

# IS IT TERMINAL DECLINE FOR THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND?

## CHAPTER 1.

Is the public perception correct that, due to falling numbers, the Church of England is in terminal decline? Or is it the old, old story of general malaise leading to new birth and new vigour? The Church of England has got itself into its present difficulties by remaining too parochial; not so much by holding fast to the beauty of Cranmer's Liturgy, which I do myself, but by holding fast to the literal truth of the ideas which it embodies. Of course in one sense the Church of England had no choice. For most clergymen the religion of the C.of E. is the whole of life. It is all they know. Take away what they know, and they have nothing left. One might have thought that the mauling they suffered over the size of the heavens, and the mauling they suffered over the age of the earth and its consequences for Man, would have stimulated their curiosity to find out about life outside the Church. But no: Aquinas' text, "God created the world, and God created science; so there can be no incompatibility" is as far as most of them go to counter the threat of annihilation. Jesus both healed and preached; without healing no-one would have listened to him. Unfortunately the clergy cannot heal.

In 1927 there was a most interesting conversation in Brussels, on science and religion, between top scientists of the day. Not the august figures of Max Plank and Einstein; but the younger men, Heisenberg, Pauli, Dirac, and later Neils Bohr, men at the very front of nuclear research. It was an urbane, civilised conversation, generally sympathetic to religion, but viewing official religion as being on the edge of life, because of its inability to talk in any language but its own. They spoke of the great medieval myth of the nature of the Universe, which had allowed ordinary people to know where they stood in relation to Nature, and which had been torn apart by science whose measurements had proved that too much of the myth was false. And nothing had replaced it. (One can find an account of the conversation on the Internet, by looking up Werner Heisenberg).

The conversation anticipated the public attitude today towards science and religion, some 80 years later. But the Church is still unable to meet science on its own terms; and creationism so conflicts with the truth of science, that ordinary people, who accept science, tend to reject creation. God did not plant fossils in sedimentary rocks to mislead geologists.

Most Christians would say that the heart of religion was some experience of the Almighty, the Creator, and better still an indwelling or communion with Him. But this does not qualify Christians to play an effective part in running the secular world. For a start you have to reconcile the secular Rule that a man may be given one chance, but normally should be punished the second time, with the gospel Rule that you should forgive 70 times 7 times.

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The best known attempt to run a community on Christian lines was by William Penn in the early years of Pennsylvania. It was known as the Holy Experiment. It was severely criticised at the time, and ended in miserable failure or flagrant hypocrisy, whichever way you look at things. The same thing would happen today. If the government of this country were handed over to Christians, they would reduce it to chaos within months. And before you allow the Sermon on the Mount to dismantle the Rule of Law, you do want to ask the question whether you want to hear the knock at the door at 2.0am. either by the Secret Police or the local Protection Racket? Christians, without further experience, are utterly incapable of running a decent just society, and depend entirely on others to do so. Their function is different.

In secular language, religion is not primarily for the benefit of the worshippers; it is primarily for the benefit of the society in which the worshippers live. They are expected to be the leaven of society. As such, they are expected to understand, not only their own mental discipline, but everyone else's too. For Christians to be ignorant of the general principles of science, while they live in a society that is dominated by science and technology, is nothing short of inexcusable. They might as well say they are not interested in mission.

Equally for Christians to be the leaven of society, they need to have an intellectual structure that commands respect, even from those who disagree with it. But once the Church has that, there is no need to try to force it on others; it is more important to get on with life. With that proviso, what do I mean by reconciliation between religions? I mean seeking to reconcile all religions within the Christian message, as far as possible, admitting their virtues, but refusing to overlook their limitations. The Christian example is complete self-sacrifice. But not every soldier has to die in battle; and you would not succeed in recruiting much of an army, if they all had to die. There is a difference between the ultimate ideal, and what is necessary or expedient in practice; just as there is a difference between the ultimate sacrifice, and a willingness to stand firm against the shifts and often dishonest evasions of fashion, and to accept the consequences of doing so. We are not all expected to be heroes.

Most people would say that Religion is about faith and belief; that is to say with the concepts in the spiritual or intangible world that one holds most dear. But it is not as simple as that! Islam is a religion of "works". It is a religion of doing; you pray five times a day, you keep the commandments in the Koran as interpreted by the mullahs, and that is your religion, apart from the adoring mysticism that is common to all religions. You are not troubled by thoughts about the relationship of God to Man, because I understand most Muslims would consider that Allah would demean himself by seeking man's friendship. In contrast Christianity is a religion of "grace"; whatever Jesus meant by his preaching, he has been

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interpreted to mean that what matters is the attitude of the mind and heart. Provided a man or woman has the right attitude, and tries to do the right thing, shortcomings will be forgiven. There will be grace to cover every sin. The two religions have radically different premises, and it is difficult to see how they can do more than agree to differ. But what are beliefs?

