

# BRIEFing

An occasional magazine for *Free to Believe*



## Critical **Friends**

*Observations on liberal Christianity*

February 2020

# CONTENTS

3

## **Learning from orthodoxy**

*Do liberal Christians too easily abandon the the riches of the Church catholic*

10

## **Getting to know Gary Dorrien**

*This year's conference keynote speaker introduces himself*

12

## **Liberal Faith**

*This year's conference at High Leigh*

13

## **Speaking (and not) of God**

*David Cornick hands back his Enlightenment credentials*

20

## **Liberals and structural violence**

*Lawrence Moore ponders two situations which trouble liberal Christians*

29

## **Crucicentric, Congregational, and Catholic**

*Martin Camroux reviews a new book on URC theologian Alan Sell*

*The PDF version of Briefing can be downloaded from the Free To Believe website  
<http://www.freetobelieve.org.uk>*

***Edited by David Lawrence (ftb\_briefing@outlook.com)***

*If you wish to subscribe, unsubscribe, change delivery details or your data protection acceptance  
please email Sue Liddell at [codurham@btinternet.com](mailto:codurham@btinternet.com) or post to 4 High Green, Leiston IP16 4ET*

# Learning from orthodoxy

*A testimony by Susan Durber*

Definitions are important, of course, but in this instance refining them might take too many words. So, I hope you will allow me some assumptions about what liberal means in this context, and orthodox too, in the hope that anything I have to say in what follows may not die by a thousand qualifications.

## **A liberal pride**

I can remember a time when I took great pride in styling myself as liberal or, later perhaps, radical. I have never warmed to the label 'progressive', since I have long been suspicious of any suggestions that movements or history progress forwards – and perhaps we have all grown more humble about the idea that we are improving on the insights or actions of previous generations. But I recognise that something of the same warning might also need to come with words like 'radical' and 'liberal'. All of these ways of describing ourselves can too easily become battle cries or assertions of identity over against others.

Increasingly I am content to be simply 'Christian' and if I have any aspiration it is more about being faithful, trusting, obedient even, than other kinds of qualifications. The truth is also that I have grown more suspicious and wary of my own motives in claiming to be any particular type of Christian, particularly if that claim suggests or implies that I think myself a better kind of Christian than others. Even 'Reformed' sometimes seems a rather hubristic title to me now. I



*Onwards and upwards? – Escher's 'Relativity'*

am much more aware than I once was that there were many reforming movements in the Middle Ages and the 15th and 16th centuries and that some of the most compelling ones (the Franciscans for example) remained within what we now call the Roman Catholic church.

Nowadays I see providing an explanation of which particular group of Christians I belong to as being more about describing the discipline I live under than about claiming any kind of rightness. And I think I can now resist any temptations that I might once have had to impress people by demonstrating how daringly radical I can be (and I think that was one of the reasons why, at one stage, I liked to call myself radical, though I recognise that's not why everyone does). So perhaps it would be more accurate to say that I don't claim the word 'orthodox' over against liberal or radical or anything else (though I don't disown it), but that I'm content simply to be a follower of Christ. I remember being profoundly affected by a URC minister I once knew who told me, in his advanced years, that he believed less and less, but believed it more and more. Perhaps I have moved into the 'more and more' stage, less inclined to adopt a critical stance and more inclined to look for what I can, not only accept, but also embrace warmly and gratefully.

## **Earthen vessels**

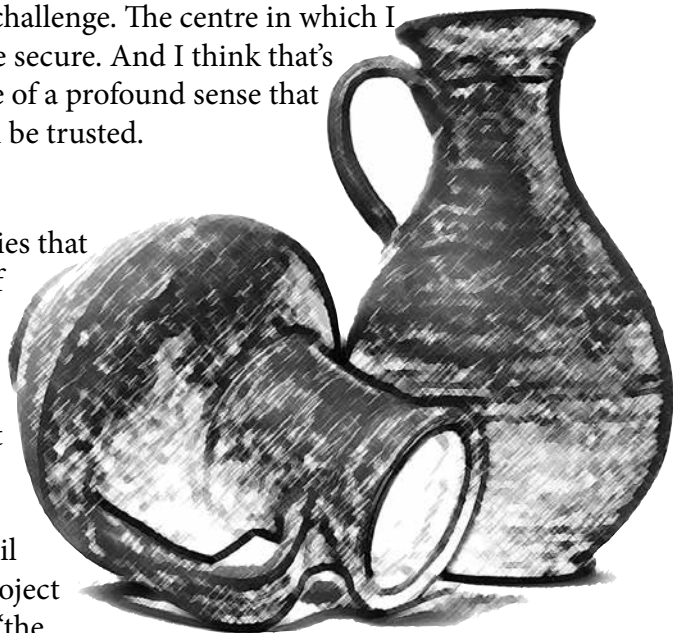
I remember another moment in my life when someone told me that he would not ever describe himself as conservative (theologically), but he would describe himself as traditional. I had, until then, elided them in my mind. But I recognise that those two things (traditional and conservative) can actually be quite different from each other and indeed they might actually lead to very different places. I would argue, now, that to engage most deeply with and to live within the Tradition (or traditions) of Christianity is to be anything but conservative (in the sense of keeping things as they've always been), and that a living tradition will of its essence be changing, but also remain rooted and held. I'm also increasingly convinced that the heart of a truly 'traditional' Christianity is in itself inherently 'radical' – it doesn't need a radical 'alternative' version of itself. I now trust that the deeper you go into the Christian faith the more its traditions become evidently more radical. In the best sense, they are rooted in the God who is transforming the world for good. My

direction now is not so much to be contesting the traditions of Christianity in the name of a modernist discipline called 'liberal', but to be opening myself up to the Christian faith in the trust that there I will meet the God who is more radical than anything I might meet in the world.

