw some light on the challenging paradox which faces us to-day, when, in an atmosphere which in theory appears to be increasingly favourable to us, we continue to decline. The Assembly was formed at a time when conservatism and dogmatism were in the ascendent, but as the years have passed, the theological pendulum has swung steadily in our direction, and at the present time, despite the persistence of a firm strain of fundamentalism and authoritarianism, Unitarian doctrines are now widely canvassed on all sides, particularly within Anglican circles — though even the Roman Catholic Church now seems increasingly inclined to agree with James Martineau in finding the ultimate seat of authority in conscience and reason. The term 'liberalism' is, of course, still rarely heard in religious circles. The acceptable alternative nowadays is 'radicalism' — and while it is certainly possible to argue that there are vital difference between

liberalism and radicalism, it can hardly be denied that the past fifteen years have witnessed a very effective vindication of liberalism. But this same period, alas, has not seen any rehabilitation or resurrection of the one church or group of churches which has always remained, come wind come weather, unrepentantly liberal. Is there perhaps some inevitability in this? Have we to learn the lesson of John the Baptist and say "they must increase, but we must decrease" — or may it not perhaps be that the fault lies in ourselves and not in our stars that we are underlings, and that the Son of Man is weeping over us, as he did over Jerusalem of old, because we have not known the time of our visitation?

During the preparation of this lecture, I spent some time looking through all the back numbers of *The Inquirer* for 1927 and 1928 — an absorbing but rather shattering experience. The size, style, format and content of the newspaper in those days all combine to emphasise the catastrophic decline in our fortunes which has occurred since 1928. That a similar decline has overtaken all other traditional denominations in this country is hardly a matter for comfort. After all, we have been confidently predicting such a decline for over a century. The irony of the situation lies in the fact that we also have declined to the same extent — a development which few if any of our fathers appear to have anticipated. The prevailing mood at the time when the Assembly was formed was ebullient and optimistic. The small minority led by L. P. Jacks and J. M. Lloyd Thomas who opposed the setting up of the Assembly did, it is true, predict dire consequences as a result of what they regarded as a dastardly betrayal of the spirit of non-sectarian undenominationalism bequeathed by Martineau. There is perhaps a special irony in the fact that similar dismal prognostications were indulged in by Martineau himself when, in 1888, he failed in his attempts to persuade his fellow Unitarians to constitute themselves into a full Presbyterian denomination. But even if we had followed the advice of Martineau in 1888, or Jacks and Lloyd Thomas in 1928, it is difficult to believe that the subsequent fortunes of Unitarianism would have been very much different.

The characteristic outlook of 1928 is well reflected in a book by S. H. Mellone, published in that year, not by the Lindsey Press, but by Constable and Co., and ambitiously entitled *Back to Realities — A Way out of the Present Chaos in Religion*. This was warmly commended in the columns of *The Inquirer* and also briefly and rather patronisingly reviewed in *The Expository Times*. The essence of Dr Mellone's thesis was that there were really only two alternatives — Romanism, the religion of authority — and Unitarianism, the religion of reason. He concluded by suggesting that the vital and progressive forces within Protestantism were moving inevitably in the Unitarian direction, and that many if not most Protestants were in fact Unitarians without knowing it.

Though the final decisive vote in Parliament in June 1928, rejecting the revised Prayer Book, was duly noted and commented upon by *The Inquirer*, there seems to have been little awareness among Unitarians of fifty years ago of the extent to which the theological tide was moving against them. They could not, of course, fail to notice the practical objections to Unitarianism. In the 1928 numbers of *The Inquirer* for instance, there are extended references to the decision of the Toc H organisation to confine chaplaincies of its local branches to orthodox Trinitarians, a decision which resulted in the exclusion of Unitarian ministers.

Since there is still much practical opposition to Unitarianism to-day, in spite of the very different theological climate which now prevails, there is a familiar ring about this. Very familiar also are the many references to Modernism in 1928. Then as now, Unitarians were understandably inclined to claim any Modernist tendencies as an expression of Unitarianism. The chief spokesmen for the traditionalists, of course, fifty years ago as also to-day, had no doubt at all that the Modernists were crypto-Unitarians. But the Modernists themselves — and again, there is an exact parallel to-day — occasionally in courteous personal letters, merely affirm their orthodoxy and politely decline the invitation to acknowledge their Unitarianism. One of the best examples of this from 1928 — which I found particularly interesting, since it provides a curiously exact link with the current *cause célèbre* of *The Myth of God Incarnate* — arose out of a rousing polemical article by the late R. Nicol Cross, entitled *Unitarianism and Modernism*. (3) After speaking of the apparent ignorance of Unitarianism among Modernists, he referred to some essays by a distinguished Anglican theologian, Professor J. F. Bethune-Baker, often regarded as the leading Modernist of the period. Nicol Cross found the essays almost entirely Unitarian. Indeed, rather patronisingly, he described them as old-fashioned Unitarianism. Contemporary Unitarianism, he declared, was one if not two generations ahead of Modernism. But a few weeks later, Professor Bethune-Baker in a personal reply, by no means unsympathetic in tone, affirms his own Trinitarian orthodoxy and also makes an interesting claim. He says that whenever he has to repel charges, especially from fellow Anglicans, that the Anglican Modernists are really Unitarians, he is always careful "to speak of the *old* Unitarianism." (4) I found this reference to 'old Unitarianism' mightily intriguing — for it at once reminded me that of the two brief passing references to 'unitarianism' (with a small 'u') in *The Myth of God Incarnate*, one occurs where Professor Maurice Wiles claims that there is an alternative to "an old-fashioned unitarianism, lacking the dynamic of a real faith." What, I wonder, is involved in this subtle distinction, spanning no less than fifty years, between the old and the new in Unitarianism? Are we to assume that a new Unitarianism would be acceptable — and if so, what form would it take?

