

Church: A Common Treasury?

The first three articles in this issue began as talks to the London SOFIC (Sea of Faith in the Churches) Conference in March. The question was: Is there any place in the church (churches) for sceptics? Do they or can they belong? Or to put it the other way round: to whom does the church belong? Only to fundamentalist believers or to the rest of us too? As one of the speakers, Tony Windross, put it: 'We need to ask whether anything significant would be lost if all the churches were closed.'

Richard Hall gave a witty 'warm-up' talk on the rise of evangelical fundamentalists: 'Like them or not, evos are in the church and evos stick.' Brian Mountford, Vicar of the University Church of St Mary the Virgin, Oxford (one of his predecessors was John Henry Newman), spoke about 'belonging without believing', the subtitle of his recent book *Christian Atheist*, saying: 'I want to include people of that persuasion in the church.' And, 'looking for ways in which religion might not bore and embarrass ordinary intelligent people', sceptical vicar Tony Windross stressed: 'It's all about taking the stories – *as stories*.'

Two Church of England vicars and one ex-curate. Oddly enough, the Church of England, established as a national church, is well placed to welcome sceptics *et al*. Not long ago I attended a poet's funeral – an 'unbelieving Jew' – in a country church. The vicar said the Church of England was for everyone in England and she welcomed a scholarly Jew who chanted the *Kaddish* in Hebrew and Aramaic. The mixed congregation of country people and sceptical metropolitan intellectuals were spellbound and in tears.

Apart from ultra-fundamentalists, most church members already take a good deal of the Creeds as metaphor. For example, few now believe that Hell is a roaring fire below the Earth (in fact Hell has almost died down altogether, as well as Purgatory and Limbo) or that Heaven is up in the sky. They are on the way to thinking that the whole Christ epic of incarnation, death, descent into Hell, resurrection and ascent into Heaven to sit 'at the right hand of the Father' is a *story* but a story with tremendous and enduring power. The task is to keep the story's positive force and *translate* it into terms 'understood by the people', a people who in European culture as a whole cannot now accept the supernatural literally.

In a recent television series Professor Diarmaid MacCulloch, a 'candid friend' of Christianity, said that the English church (and people) had a peculiar genius for transforming itself, so that it was changed utterly yet still felt the same (witness the choirs in Church of England cathedrals gloriously singing pre-Reformation liturgy and music). So it may be this 'English genius' that can negotiate the move from hearing the Christ

epic as literal to hearing it as symbolic.

I think it is vital for this epic still to be heard in our culture and that is what the church can do. And although the *epic* is symbolic, the *gospel* is not. Even if we do not take the epic literally, we can still believe in the gospel, keep faith. The gospel as good news for the poor, as the reign of kindness, justice and peace on Earth and in our hearts, needs to be *realised* in bodily terms: hot dinners, safe beds, freedom from torture. These things are not 'post-modernist' or 'non-real'. The gospel remains and David Cameron's recent call for a 'return to Christian values' rang hollow indeed. Where is the good news for the poor in *reducing* tax on the super-rich (has he never heard of that camel?) or in making so many less well-off people poorer, lose their public services, their livelihoods and their homes?

As well as kindness, we need poetry (in all its senses, to include music and all the arts). The church can give us that abundantly and it is an inheritance beyond price that must not be lost. Many of Brian Mountford's Christian atheist interviewees mentioned beauty and one described herself as 'Anglo-choral'.

Today the Church of England is in a strong position to embrace the necessary change of attitude to the supernatural. In the seventeenth century it was the English – the likes of Gerrard Winstanley and others – who fermented a liberation theology ('the Earth should be a common treasury' and 'Christ rising again in the sons and daughters').

However, in recent decades it has been the Catholic church, especially in Latin America, that has developed liberation theology most fully. And the interesting thing is that these theologians, although 'orthodox' in print (many of them Jesuits), have a *humanist* agenda. They don't say: 'This is wrong because God forbids it' but 'The kind of God he is *could not* want this (e.g. death squads) because it is inhuman.' Mountford reminds us that a dictum of the church was *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*: 'no salvation outside the church'. The subtitle of Jesuit Jon Sobrino's book *The Eye of the Needle** is *Extra Pauperes Nulla Salus*: 'no salvation outside (without) the poor.'

Could these insights combine to foster the twin requirements for holding fast to what is good in Christianity – ditching the supernatural yet keeping the gospel? It is heartening, at least, that there is a statue of Archbishop Romero of San Salvador on the great west front of Westminster Abbey.

*Darton, Longman and Todd (London 2008) translated by Dinah Livingstone.