In my liberal/radical days I would refer often to the need for a 'hermeneutic of suspicion' as we read the Scriptures and other texts of Christian faith. Now I always want to balance that with reference to a 'hermeneutic of trust'. What I trust above all is that God does come to us through the faith we have inherited and that there are treasures there, even when held in 'earthen vessels'. Perhaps I am less outraged now by the earthen vessels (I have learned so much about my own fragility), and more convinced about the treasure that is nonetheless in those vessels and there to be found. I don't want to spend so much of my days protesting about the vessels or smashing the pots, but rather to receive them gratefully as containers for so much that is precious. I recognise, perhaps, the thrill that can be found in pot smashing (critiquing, challenging, bringing down) and it's sometimes necessary, but I am more driven by the need to find the treasure and perhaps I have more of a sense of why I might want to critique or challenge. The centre in which I trust feels now more secure. And I think that's because I have more of a profound sense that God is God and can be trusted.

### **Some stories**

There are some stories that I can offer by way of explanation. Some years ago, I was asked to co-moderate a study project for the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches. The project was to explore how 'the

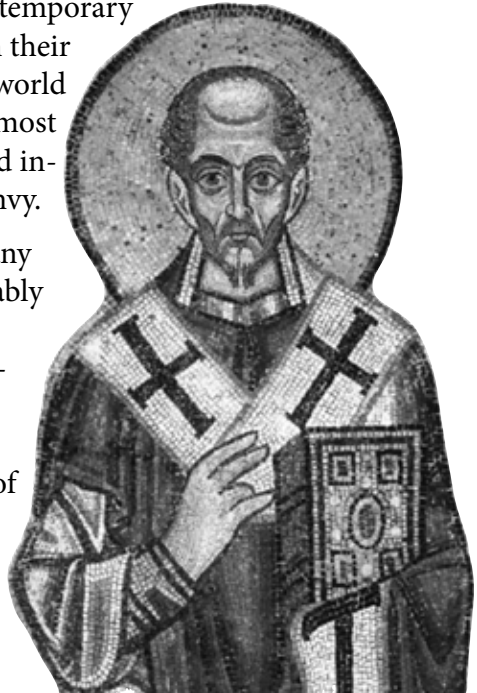


Church Fathers' might be seen as shared authorities for all the churches. I was asked to co-lead and co-moderate with someone from one of the Orthodox churches.

We were a beautifully balanced team. He was steeped in patristics, a scholar who, as a young monk had decorated his cell with quotations from the Fathers, quotations he had obtained by subterfuge in Soviet Russia. I was a Feminist, affronted even by the very term patristic, born into and shaped by a culture that often sees the past as a foreign country full of people more primitive than us, and ready to do battle against creeds that were enforced by Roman Emperors and against a corpus that is almost all written by men. But through months of study, reflection and conversation, I discovered something quite different from what I had expected.

I realised that the 'teachers and witnesses' of the early church (some of whom were women!), were far from being the dull, conservative guardians of a past I did not want to visit. They were faithful Christians, with all the variety and flaws of the contemporary versions I know, following Jesus in their own times and responding to the world while interpreting the Scriptures, most often with a prayerful intensity and intellectual bravura that I came to envy.

I realised that I had thought of many of them as abstract scholars, probably working in ancient libraries in the pay of political and church authorities, defending only conservative positions. I came, as I read much more, to experience them as part of what my Orthodox (with a capital O) colleagues describe as 'living tradition', those who are a living presence in the communion that makes up the amazing community we call the church. I came



*St John Chrysostom*

away from that work deeply persuaded that the teachers and witnesses of the early Church should be honoured. I saw that they were not ‘pure’, and neither were their times. Their discourses were flawed, but so are ours.

## **Beacons of light**

Every generation has its stupidities and its profound injustices. And each has its beacons of light. And in those early witnesses to our faith I saw those who can inspire us all, those who have shaped the faith we hold so often for good. I knew many hard things about John Chrysostom, for example, but when I read his sermons and discovered his life story, of how he spoke out for the poor against the Empire and was banished for his prophetic voice, I saw him new. That his liturgy is still spoken and sung around the world every Sunday now moves me.

I understand now why it might be important to say prayers, in all our services, that do not come from our own times alone, but reflect the wonderful catholicity of the church, through time and space. The treasures of the Holy Spirit can indeed come to us carried in earthen or even cracked vessels – and vessels that come from other than our own tables. I learn this about the Bible, but it is also true of the early Church, and of the slightly later Church, and of the Church that is yet to be.

## **A church of millennia and miles**

I came to see that the church of any age is not simply defined by the things that we want to criticise or critique about it and that there is so much to admire and learn and that can feed our souls too. In coming to see Christians of the past as more than those who could only read the Bible without the benefit of form criticism (!), I discovered deep wells of wisdom I had overlooked. In my own doctoral studies I had been struck by the arrogance of those who think they are the first generation to read the Bible in the right way. I was once taught to ridicule ‘pre-critical’ readings, but now I treasure them.