This is a problem to which I shall have to return. In the meantime, I must begin my brief survey of the changes in the theological climate which the past fifty years have brought, to serve as the groundwork for a possible new Unitarianism. There is no doubt at all that the predominating theological influence at the time the General Assembly was formed was what later came to be known as Barthianism, Dialectical Theology, or the Theology of Crisis. That most Unitarians seemed to be unaware of the fact is little to their discredit, since they were not alone in this respect. Indeed, the zenith of this new form of extreme conservative orthodoxy belongs to the late thirties, to the period of World War II, and to the immediately following years. But already, in the late twenties, the shattering effects of Karl Barth's blockbusting *Römerbrief* (*Commentary on Romans*), first published in 1919, were reverberating throughout the continent of Europe, and his typically passionate and dogmatic outlook, later reinforced by his *Church Dogmatics* and his *Credo*, ultimately came to dominate Protestantism to an extraordinary degree, his influence being particularly strong in the Reformed tradition, especially for example in the Church of Scotland. Now that Barth is much less dominant, it is perhaps easier for those who were formerly the targets for his wrath to arrive at

an objective estimate of his significance, and it would be foolish to deny that he is rightly entitled to be regarded as one of the great theological giants of the 20th Century, if not of the whole post-Reformation period. It is significant that he is now greatly esteemed by Roman Catholics no less than by Protestants. Pope Pius XII described him as the greatest theologian since St Thomas Aquinas. He will certainly be remembered, if for nothing else, for his courageous stand against Hitler and National Socialism in Germany. But part of his greatness also stems from the curious and paradoxical fact that he appears to have prepared the ground for the revival of radicalism and liberalism which has characterised recent years.

At the time of his ascendancy however, he was primarily the focus and centre of the anti-liberal, anti-Schleiermacher reaction which marked the first half of the 20th Century, and which seemed to sum up and exemplify all that Unitarians and liberals found most objectionable in the Christian tradition. The fact that Barthianism was in many respects a renewed and revived form of Calvinism, made it particularly loathsome to Unitarians. It is perhaps one of the minor paradoxes of ecclesiastical history that Unitarianism, which in many respects originally emerged against a background of Calvinism, should ultimately have come to regard this form of Protestantism as the work of the Devil. From the time of Servetus onwards, when faced with Calvin and his works, Unitarians have always been swift to cry with Voltaire (though his target, of course, was something very different) "Ecrasez l'infâme!" But in the thirties and forties of this Century, Barthianism marked the final triumph of that reaction against the Liberal Protestant tradition of Harnack and Ritschl, a reaction which had begun at the beginning of the 20th Century largely against a background of radical New Testament criticism, and associated originally with the so-called Thorough-going Eschatology of Albert Schweitzer and with the abortive and unsuccessful revolution of Alfred Loisy and the Roman Catholic Modernists.

Barth's impact was also tremendously reinforced and underlined by the catastrophe of World War I and its dismal aftermath — the Russian Revolution, the Great Depression, the advent of Hitler, and the descent into World War II. It was the gloomy and depressing history of the 20th Century which finally shattered that naive 19th Century optimism, so inextricably bound up with Liberal Protestantism, and which still dogs the footsteps of Unitarianism to-day. In the ready-made atmosphere of the time, in season and out of season, Karl Barth preached his characteristic themes — back to the Reformation, back to the Bible — emphasis on the majestic transcendence of God, the 'wholly other' — passionate acceptance of the Fall and Original Sin, no way at all from man to God — a totally unique and exclusive revelation, from God's side, in Christ — indifference to the historical Jesus — repudiation of all 'work-righteousness.' The extreme conservatism of Barth, at least in his original mood, was well exemplified in 1934 by his famous dispute with Emil Brunner, usually regarded as one of his chief disciples and the leading exponent with him of the Theology of Crisis. But Brunner was prepared to admit that there was a limited revelation of God in natural theology, a suggestion which evoked from Barth a celebrated pamphlet: *Nein: Antwort an Emil Brunner* in which he repeated his claim that there was absolutely no point of contact at all between human nature and God.

Karl Barth lived on until 1968, increasingly revered and respected, even by

those who disagreed with him. In the post-war world, he occasionally came up with unexpected attitudes — especially on the subject of Infant Baptism (which he criticised) and Communism (which he refused to regard as wholly evil). He also seems to have become in some respects much less Barthian! He certainly made a contribution to a notable series of confessions published by the American periodical *The Christian Century*, entitled *How I Changed my Mind*, and in 1961, he published three essays with the extraordinarily un-Barthian title *The Humanity of God*.