In the professional world it is easy enough to recognize a belief when one sees it, just as it is easy enough to recognize a hopeless case. If an advocate never misrepresents the evidence, and never seeks to put an interpretation on a witnesses' evidence which it does not arguably bear, then he can say he believes it is worthwhile to be an honest advocate. But if an advocate says, "Of course one should be an honest advocate", and says it so often that he "believes" it; but every time he opens his mouth in front of a jury, he misrepresents the evidence a little, and again a little more, yet never so blatantly that his opponent can object, then one can say he believes it is worthwhile being a dishonest advocate. The "beliefs" you really believe are the ones you put into practice every day, week in week out, year in year out. Intellectual beliefs to which the mind alone pays lip-service are so pale and shadowy in comparison, that they hardly merit the name "belief" at all. And dogma, which wholly refuses to be open to reason, is something dredged out of the primeval darkness of the human soul.

The original thought in my "Reconciliation with Science and War" is my Theory of Consciousness, in which the basic concept is the "perfectly relaxed consciousness". There are other theories of consciousness, such as the one that says the way we look at things is dictated by social pressure; which is I imagine an extension of Karl Marx's dialectic materialism. But such a view can hardly be said to rejoice in the infinite invention of human ingenuity. And mine has the advantage that it is a basic human experience that in a state of complete relaxation, a human being can **do** absolutely nothing, not even think. Whoever heard of someone running a race, with his body tensed almost to breaking point, and his mind a complete and absolute blank meditating on the wholeness of things? To do anything, even to think, there has to be tension. And social pressure becomes relevant, inasmuch as in every society there is a different type of prevailing tension; or in my metaphor, a different type of hardening of the consciousness. Were it not so, you could not have what we call "national characteristics", and national languages would be impossible. A child only learns to utter words, as he or she begins to submerge himself into the attitude of mind of the family into which he or she is born. And ultimately this means the nation into which he or she is born.

So inevitably man as he grows from childhood to youth to adulthood, is separated from the spirit of God. This is not a Fall; it is part of the process of growing up, just as it is part of the process of leaving home. Similarly with society, to run any sort of decent society,

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it has been found in practice that its institutions have to be secular. Its Law Courts have to administer human Justice, not Divine Justice. At the time of the dissolution of the monasteries, the Ecclesiastical Courts were one of the worst abuses that had to be ended. And we do not want to see them raising their heads again in our own country, either in our own religion or in any other; and it is parochial not to recognise this. Jesus Christ did not concern himself with the secular world; or if he did then I'm afraid his understanding of it was very limited. Whether the Risen Christ has a broader outlook than the Historical Jesus is not for me to say. It is sufficient that for someone in authority (by that I mean someone who is in a position and has the power to influence others for good or ill) to ask himself the whole time, "What would Jesus have done?" is not only absurd; it is the road to catastrophe.

So it is not surprising that those who are competent in the secular world regard religion as being on the edge of life, if religion cannot speak in any language but its own. In my opinion religion ought to be able to speak in the language of anyone with whom it has to talk. Of course in this country it will use English. What I mean is that in talking to scientists, it will talk the language of Science; in talking to lawyers, the language of the Law; to soldiers the language of War, etc. There is not the slightest point in talking to a jury in speech that does not appeal to them; I know because I addressed juries for 40 years. In colloquial jargon, you have to be on the same wavelength as they are. So to communicate with someone, for example to persuade them of the correctness of what you are saying, you need to talk the same language as the person or the people who are listening to you. If you talk down to a jury, they switch off. So what do I mean by "talking the same language"? I do not mean adopting the same frame of mind; when prosecuting, you do not pretend that secretly you are one of the jury. When prosecuting your job is to present the case in a way that shows best that it is a thoroughly credible story, and if possible shows that the defence evidence demonstrates that wherever truth lies, falsehood lies with the accused. In other words, one must strive to have the same concepts of truth and falsehood that the jury are likely to have, judging by their appearance, demeanour, and the little one knows about their background. The atmosphere in a Courtroom is very real, and is a pretty reliable guide in deciding how to pitch one's argument. Addressing or talking to an individual is not so different. The rapport between you again is very real; you have an instinct of what you can say, and what you cannot say. And usually you have a pretty clear idea of whether you want to say anything to them, or not!

But assuming you have mastered the skill of talking to people, and persuading them to listen; what are you going to talk to them about? What you are not going to do is let the creation of a religious World-view, and the administration of a decent just Society, go by

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default; and leave it to the “intolerant secularism, that is striding across Europe”, to use Pope Benedict’s graphic phrase, to supply these omissions. At least not unless you are mad! But then Enoch Powell would have said before the gods destroy someone, they make him mad. And the way to start creating a vision of a world created by God is to enable religion to talk the language of all those disciplines necessary to run Society or the State.

Just as at the break-up of the Roman Empire, the best people were in cloisters, and the barbarians extinguished Christianity in Britain for 150 years, though not in Wales; so today Christians seem solely concerned with the spiritual life, and leave the rest to others. It is a pity that the Church is digging its own grave. But if you do not know any science, and have no idea how to manage conflict, but simply disapprove of it, then you probably cannot see what, if anything, can be done. So if the Church is so supine, is it possible for others to create a world-view, which accords to science the respect due to it, and recognises the brutal truth that War is inevitable if you come across someone more interested in fighting than talking?