I value modern and post-modern readings of all sorts too, for I am hungry for new eyes on scriptural texts, but I do not turn now from ancient readings and I am drawn to their beauty and difference from my own assumptions. I am much more humble than I ever was about the

insights of the era I happen to have been born in. I am glad to belong to a truly catholic church that covers millennia and miles. What a gift that is. I find myself in a larger space, one that I once feared to inhabit, but in which I have found a beloved extended family. I recognise now that I deeply desire the very tradition with which I continue to wrestle. This is about love and community as much as it is about truth.

### **A search for renewal**

I have learned that for many Orthodox Christians, to suggest that the Christian faith can change (as many liberal and radical Christians from the West insist that it must) seems impertinent, dangerous and impossible. For them, the faith has been revealed to us and held by the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church. The Christian faith is the faith passed on to us by the apostles – we cannot just ‘change’ or reform it. This sometimes means it seems as though ‘conservative’ positions are then set against ‘liberal’ ones on many questions from scriptural interpretation to ethics.

However, I have learned that for many among the Orthodox there is a passionate search for the renewal of the church, but in a particular way.





So sometimes they will say that what was always there, and has always been true, has been newly uncovered. It is not that the faith has changed, but we have grown more faithful. Thus, for example, one Orthodox church has recently argued that women were deacons in the earliest churches, and so it becomes possible, and indeed right, that they should be deacons in today's church. This is not to change the faith received from the apostles, but in fact to grow closer to it.

I find myself wondering what it would mean if every kind of church took as seriously as we all might the teaching of Paul in Galatians 3 that many of the distinctions between people (gender, ethnicity, status, wealth) are radically overcome in Christ. To live from that truth, from what is part of the apostolic faith, would surely be far more 'radical' than any modern Western discourse, and yet profoundly orthodox. This would not be to change the apostolic faith, but to begin to take it seriously.

### **Beautiful human beings**

But perhaps the most compelling reason why I find myself 'returning' to sources, traditions and people that few would immediately recognise as liberal, radical or progressive is that I see what seems to shape the most beautiful human beings. Rowan Williams' book *Luminaries: Twenty Lives that Illuminate the Christian Way* (InterVarsity Press, 2019) provides a selection from among the saints of the ages who have emerged from the faith we share. It is the quality of their lives and witness that attracts me, and some of them might even be identified as conservative in many ways.

I find myself now more eager to be like Saint Francis than Peter Waldo, radical and orthodox, passionate about unity and justice, looking for a way to follow Christ, and constantly amazed at how there are yet more bright fields to see in the landscape of the church. I am content not to look for the radical edge, but to know that the orthodox centre is truly radical, and graceful, enough.

*Susan Durber ministers in Taunton and is Moderator of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches*



## Getting to know Gary Dorrien

*The keynote speaker at this summer's Free to Believe conference talks about his life and fascination with the heritage of Martin Luther King*

I grew up in a poor, semi-rural section of Michigan, Bay County, in a nominally Catholic family. My parents moved there after growing up in similarly poor areas of Michigan's Upper Peninsula, where my father took abuse for his Cree heritage. At the age of twenty he acquired passably white status by moving south, to the Lower Peninsula. When he looked in the mirror he saw an inferior caste, so the most loving thing he could imagine as a parent was to claim for his children all the white privilege he could get. Today my father is proudly, even aggressively, Native American, and I appreciate the changes in American society that made it possible for him to reclaim his racial identity. None of it would have happened without the civil rights movement. But I am a child of the white working class, having never experienced or claimed any other racial identity, and this nation has never had a breakthrough for racial justice that did not set off a mighty backlash from my group. We are in one such backlash now.

In my youth I got to Mass sporadically with my family and sometimes hitched a ride with neighbors – just enough to be caught by the figure of the crucified Jesus. This God-figure who responded to evil with self-sacrificing love provided a religious ideal, a sign of transcendence that

broke through my everyday horizon of lower-class culture and the next game. Then the stunning witness of the civil rights movement similarly broke through, eventually melding in my thought and feeling with the cross of Christ.

I came of age in the climactic years of the movement. The Selma demonstration made a searing impression on me. My teachers described America as the world's greatest nation in every way that mattered. But the civil rights movement taught a very different lesson. Martin Luther King became the formative figure for me long before I understood much of anything about politics or religion. Then King was assassinated, and he became more than merely the leader of a justice movement. Like Jesus whom he followed, King had died for us – died as an exemplar of Jesus' way of peacemaking and justice-making. That was the extent of my religious worldview when I squeaked into college, mostly to play sports. In my twenties and early thirties I served as a community organizer and Episcopal priest; at thirty-five I became an academic; today I stand on the same bedrock as when I started.

The story of Martin Luther King Jr. and the movement he led is our greatest national treasure. It is beautiful, searing, inspiring, and traumatic. It resounds with soaring rhetoric and ends in night-marish despair, but does not end. To me, this story surpasses all other American stories because it is the passion narrative of our time. It crashed through my lower-class white world in my youth and put me on a very unlikely vocational path. Yet this greatest of American stories no longer makes its own way, partly because of the way it was told for many years.

The civil rights movement led by King refuted America's self-congratulatory story about its freedom-loving goodness, instead offering Americans an opportunity to confess and atone for the ongoing legacy of their nation's original sins. Today we need the witness of King more than ever, for America never built a culture of atonement, and today our nation is wracked by consequences of the very problems that King devoted his life to ending.

*Gary Dorrien is the Reinhold Niebuhr Professor of Social Ethics at Union Theological Seminary, Professor of Religion at Columbia University, and the author of 18 books on ethics, social theory, philosophy, theology, politics, and intellectual history. He is a priest in the Episcopal Church.*

# Free to Believe National Conference 2020

30 July – 1 August

*At High Leigh Conference Centre, Hoddesdon, Herts EN11 8SG*

## Liberal Faith

What is it and what does it offer to the world?