But before we trace the reversal of the trend initiated by Barth, a reversal to which he himself may have contributed, we need to take a look at some of the many other factors which contributed to the anti-liberal atmosphere in which the General Assembly grew up. One of the most significant of these was the rediscovery of Søren Kierkegaard, the gloomy Dane, that erratic but perceptive 19th Century genius, who, though almost completely unknown in his own day, became a kind of time-bomb, destined to explode with decisive force in the 20th Century. Kierkegaard, with his reputation of rationalism and institutional Christianity, his emphasis on the inevitability of 'angst' and the necessity of a 'leap of faith', was, of course, one of the thinkers who shaped the outlook of Karl Barth. But his main influence was felt in that very characteristic 20th Century philosophical trend known as Existentialism, which, with its concentration on the fact of death, the inevitability of decision and commitment, and the necessity of interpreting everything from the standpoint of individual personal experience, has, in both its theistic and atheistic forms, done so much to determine the entire pattern of contemporary culture. The relation of Existentialism to liberalism in theology is in some respects ambivalent. Its emphasis on experience and its repudiation of rationalism were fully in line with one of the strands of 19th Century liberalism. But its anti-rationalism made it very suspect in some other liberal quarters, and it was often embraced with enthusiasm by those of dogmatic and traditional beliefs. But it is significant that one of the greatest of the Christian Existentialists is that much neglected representative of the Russian Orthodox tradition, Nikolai Berdyaev, whose distinctive and challenging personalist philosophy, though anti-Unitarian in the strict doctrinal sense, is in many respects a supreme example of the free faith of the spirit, which, particularly in its social aspects is anything but anti-liberal.

But of more direct importance in our present survey, since it was especially effective in reinforcing the anti-Unitarian tone of the forties and fifties, was the trend known as Neo-Orthodoxy, associated particularly with the names of Reinhold Niebuhr and C. S. Lewis. Niebuhr, who died in 1971, was an American Lutheran, for many years Professor of Applied Christianity at the famous Union Theological Seminary of New York. Beginning as a liberal, he later came under the influence of Barth, and, challenged like him by the dismal events of the inter-war period, he became one of the chief representatives of what was usually known as Neo-Orthodoxy — even though he himself, apparently, repudiated the term. He certainly always emphasised the traditional less-acceptable doctrines of Christianity — such as the idea of Original Sin and the concept of a unique supernatural revelation. Unlike Barth, however, he continued to believe in the prophetic vocation of Christianity, and was always very left-wing in politics and economics, being widely accepted as a sociologist as well as a theologian, and noted for his repudiation of 'utopianism' and the superficial optimism of political liberalism. His books, particularly *Moral Man and Immoral Society* and his

Gifford Lectures, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, are still immensely readable and stringently challenging. But in later life, Niebuhr became markedly less conservative in his theology. In a contribution to the Christian Century series *How I Changed my Mind*, he withdrew some of his earlier structures and freely acknowledged the positive contribution of liberalism.

C. S. Lewis, however, was always much more unrepentantly conservative. Though he was at one time greatly revered as a very able and popular champion of traditional Christianity, his former pre-eminence now seems, in many ways, rather surprising, for of all the former exponents of Neo-Orthodoxy, he was surely the most naively fundamentalist, and in the religious field, he was also an amateur, being not a professional theologian at all, but an English Literature don. Lewis who died in 1963, published a great variety of writings — poetry, criticism, novels, some very successful children's stories, and science fiction — but what really brought him wide acclaim was his popular religious apologetic, much of it based on very successful radio talks, for which he obviously had a considerable flair, despite his own rather dull style of speaking. There was nothing really distinctive about his theological position, which was simply evangelical conservatism of a rather outdated variety, characterised by frequent resorts to paradox and dogmatic assertion, sprinkled with a dash of apparent commonsense rationalism which could easily fool the unwary. His moral pronouncements were often quaint and comic. Perhaps his writings were not altogether without value, especially now that, as in the case of Barth, it is possible to approach him more objectively. The famous *Screwtape Letters* are certainly very ingenious and entertaining, and even *Mere Christianity* (this being the significant title of a collected edition of some of his broadcast talks) contains some sound and useful sections. But on the whole, C. S. Lewis deserves to be chiefly remembered as the main purveyor in recent times of that crude bludgeoning type of theology which assumes that the doctrine of the Incarnation is best defended by the assertion that Jesus was obviously mad, bad — or God. Nothing could perhaps more effectively demonstrate the extent to which the theological pendulum has now swung in our direction, than the interesting fact that this hoary ploy — mad, bad, or God — is now usually quoted by Modernists as an example of how *not* to conduct theology!

Another development of a very different kind was the advent of Logical Positivism, usually described nowadays as Linguistic Analysis and rightly reckoned, along with Existentialism, as one of the most significant trends in 20th Century philosophy. This owed its origins to the discussions of the so-called Vienna Circle of the 1930s and the difficult writings of Ludwig Wittgenstein, but was chiefly associated in this country with Sir Alfred Ayer's famous book, published in 1936, *Language, Truth and Logic*. According to Linguistic Analysis, all theological and metaphysical statements (metaphysics being that branch of traditional philosophy which deals with the nature and meaning of reality) are literally nonsensical and devoid of meaning, because they are not in principle capable of being verified. Despite the fact that this demolition of metaphysics was in many respects merely an extension of the classic critique first propounded by Immanuel Kant at the end of the 18th Century, and is not necessarily as ingenious or as decisive as it appears to be, it certainly tended in the forties and fifties to promote a further flight from reason and an increased suspicion of natural theology. At a somewhat later period, Ayer's verifiability principle was replaced by a falsifiability principle — which

led to Professor Anthony Flew's famous quip about "a brash hypothesis being killed by inches — the death by a thousand qualifications." (5) The reference here is to the admitted tendency of religious apologetic to absorb all attempts to falsify its claims — as reflected for example in the common insistence that the facts of evil do not contradict the idea that God is love — which thus becomes a claim that cannot in principle be falsified.