*The liberal option is of a faith that changes and develops to meet the needs of the contemporary world. It stands for a faith that is open, inclusive and socially radical.*

*In our time it has been championed among others by  
John Robinson, Paul Tillich, Jack Spong and Martin Luther King.*

*Without Liberal Faith theology too easily becomes a shrivelled, narrow, bigoted discourse. Instead  
it looks for a liberating faith.*

### Speakers

**Gary Dorrien** is Reinhold Niebuhr Professor of Social Ethics at Union Theological Seminary in New York and Professor of Religion at Columbia University. He has written extensively on the social meaning of the gospel.

**Peter Brain** is a former Church and Society Secretary of the URC and author of 'The knowable God'.

**Alex Clare-Young** is a minister of the United Reformed Church; currently serving as Community Leader at Peter's House, Hull, and conducting doctoral research into the theologies of trans Christians. Alex's first book *Transgender. Christian. Human* will be published in 2020.

**Alison Micklem** served the URC as a Church-Related Community Worker for 15 years before her ordination in 2014. Now minister of St. Columba's, York, her focus remains on faith which engages with its context and community. Her connection with *Free to Believe* is long-standing, and she has chaired a number of conferences and reading parties: this will be her first appearance as a speaker.

***Find details and a booking form online at [freetobelieve.org.uk](http://freetobelieve.org.uk)***

# Speaking (and not) of God

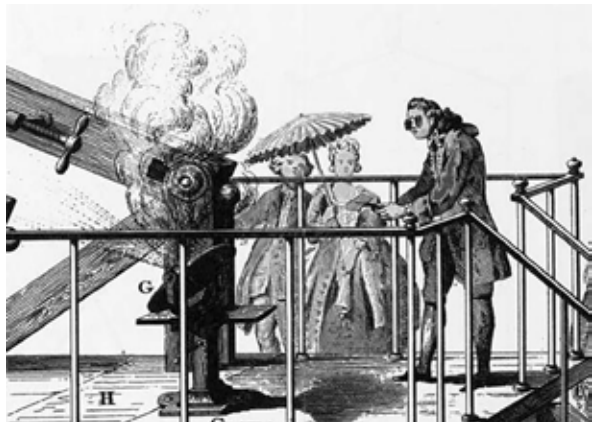
*David Cornick takes back his youthful scorn*

I went to university and theological college to study theology as a callow young arts graduate after the glorious summer of 1976, then the hottest on record. These were heady, exciting years. The United Reformed Church was four years old, the Churches Council for Covenanting had just published Ten Propositions on visible unity and hope was still in the air. More broadly, despite political and economic strains, the post-war consensus was in what we now recognise as its long autumn, and my generation were amongst its grateful beneficiaries.

## **An Enlightenment agenda?**

So, I was convinced that the Enlightenment had set the agenda for the theological task. After all, it had gifted us with the wonders of modern science and medicine which had exponentially improved health and life-expectancy, placed rationality, learning and education at the heart of the human enterprise, and freed the world from the curse of superstition. Rationality and reason were, it seemed to me, God given gifts to free the church from the mumbo-jumbo of tradition and the sanctimony of childish piety. As Bonhoeffer said, man (sic) had indeed come of age, and those of us raised on the excitements of *Honest to God* were about to ride our theological chargers to the rescue. I therefore arrived on the steps of

King's College London in September 1976 as a card carrying theological liberal, dubious about miracles, convinced that historical method could reveal the radical historical Jesus – the 'man for others', persuaded that the church should talk of love rather than sin, sure that 'incarnation' was a time-bound myth.



*Casting light on the world – an early experiment by Antoine Lavoisier*

That happy naivety was jolted by the depths of the Christian traditions to which my teachers gently introduced me. I can still remember being appalled by reading Calvin, my horror intensified by the growing realisation that he was probably right about most things (excepting double-predestination of course).

As I turned from undergraduate theologian to post-graduate church historian in 1978 the country descended into acrimony and division in 'the winter of discontent': rubbish piled on the street, the dead unburied. By the time I left in 1981 James Callaghan had lost power and Thatcherism was an ideology in embryo. Whatever people were doing, they certainly weren't coming of age, and I increasingly appreciated that theologies which didn't take God and sin (not just 'personal' but 'structural' sin – all that hinders God's good will for creation) with utter seriousness had no chance of dealing with the human condition. No amount of altruism and loving your enemy would cut the mustard. Humanity didn't need an exemplar, it longed for a Saviour. I handed back my liberal card.

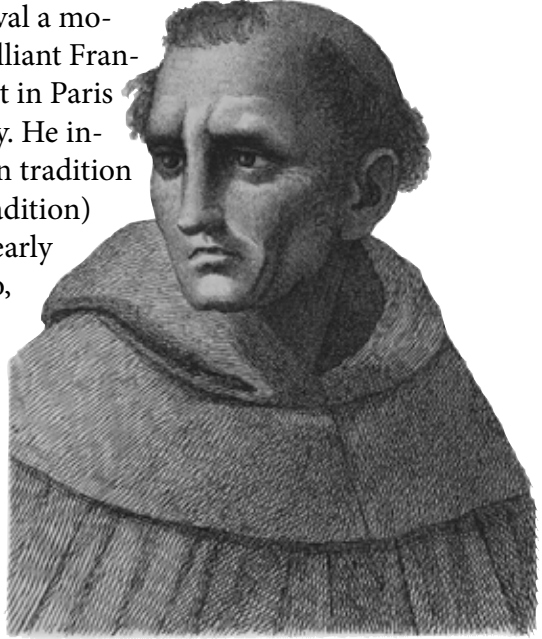
### **The long view**

If church historians have any special contribution to make to the study of history or theology, it's that they are interested in the 'longue durée' of the history of two thousand years of the Christian church. Why did the ideological plurality of the Roman Empire become the unity (not, be it noted uniformity) of Western Christendom for over 1000 years? Why did that unity shatter into pluralism in the 16th century? What is the relationship between that pluralism and the explosion of secularism in the 20th century? And, more recently, why does that appear to be just a Western European phenomenon?

Most events have multi-causal explanations, some long term, some short. Take secularisation for example. Recently some have presented a compelling case that secularisation accelerated in the 1960s, and one historian has suggested that amongst the causes was the church's own invention of the language of secularisation as it struggled to articulate the horrors of the holocaust. That has to be balanced by the many who argue that the pluralism set unwittingly free by the sixteenth century reformations acted as the midwife of non-belief, and those who trace its ideological roots back to medieval times.

## The 'otherness' of God

Let me stay with the mediaeval a moment. Duns Scotus was a brilliant Franciscan theologian who taught in Paris in the mid thirteenth century. He inherited the classical Christian tradition (which is also the Biblical tradition) that God and creation are clearly distinct. Creation is ex nihilo, and God sustains it through his providential care, yet is completely separate from all that is created – literally unimaginable and incomprehensible (Ps 139; Is 55; 1 Tim 6:16) – and that 'otherness' echoes down the early theological centuries – Augustine, Anselm, Hildegard,



*Duns Scotus*

and Thomas, as well as in the writing of later mystics and theologians as varied as St John of the Cross, Newman and Barth. It is because God is 'other', with no need of such created constructs as time and space that the incarnation becomes possible and the sacraments a reality. And, of course, a God who is completely other than creation can never be investigated or disproved by disciplines which work within the confines of creation by empirical enquiry. In classical Catholic theology, that is why the bread and wine transubstantiate into the body of Christ without any change in their physical or chemical structure. In empirical terms after consecration what you have is still bread and wine. What has changed is that the God who is totally distinct from creation has become present within those elements.

### A single map

Aquinas used analogy to maintain the distinction between God and the created world, but he was very clear that God was not 'a' being, but the sheer act of being in which all creation participated. Scotus thought

this whole tradition was mistaken. He was very influenced by the revival of Aristotelianism in the work of the Islamic philosopher Avicenna who argued that being both existed prior to and was common to God and creation. Scotus was persuaded. God and creation could not be separate because they shared the same being. God might be infinitely greater than anything imaginable, but God partook of being. What Scotus had done was to map God and creatures onto the same co-ordinates. It was known as metaphysical univocity, and it was that philosophical system (derived eventually from Aristotle) which came to dominate late medieval theology.

The theory was taken on by a Franciscan of the next generation, William of Occam. He insisted that God had to be a thing, an entity, an ens - however different to any other 'ens' in the universe in power and majesty. Add to that the method of his famous razor - that entities should not be multiplied beyond necessity - and all the tools slip into place for the much later sidelining of God from the natural world. The Reformers reacted against this tradition as they 're-discovered' the Bible, but in the 'longue durée' Scotus's work was the seed from which the domestication of God's transcendence grew. That growth was abetted by reformation disputes about the relationship between God and the world (particularly about God's presence in the eucharist). Those who were concerned with the investigation of the natural world found themselves side-stepping doctrine, which was dangerous. The assumption of the correctness of univocity on the one hand, and the disputes around Scriptural authority on the other left the Christian intellectual cupboard looking bare. It was small surprise that those who investigated the natural world began to give priority to empirical observation and reason. It wasn't that the empirical observation of the natural world disproved theological claims, rather Catholicism and Protestantism in their conflict had unwittingly created a sterile impasse, and nascent science prudently side-stepped it.

### **The divine watchmaker**

That same process provided the ground rules for the philosophers of the Enlightenment. God became the divine watchmaker, a demi-urge who sets creation running, an object within a deist system. By any classical



definition, such a God is not God, because God is that than which no greater can be conceived. Nor is the deist God the God whom Christians know in Jesus Christ.

I was wrong when I stood on those steps in 1976. The Enlightenment should not be setting the theological agenda, much as we should cherish its achievements in science, for its philosophical heritage is even more pluralist and conflicted in the face of the big questions of life and morality than Christian theology. Philosophers agree on practically nothing. Any attempt to build a theology on such weak foundations is doomed to failure.

### **A traditional truth**

Post-modernism (whatever its precise meaning and content) liberates Christian theology from the shackles of modernist assumptions, and is therefore to be welcomed. Movements as diverse as Radical Orthodoxy and those who seek to apply a post-modernist understanding of Barth show its rich potential for recovering the fulness of the classical Christian tradition. I take pleasure in that for although I am no theologian (which may be obvious by now!) I am a thinking, questing Christian believer and the more I explore, the more I am persuaded that it is the classical Christian tradition which is true to the God we know in Jesus Christ.

The true God, according to all the major theistic traditions of the world is 'being, consciousness and bliss' God is not an object, not a deist demiurge but the One who is the mystery of Being, who holds everything that is in being at every second, who is manifest in the wonder and mystery of consciousness as we perceive the amazing gift of created reality, who is the path we follow and the destination we will arrive at, drawn by a yearning for truth and love, both of which God is.