The question of the status of religious language is still a very crucial one in contemporary theological debate, and I will have to return to it later. But for the moment, I merely want to underline the unsettling effect of Linguistic Analysis by pointing out that not only is it useful, especially at a time when traditional Christianity is in the ascendant, to those who base their theology wholly on supernatural revelation, it also undermines the empiricism of traditional liberalism, and encourages a dependence on feeling, emotion, or religious experience, which is by no means as helpful to liberalism as some people seem to imagine. I have often argued, in this connection, that it is strange that those who appear to have been so impressed by the strictures of Linguistic Analysis, often completely ignore the equally devastating arguments of psychological analysis. If one were compiling a complete list of those factors which led to the eclipse of liberalism in the first half of the 20th Century, it would certainly be necessary to include some reference to Sigmund Freud and psycho-analysis. Yet here, once again, we encounter a paradox. For although there are many who assume that depth psychology has finally disposed of all religion, there are others who feel that it clearly demonstrates the essential truth of religious belief — while John Wren-Lewis, the leading contemporary amateur radical theologian, apparently feels that it is wholly necessary for intelligent modern Christians to agree with Freud in dismissing belief in God as a neurotic delusion!

But this, of course, is to anticipate the strange story of the Ground of Being, the Death of God, and the rehabilitation of liberalism — and before we proceed to this, there are a few more threads which need to be gathered up. The argument from experience in religion, to which I have briefly alluded, is not entirely without value, and it is significant that throughout the fifty years which we are considering, there have been two very important background influences which, though they have also been made use of by traditionalists, have probably operated on the whole in a liberal direction. Both of them go right back to 1923. I am thinking of Rudolf Otto's famous *Idea of the Holy*, which first introduced the concept of 'the numinous' — that distinctive non-rational factor in religious experience — and also of *I and Thou*, the equally famous essay by the distinguished Jewish philosopher, Martin Buber, which influenced almost all subsequent religious thinkers, and not a few non-religious ones as well, to quite an extraordinary degree. The fact that 'the I-Thou relationship' has since become one of the most overworked clichés of religious discussion, does not detract in any way from its profound significance. And since we are now thinking of aspects of religious experience, this seems as good a place as any to mention the writings of that neglected contemporary philosopher, John Macmurray. I have always felt that his very able and challenging Essex Hall Lecture for 1944 — *Idealism Against Religion* — merits far greater attention than it has received either from ourselves or from outsiders.

Finally, before passing from the first part of my story, the eclipse of liberalism,

to the second part, its vindication, I feel that I ought to pay some tribute to those outside our own tradition, who, even when the wind was blowing strongly in the opposite direction, maintained a firm and eloquent commitment to Liberal Protestantism. I think in particular of such doughty Anglican Modernists as Dean Inge, J. F. Bethune-Baker, C. E. Raven, H. D. A. Major, W. R. Matthews, B. H. Streeter, and E. W. Barnes, the Bishop of Birmingham — and since, on the whole, the witness to liberalism was much more muted within Non-Conformity, I reserve a specially honourable mention for the eminent Congregationalist scholar, C. J. Cadoux, a great hero of mine in my student days, whose *Case for Evangelical Modernism*, published in 1938, still seems to me, despite the fact that he always denied that he was really a Unitarian, one of the best defences of Unitarian Christianity ever written.

Though some of my recent observations have suggested an atmosphere not entirely inimical to liberalism, my main contention so far has been to underline the fact that, during the first half of the history of the General Assembly, the outlook for Unitarianism and liberal religion generally was not encouraging, the prevailing tendencies being almost exclusively traditionalist and authoritarian. My chief concern has been with the realm of ideas, but a significant development in a somewhat different sphere was the notorious Liverpool Controversy of the 1930s, resulting from an Assize Sermon, preached in Liverpool Cathedral at the invitation of the Dean, F. W. Dwelly, by the late Lawrence Redfern, minister of Ullet Road Unitarian Church. After a considerable outcry, led by Lord Hugh Cecil and Bishop Hensley Henson, the final outcome, in 1934, was an official decision by the Church of England, barring Unitarians from occupying Anglican pulpits "during statutory services." Though this decree presumably still stands, the fact that it is often disregarded (I have more than once preached at a "statutory service" in an Anglican Church) underlines the extent to which the scene has now completely changed, and it is to an analysis of some of the factors which have produced this surprising reversal of earlier trends that I now pass.