It is that God – wonderful, mysterious, other – who became



*Karl Barth*

incarnate in Jesus Christ. It is precisely because God is 'other', not part of space-time, that in Christ God can fashion our salvation, defeating on the cross and in the resurrection all those sinful forces that would disfigure and distort God's will, and forge reconciliation. It is for those reasons that I find myself joyfully affirming the virgin birth (which seems to me a necessary theological truth), rejoicing in the power of God as health and healing follow in the wake of Jesus 'the God-man', celebrating the sheer physicality of the resurrection, and relishing life anew each Sunday as my sins are pronounced forgiven. Incidentally, a liturgy which does not contain the assurance of forgiveness is selling God's people short.

The Enlightenment was a source of great blessing – the unfolding stories of the sciences are proof. But it was also the cause of huge confusion, for the mechanical universe it imagined cast God into the role of the divine watchmaker, the God of the gaps, the God who kick-starts the universe, the primal cause. That is the God Richard Dawkins and his collaborators don't believe in. It is also the god that Christians don't believe in, because it is not God but a demi-urge.

### **Without God, nothing**

It doesn't matter to Christians whether creation began with a big bang or a steady state, whether there are incalculable multiverses out there or not. The mechanics of creation are the realm of science and its discoveries and we will continue to admire their achievements. However, the Christian affirmation is that without God there would be no existence – whether that 'existence' is a universe as complex as ours, or simply a set of possibilities and mathematical laws which might one day produce life. Without God there would be literally nothing.

But there is everything, such is God's generosity, and the joy of faith is that the generous God who holds all of that in being became incarnate in Jesus Christ, to draw us into communion, and embrace us with a love beyond understanding.

Speaking of such a God is the vocation of the church in every age, but it is no easy task. In 1922 the Swiss Reformed theologian Karl Barth

wrote, ‘As theologians we ought to speak of God. We are, however, human beings and as such cannot speak of God. We ought to recognise both our obligation and our inability – and precisely in that recognition, give God the glory. This is our affliction. Everything else is mere child’s play.’

I would have scorned that in 1976. Now I know that it is true.

## Endnote

I’ve tried to keep this text clear of footnotes. For those who would like to read further, two church historians who explore the 1960s and secularisation are:

- Hugh McLeod, *The religious crisis of the 1960s* (Oxford OUP 2007)
- Sam Brewitt-Taylor ‘*The invention of a “Secular Society”? Christianity and the sudden appearance of secularization discourses in the British National Media, 1961-1964*’ in *Twentieth Century British History* vol 24, no 3 (2013) pp. 327-350.

The ‘longue durée’ can be represented by

- Brad Gregory, *The unintended reformation: how a religious revolution secularised society* (London, Harvard University Press 2012).

I have relied heavily on his work, particularly on Duns Scotus.

Gregory writes as an historian, but there is a serious debate amongst theologians about the theology and philosophy (rather than the historical impact) of Scotus’s doctrine of univocity – see for example:

- Thomas Williams ‘*The doctrine of univocity is true and salutary*’ in *Modern Theology* 21(4) (2004) pp 575-585.

For the nature of God as being, consciousness and bliss, see:

- David Bentley Hart *The existence of God: being, consciousness, bliss* (London, Yale UP 2013).

*David Cornick* is Director of Studies in Theology at Robinson College, Cambridge and a former General Secretary of the United Reformed Church

# Liberals and structural violence: two case studies

*Lawrence Moore muses on Theological and political liberalism*

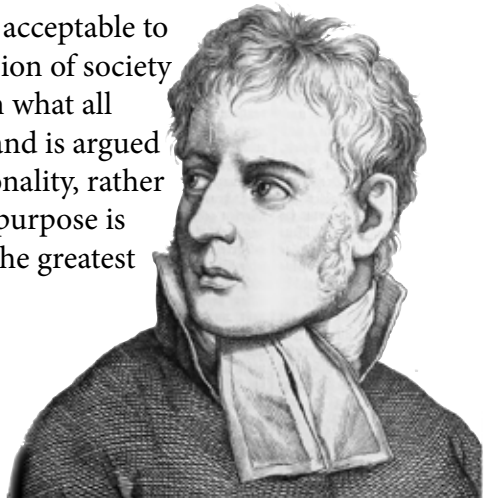
**L**iberalism? I understand the term to refer theologically to an intellectually critical faith that occupies the territory between an authoritarian system of belief, on the one hand, and atheism on the other. Politically, I take it to describe a moderate philosophy based on liberty, consent of the government and equality before the law, that emphasises universal civil and human rights. Its proponents argue that it is rooted in universally rational principles, rather than aristocratic privilege. Practically, these include limited government, individual rights, capitalism (free markets), democracy, secularism, and gender and racial equality.

Both political and theological liberalism share common instincts and display common characteristics and emphases that frequently make them natural bedfellows.

Significantly, the apology for both rests on the basis of universally shared characteristics (rationality, human rights etc). Friedrich Schleiermacher, the “father of liberal theology”, attempted to build Christian faith on the basis of a universally shared God-consciousness that would be accessible and acceptable to any rational mind. The liberal vision of society similarly envisages a state built on what all human beings have in common, and is argued for on the grounds of shared rationality, rather than any external authority. The purpose is to achieve “the greatest good for the greatest possible number” of its citizens.

## **The issue of structural violence**

The stress on what is shared and held in common risks ignoring or eliding significant differences among groups in society where



*Friedrich Schleiermacher*

access to power is unequally distributed, particularly on the basis where the natural equality of all human beings is denied. When one group is held to be somehow “less human”, those with power are exempt from extending to them the rights and freedoms that are otherwise deemed to be universal. When this is enshrined in law and enforced by judicial and military action, that group becomes the victim of structural violence. The violence they face, therefore, is not a series of isolated, unlawful incidents perpetrated by evil individuals (ie the exception to the rule) but is inherent within the social, economic, legal and military framework of the state. How should they respond, both practically and ethically? How should the church respond? How should the international community react?

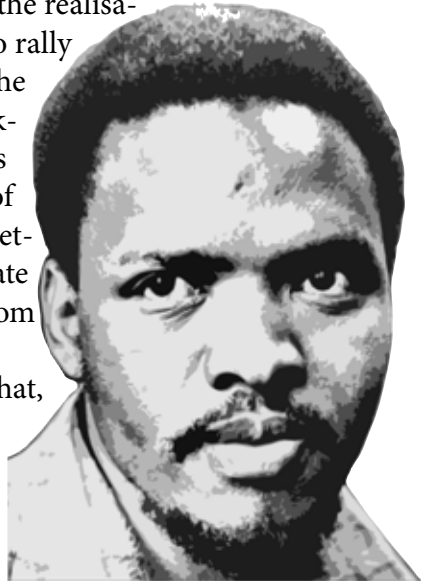
This is the situation that was faced by Black South Africans under Apartheid and the Palestinian people under Israeli occupation in the present. I want look briefly at both of these as instances where the liberal response was and is deemed deeply problematic by the victims of these policies.

## **1. The South African case: Steve Biko and white liberals**

Steve Biko was an African nationalist and socialist. He was at the forefront of the grassroots anti-Apartheid campaign known as the Black Consciousness Movement during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Brilliant, articulate, visionary and incisive, he was just 31 when he was beaten unconscious during a 22 hour interrogation by South African security police. Naked, manacled and unconscious with at least three brain lesions, he was thrown into the back of police Land Rover and driven 740 miles to a police hospital in Pretoria, where he died alone in a cell on 12 September 1977. 20,000 people attended his funeral.

For Biko, political campaigning and military resistance was not enough to achieve black liberation. Black Consciousness was the necessary response to a society in which both blacks and whites had internalised the view that white equals superior and black equals inferior. Until blacks threw off these psychological shackles, they would always be beggars for scraps from the white table, rather than equal partners in a negotiated shared future for South Africa. Writing in 1971, he defines it thus:

“Black Consciousness is in essence the realisation by the black man of the need to rally together with his brothers around the cause of their oppression - the blackness of their skin - and to operate as a group in order to rid themselves of the shackles that bind them to perpetual servitude. It seeks to demonstrate the lie that black is an aberration from the “normal”, which is white. It is a manifestation of a new realisation that, by seeking to tun away from themselves and to emulate the white man, blacks are insulting the intelligence of whoever created them black. Black Consciousness, therefore, takes cognisance of the



*Steve Biko*

deliberateness of God’s plan in creating black people black. It seeks to infuse the black community with a new-found pride in themselves, their efforts, their value system, their culture, their religion and their outlook on life.” (1)

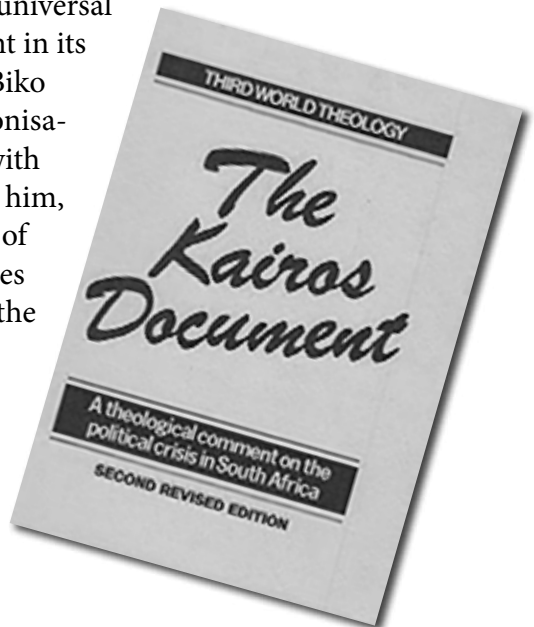
In contrast to the ANC, Biko believed that black liberation from Apartheid needed to be an exclusively black pursuit, precisely in order to realise a genuinely multiracial South Africa as a result. This was because the whites had not only colonised South Africa, but had succeeded in colonising black minds with the myth of white superiority. Unless and until blacks discovered for themselves their own humanity and equal worth, they would never be liberated. That required blacks to organise on their own terms, free from the white domination of resistance to Apartheid.