As we have already seen, the seeds of this reversal, curiously enough, can be traced to some aspects of the thought of Karl Barth. It is surely particularly significant that almost all recent radical theologians have been, to a greater or lesser degree, disillusioned Barthians. As far as this country is concerned, the wind of change first became unmistakably apparent with John Robinson's epoch-making *Honest to God*, which first appeared in 1963. There were also two other very influential books, both edited by Dr Alec Vidler, which appeared at round about the same time — *Soundings* and *Objections to Christian Belief*. It has sometimes been pointed out (usually, no doubt, by Oxford scholars!) that all three of these had a special connection with Cambridge. It was undoubtedly *Honest to God*, possibly the most successful modern religious book ever written, which had the most decisive influence, provoking an explosive debate, which still continues. As has often been observed, to a considerable extent it was simply a popularisation for English readers of three, at that time, largely unknown names — Bonhoeffer, Bultmann and Tillich, and it is to these three that I now turn.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, without doubt one of the truly great Christians of the Century, will perhaps be remembered above all for his heroic part in the German Resistance against Hitler and his tragic martyr's death. He was hanged in a

German prison camp in April 1945. But it seems equally certain that he will also come to be regarded as a seminal thinker of great importance, and it is part of the tragedy of his violent early death at the age of 39, that he was not given the chance to develop the many challenging ideas which came to him in prison. Though he began as a disciple of Barth, he ultimately became one of the great pioneers of radical theology, and was particularly associated with such ideas as 'man's coming of age', 'religionless Christianity', the rejection of the notion of a God who solves our problems, the acceptance of struggle and suffering, the vital necessity for Christians to involve themselves completely in the life of the secular world, and a Christology which sees Jesus primarily as 'the man for others', whose divinity is revealed in his full humanity. Of particular importance was Bonhoeffer's insistence on the necessity of our learning to live "etsi Deus non daretur" (as if God were no longer there) — a notion which goes back to Nietzsche and to the German Romantic writer Jean Paul Richter, and which also had great importance for the Death of God theology in America.

Rudolf Bultmann, who spanned an enormous slice of our era — from 1884 to 1976 — was a leading German theologian, much influenced by Existentialism, who first came into prominence as a radical New Testament scholar and an exponent of the method known as Form Criticism. He also came under the influence of Barth, and was at one time critical of liberalism. But he later came to be associated above all with "demythologisation" — the notion that we need to recognise that the New Testament and the whole of traditional Christianity, is inextricably dependent on a completely outworn mythology, which has either to be discarded, or radically reinterpreted. For this and for other reasons — such as, for example, his interpretation of the Resurrection, which he found theologically meaningful, while rejecting it completely as a historical event — Bultmann greatly encouraged the revival of liberal ideas.

This was also true of Paul Tillich, who died in 1965, another Christian Existentialist and one of the key figures in the development of contemporary theology. Originally a German Lutheran pastor and academic, influenced by Rudolf Otto and Kierkegaard, he came into conflict with the Nazis, emigrated to the United States and became an American citizen. With his *Systematic Theology* in two volumes, he acquired a dominant place in American intellectual circles, and also, after the War, became popular in Germany. But his importance was only gradually recognised in this country. It was Tillich above all who popularised the idea that God is not a Supreme Being, but rather the Ground of Being, or Being Itself. I once heard J. Heywood Thomas a leading expert in this field, wittily observe that, according to Tillich, the only true atheist is the man who says God exists — such a statement being in effect a *denial* of God, since it implies that God is a being — which he is not. He is the Ground of Being! This, of course, was one of the notions taken up with enthusiasm by John Robinson in his *Honest to God*. It was a notion which also gave great encouragement to the humanists amongst us. In his popular paperback *The Courage to Be*, the best simple introduction to his thought, Tillich certainly argues that theism is irrelevant and misleading, and must therefore be rejected. But he also pleads paradoxically and eloquently for a recognition of the reality of "the God who is beyond God." Like most other contemporary theologians, Tillich was also especially concerned with the problem of religious language — and in a very penetrating article in *The Expository Times* of March

1963 (Vol. 74, No. 6), Professor William Hordern of Evanston, Illinois, has a highly amusing comment. In Volume I of his *Systematic Theology*, he says, Tillich argued that the only non-symbolic statement we can make about God is that God is Being Itself. In Volume II, he conceded that this too was a symbolic statement. Eventually, however he arrived at the view that the only non-symbolic statement that we can make about God, is that all statements about God are symbolic. But unfortunately, as Professor Hordern points out, this is not a statement about God. It is a statement about statements about God!

However, leaving aside for the moment such subtle niceties, it is now generally agreed that both Bultmann and Tillich, in so far as they aimed to discover a new religious apologetic based on modern philosophy and science, and to emphasise an element of continuity between God and human nature, gave a new lease of life to the tradition of Liberal Protestantism, and made liberalism intellectually respectable once more — and this is undoubtedly the climate which faces us to-day in the 50th year of our General Assembly. There are, of course, many other influences which have shaped the contemporary theological scene. It is impossible to avoid some mention of the so-called Death of God Theology which dominated America in the 60s, or of the widely influential development known as Secular Christianity. To considerable extent, these were both variations on a common theme, springing from Bonhoeffer's idea of 'religionless Christianity', and resulting in the contention that since the whole traditional concept of God is culturally dead and philosophically meaningless, Christianity needs to be completely reinterpreted in terms of secular values and radical social commitment. The chief names here, mostly American, were Paul van Buren, William Hamilton, Gabriel Vahanian — and above all, Thomas J. J. Altizer. Not all of these appear to be saying the same thing. For some, it was simply the traditional *idea* of God which was dead. Others — and this is especially true of Altizer — really seem to believe that God existed once, but is now dead! As I have already pointed out, though this has links with Bonhoeffer's idea of the necessity of living as if God were no longer present, it is in many respects simply a revival of a favourite theme of 19th Century Romanticism, associated particularly with Jean Paul Richter and Nietzsche. After all, as is well known, it was Nietzsche who invented, or at any rate popularised the slogan: "God is dead!" (6).

Altizer seems to believe that we can actually name the point in time when the Death of God occurred. God died when Jesus was crucified on the Cross. Some experts have pointed out that, in a way, this is merely a return to an early 2nd Century Christian heresy known as Modalism, one of whose protagonists, Praxeas, argued that it was God the Father who had died on the Cross. Praxeas presumably believed, however, that with the Resurrection, God came to life again. But there appears to be some doubt as to whether Altizer also believes this, since the main burden of his teaching is that we must come to terms with the idea that God no longer exists.

However, whether Altizer really believes that God is dead or not, it is obvious, to the disappointment no doubt of our humanist friends, that God refuses to stay dead. The Death of God theology was followed by two developments which emphatically affirmed his existence. The first of these was Process Theology, expounded by the disciples of the great 20th Century Anglo-American philosopher,

Alfred North Whitehead — notably Charles Hartshorne and Norman Pittenger — a theology which, in many respects is simply a fresh and revived form of liberal Christian theism. The second of these very recent developments, often described as the real answer to the Death of God theology, is what is sometimes known as the Theology of Hope. This is associated chiefly with two contemporary German theologians — Jürgen Moltmann and Wolfhart Pannenberg. Pannenberg, a man of personal charm and immense learning, is probably one of the most important rising stars in the current theological firmament. He also is an erstwhile disciple of Barth. But he is quite prepared to acknowledge the errors of Barthianism, and while perhaps a little less radical than some of his predecessors, his outlook is emphatically liberal.

In concluding this survey of fifty years of theological development, I must inevitably mention the name of Maurice Wiles, perhaps the leading contemporary Anglican Modernist, Regius Professor of Divinity of Oxford, and a former chairman of the Church of England Commission on Doctrine. In his two recent books *The Remaking of Christian Doctrine* and *What is Theology?* he has presented what, to me, is an admirable and almost wholly acceptable statement of a modern Liberal Christianity. At the present time, of course, he is particularly associated with the controversial ideas contained in the very recent SCM publication *The Myth of God Incarnate* which appeared in 1977. Since Professor Wiles was not solely responsible for this enterprise, one obviously needs to couple with his name those of the other contributors — notably Don Cupitt (another Anglican Modernist, famous for his presentation on television of a very radical view of Jesus), Professor John Hick, who belongs to the United Reformed Church, and Frances Young, who is a Methodist. The fact that *The Myth of God Incarnate* was so swiftly followed by *The Truth of God Incarnate* — a comprehensive statement of a traditional conservative theology — is the measure of the impact which Professor Wiles and his colleagues have created. Whether or not one agrees with the Rev John Stott in concluding that they are clearly Unitarians, it can hardly be denied that *The Myth of God Incarnate*, despite the fact that it almost totally ignores the historic contribution of Unitarianism, contains one of the best statements of the Unitarian case against traditional Christology ever to appear in a 'mainstream' publication. This seems a wholly appropriate note on which to end my story of the vindication of liberalism.

But before passing to my final conclusions, I would like to add a brief post-script. In the first place, I want to mention some of the non-theological factors which, during the past thirty years, have contributed to the rehabilitation of liberalism — such things as the wind of change in Africa and elsewhere, the slow and painful move towards multi-racialism, the widespread concern for protest and liberation, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, Vietnam and its aftermath, Watergate and the fall of Richard Nixon, the rise of pop-culture and the resort to mysticism, transcendental meditation, the growing interest in para-psychology. Some of these factors, admittedly, have been ambivalent in their effects, especially in so far as they have contributed to a disturbing and wholly unliberal feature of our time, namely the growing cult of unreason. But another very positive factor, despite or perhaps even because of, the strong reaction which it has provoked, is the advent of all that is involved in the idea of a permissive society. It is frequently forgotten that the whole of the second part of John Robinson's *Honest to God*

consisted of a defence of what is usually known as the new morality. According to its opponents the new morality, is merely the old immorality writ large, but most of us will surely feel that situational ethics, an alternative and less emotive title than 'new morality', do have a legitimate place in moral philosophy, and reflect an approach fully in keeping with the traditions of liberalism. One cannot ignore either the liberalising effect of such non-theological changes in the religious scene as the Second Vatican Council and the rise of the Ecumenical movement. The importance of the changes resulting from Vatican II can hardly be exaggerated. Though a strong element of traditionalism and authoritarianism still persists within Roman Catholicism, it is obvious that the Church as a whole has entered a new reformist phase and has already moved, to an extent which our fathers would have found quite unbelievable, in a liberal direction. As for the Ecumenical Movement, no-one who has been associated with it can fail to be aware of the extent to which it sums up and exemplifies all that is best in the liberal tradition.

The second part of my post-script is simply an acknowledgment of the continuing persistence, despite the vindication of liberalism, of some by no means negligible contrary trends. Even to-day, in spite of the swing of the pendulum, it would probably be true to say that that dubious entity known as the silent majority — especially where grass-roots religion is concerned — is still against us rather than for us. It is obvious that there are still very many who wish for nothing better than to cling to old paths in perilous times, and the present strength of Evangelical Fundamentalism in the country, under the leadership of John Stott and others, cannot be ignored. Nor can the recent alarming expansion of such fringe sects as the Mormons and the Jehovah's Witnesses. However, it is surely not without significance that the criticism of Fundamentalism is no longer left to Unitarians. Professor James Barr has recently published a very scholarly and penetrating study, called simply *Fundamentalism*, in which he deplores its shallowness, exclusiveness and dishonesty, and even goes so far as to challenge its right to be regarded as truly Christian!

* * * * *

I pass now to my final section — a groundwork for a possible new Unitarianism. If my analysis so far has been correct, the theological climate in 1978, at least in one sense, has never been more favourable to Unitarianism. Why then do we still appear in those uncomfortable words of the late Henry Gow, as "ineffective and cold pale copies of the past, rather than heralds of the dawn" — words which, incidentally, were first penned exactly fifty years ago? (7) One of the reasons, of course, is simply that however favourable things may appear in theory, in practice the present climate makes things more difficult for us, and not easier at all. The more Unitarian ideas became intellectually respectable, the more difficult it becomes for us to justify our separate existence as a small floundering sect.

From very different premises, therefore, I have eventually arrived at the same conclusion reached by the late Principal Harry Short in his Essex Hall Lecture for 1962, *Dissent and the Community*, and like him, I ask the very basic question: What is the role of our Churches to-day? Principal Short did not give an answer and I am almost tempted to follow his example, leaving the discussion, in the words with which Bernard Shaw concluded his *Everybody's Political What's What?* —

"to be continued by them that can." But even at the risk of becoming controversial, I feel that I must sketch a few guide-lines.

My basic contention at this juncture would be to affirm that we no longer need to strive officiously to demonstrate that we are different, or to prove that we are more progressive than the radicals. This will not be easy for us, because of the strong tradition of rational dissent which has moulded the ethos of our movement. I recognise that there are those amongst us who sincerely believe that, at a time when the tide appears to be flowing in our favour, it is our duty to move forward, in the hope that we may become once again the vanguard of the age. After all, though the Modernists of to-day may agree with those of fifty years ago in regarding Unitarianism as old-fashioned, we might equally well argue, with Nicol Cross in 1928, that Modernism is, in many respects, a very traditional form of Unitarianism. So do we not need now to concentrate our energies on stressing the radical humanist and universalistic elements in our tradition — or perhaps even to deny that we have any common basis of belief at all? Should we not proclaim rather the openness and freedom of our movement, and suggest that the only thing which unites us is an agreement to differ?

I recognise the strength of this position. I hope that it will continue to be vigorously advocated amongst us. One of our great needs at the present time is the maintainance of a strong and lively debate. But for myself, I cannot believe that it represents the way forward at the present time. I hope that we shall always remain, in many respects, dissenters and non-conformists. One of the most depressing aspects of our contemporary culture is the prevalence, among the young no less than the old, of extreme conformity — even if only in such matters as the universal acceptance of the drab international uniform of blue denim! There is still a great deal from which we need to dissent — the unthinking acceptance, for example, among both old and young, of the inevitability of drug-dependance, whether it be pot, barbiturates, alcohol, or tobacco — the pursuit of ostentatious affluence, the encouragement of greed and envy and competitive ambition. Against such social attitudes we need more dissent and not less. But I do not think that we necessarily have to be perpetual dissenters in the realm of theology or the world of ideas.

In other words, the role of Unitarianism at the present time, as I see it, is the advocacy and encouragement of what some would no doubt regard as a rather traditional form of Liberal Christianity, the interpretation of Christianity now in the ascendant once more. After all, we are entitled to claim that we are the ones who are most able to do this honestly and unequivocally — and that we have in fact been doing it for over a century. The great defect of a radical approach prepared to operate wholly within a traditional framework is that it often appears to encourage a kind of theological double-speak. However much one may sympathise with the motives of those Modernists who wish to remain within the Established Church, so long as they continue to give 'general assent' to the Thirty-Nine Articles and to recite the historic creeds, it is not easy for them to avoid the charge of intellectual dishonesty. No doubt they will tell us that they accept the creeds in a symbolic or aesthetic sense. But so long as other members of the same Church — and probably a majority of the members — still accept the same creeds in a literal sense, the resulting situation is completely confusing and wholly unacceptable to those who have some concern for standards of integrity.

But it is obviously not enough for us to affirm, even if on a basis of intellectual integrity, a fairly traditional form of Unitarian Christianity. Maybe our Anglican friends, in both 1928 and 1978, are right when they centre their criticism on the old Unitarianism. Perhaps we do need to discover a new Unitarianism which avoids the faults of the old — just as Tillich and Bultmann succeeded in their task through an advocacy of a new liberalism which acknowledged the weakness of the old — and I am becoming increasingly persuaded that the new Unitarianism, as E. G. Lee has so long insisted, will need to take greater account of the idea of the myth. (8) Bultmann's concern for 'demythologisation' was based on the idea that outworn myths must be discarded. Perhaps our real task is to discover the real truth concealed within myth — even within ancient myth. Among some old newspaper cuttings, I recently came across a striking quotation from a book by the literary critic Rayner Heppenstall, published in 1947: "The myths embodied in Christian belief are more true to-day than they were at the time of the ecumenical councils which authorised them in the form of those mnemonic jingles, the creeds and the catechism." (9) This is why I think that last year's controversial publication, *The Myth of God Incarnate*, is so important. An acknowledgment of the full significance of the idea of myth will enable us to find the true meaning of Christian belief — especially those aspects of it, such as Incarnation, Salvation and Redemption, which we have never found easy to assimilate in the past.

And while we are still bound to reject the impossible Chalcedonian formula of Two Natures in One Person, a deeper appreciation of the Christian myth could provide us with a more satisfactory Christology, enabling us still to find in the Son of Man, a true vision of reality. Needless to say, such an acceptance of the Christ-myth would by no means exclude a profound openness towards other traditions. But for most of us, the Christ-myth must inevitably remain a part of our cultural inheritance, and I have a feeling that the new Unitarianism will have to be more Christian and not less.

I am also convinced that it will need to be more theistic and not less. Here again, the myth approach will be useful. But since there is still a lingering suspicion that to speak of mythology is to speak of that which is not really true, we will have the duty to speak up for the idea of God, not only in terms of mythology, but also in terms of reason and natural theology. As A. C. Adcock points out in his contribution to that neglected Lindsey Press paperback *Point of Belief*, "God-talk is a precious and pointless affectation unless theological propositions can in some meaningful sense be scientifically verified." (10) This is no longer an impossible task. All the recent discussions on the problem of theological language have resulted in some important conclusions, and have clearly demonstrated that to believe in God in the simple and obvious sense, is no longer a sign of theological illiteracy. The really great name in this field is that of the late Ian Ramsey, Bishop of Durham, whose early death was such an untimely loss to intellectual Christianity. Despite the difficulty of his thinking, with its references to 'models' and 'disclosure situations', I am sure that we shall find that it will be something like Ramsey's Christian Empiricism, based as it is on the empiricism of John Locke, which was always an essential part of the Unitarian tradition, that will at last enable us, fully and freely, "to speak responsibly of God" — to quote the admirable and very apt sub-title of a recent definitive study of Ian Ramsey by Professor Jerry H. Gill of Eckerd College, Florida, (11)

It goes without saying, of course, that this kind of theism will not exclude humanism. Indeed, it could be part of the mission of the new Unitarianism to refute the ridiculous notion that theism and humanism are mutually exclusive. Unitarian theism arises directly from that true Christian Humanism of the Renaissance, which alone can give to the world that profound reverence for the dignity and uniqueness of man which to-day it so singularly lacks.

And one final word in conclusion: it is not enough just to *speak* responsibly of God. Our basic need is really to *believe* responsibly in God — to believe responsibly and passionately. Baron von Hügel, that great Catholic Modernist of an earlier generation, always used to say that the essence of religion is adoration. I am sure he was right — and this means that, in the last analysis, we must interpret our theology in devotional terms. We must also interpret it of course in terms of social commitment. To this extent the Secularists are right. But we have been for too long misled by the Abou-ben-Adhem syndrome. It is not enough just to love our fellow men. "The first of all the commandment is: Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and soul and mind and strength." If we are to fulfil this commandment, we shall need a new sense of reverence and mystery, and far higher standards of aesthetic sensibility. No-one is more convinced than I am of the importance of intellectual argument, and of the necessity for finding a rational basis for religious belief. But in the end, we shall need much more than a mere rational basis.

There have always been those amongst us who object to the idea of a Unitarian *Church* and who insist that we are primarily a *movement*. I profoundly hope that, like the Holy Catholic Church itself, we shall always be something of a movement, even if we cannot aspire to be a mighty army. But I am persuaded that unless we strive earnestly to become and remain all that is involved in the idea of a Church — whose primary function is the priestly task of making God more real for men and women — we shall fail and we shall deserve to fail.

"Always, wherever, whatever, however,
When I am able to resist
For once the constant pressure of the failure to exist,
Let me remember
That truly to be man is to be man aware of Thee
And unafraid to be. So help me God." (12)

NOTES

1. From a biography by Basil Matthews (1950), Quoted *Expository Times*, April 1950. Vol. LXI. No. 7, p.224.
2. From an address on Thomas Belsham, delivered at the Unitarian College Manchester, October 1898. See Alexander Gordon, *Essays Biographical and Historical* (1922), p.309.
3. *Inquirer*, Jan. 7 & 14, 1928.
4. *Inquirer*, Feb. 18, 1928.
5. Anthony Flew: 'Theology & Falsification' — in Flew & MacIntyre (eds.), *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, p.97.
6. See F. Nietzsche, *Fröhliche Wissenschaft*, No. 125. (Quoted R. Gregor Smith, *Secular Christianity*, 1966)
7. Henry Gow, *The Unitarians* (1928), p.162.
8. See *Free Religious Faith* (1945, ed. R. V. Holt), p.207; *Point of Belief* (1968, ed. J. Rowland), p.45; E. G. Lee, *Christianity and the New Situation* (1953).
9. R. Heppenstall, *The Double Image* (1947). Quoted *New Statesman and Nation*, May 24, 1947.
10. *Point of Belief* (ed. J. Rowland), p.65.
11. Jerry H. Gill, *Ian Ramsey — To Speak Responsibly of God*. 1966.
12. David Gascoyne, *Fragments Towards a Religio Poetae*, Section 8. See *Modern Religious Verse* (ed. T. Beaumont), p.38.

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SEVENTY-FIVE PENCE