For Biko, therefore, the single greatest obstacle to black liberation was the white liberals. He noted that resistance to Apartheid was effectively run by white South African liberals, to whom blacks deferred. This was, for him, the evidence of the totality of white power: whites not only instituted Apartheid, but also determined how, when, and at what pace change should occur. He writes:

“It is not enough for whites to be on the offensive. So immersed are they in prejudice that they do not believe that blacks can formulate their thoughts without white guidance and trusteeship. Thus, even those whites who see such wrong with the system make it their business to control the response of the blacks to the provocation... To us, it spells out the totality of the white power structure - the fact that though whites are our problem, it is still other whites who want to tell us how to deal with that problem.” (2)

Biko’s stance caused bewilderment and distress among white liberals. His accusation was that they could not recognise the extent to which they were beneficiaries of the system, and therefore pursued a “white” strategy for liberation with which they could be comfortable as whites in a black majority country. They addressed their protests over Apartheid to the white establishment, demanding reform and recognition for blacks. For Biko, a far more militant response was required because of the system of structural violence: the overthrow of the whole system of white domination. White liberals had as their aim a programme of moderate reform, rather than wholesale transformation.

This was true of the white liberal church response, too. Theologically, it emphasised principles of peace, forgiveness, reconciliation, non-violence, turning the other cheek, universal humanity and rational argument in its confrontations with the state. Biko believed it no accident that colonisation had happened in concert with the missionary movement. For him, as for Desmond Tutu, the form of Christianity that the missionaries had brought urged passivity in the face of injustice and suffering, and justified imperial expansionism. The sort of resistance Biko thought was required by structural violence was frequently condemned as sinful by the bishops, priests



and ministers. Biko therefore argued for a distinctively black approach to theology and faith.

“Here we have the case for Black Theology ... It seeks to relate God and Christ once more to the black man and his daily problems. It wants to describe Christ as a fighting god, not a passive god who allows a lie to rest unchallenged ... It seeks to bring back God to the black man and to the truth and reality of his situation ... It is the duty therefore of all black priests and ministers of religion to save Christianity by adopting Black Theology’s approach and thereby once more uniting the black man with his God.” (BC and the Quest for a True Humanity)

### **Taking sides**

Biko did not live to see the liberation struggle unfold to its conclusion in 1990, when Mandela was released as part of the dismantling of Apartheid. Nor did he see the publication of the Kairos Document in 1985, in which the second chapter on Church Theology echoes and builds on Biko’s own critique of liberal theology’s approach to the conflict. The Kairos theologians make explicit what is implicit in Biko’s own writings: in situations of structural violence, the church needs to recognise that the divisions in society are mirrored in the church. There is no “universal”, “Christian” location in which these differences magically disappear. In South Africa, white Christians were oppressing, beating, assassinating, shooting, torturing and murdering black Christians. And in such instances, say the Kairos theologians, the God whom Jesus calls Father takes sides with the oppressed. Therefore, the only way to be where God is is to take sides unequivocally with the oppressed and become enemies of the oppressor. That is what solidarity means: it means “to cross over to the other side to be united in faith and action with those who are oppressed. Christians, if they are not already doing so, must quite simply participate in the struggle for liberation and for a just society.” (3).

From the perspective of oppressed people living as victims of structural violence, the two most glaring failings of liberal Christians are (1) to assume that the church occupies a position outside the divisions of its society which makes it some sort of “neutral honest-broker” in conflict situations, and (2) a refusal to recognise that discipleship of Jesus requires a radical identification with the victims in their struggle for liberation.



## 2. The Israeli Occupation of the Palestinian Territories

This is true also of the current, expanding Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories. Benjamin Netanyahu has recently stated that only Jews have the right to self-determination within Israel. Palestinians have no access to legal redress against the occupation of their farms, villages and cities, no call on police and army protection against Jewish settler violence, and no right to a Palestinian state. Donald Trump has recently reversed international law, declaring that the Israeli government expansion of its settlement programme is legal.

When proposals came to General Assembly to express solidarity with the Palestinians and to support the BDS campaign of boycotting goods from and disinvesting in Israeli companies that are complicit in the violations of Palestinian rights, Assembly was deeply conflicted. From the discussion, it appeared that Assembly was prepared to criticise injustice, but that the sort of solidarity the motions called for amounted to “taking sides”, which it was not prepared to do. Unease centred around several issues, the two most prominent of which were accusations of anti-Semitism and Palestinian violence (seen as “terrorism”). How ought we to evaluate this?



It is not accidental that South Africa has been one of the most vociferous champions of the Palestinians, advocating the boycott and disinvestment campaign, urging international recognition of Palestine and drawing frequent parallels between the situation faced by the Palestinians and Apartheid. Nor is it accidental that their critics have accused them of supporting Palestinian terrorism. The question of the legitimacy of the ANC's armed struggle had been deeply divisive in the South African churches. Intense theological debate about structural violence had led the South African Council of Churches to conclude:

1. The primary violence was initiated by the government and embedded in the social, economic, legal and military fabric of the state.
2. The Apartheid system was therefore inherently violent; violent response on the part of the victims did not therefore turn a peaceful situation violent.
3. State violence was passed off as “law and order” and “security”. Retaliatory violence on the part of the victims was essentially defensive, yet was characterised as “terrorism” and was inevitably met with an entirely disproportionate response on the part of the state.
4. “Non-violence” could not be one-sidedly urged upon the victims without recognising that it was a defence of the status quo.
5. Within the Reformed tradition, structural violence meant that the government had become tyrannical, the enemy of the people, and needed to be opposed and overthrown. Those who believed in the possibility of a just war needed also to recognise the possibility of a just revolution, if they were to avoid ending up supporting the status quo.

The South Africans recognise the shared experience of being victims of structural violence: of being second class citizens without the right of abode in their own homeland; of being the victims of a political and judicial system (Zionism) that denies them access or redress to the law and the police when they are threatened, beaten, shot at or have their land occupied by Jewish settlers from overseas; of being required to pay the state to destroy their homes under demolition orders; of having to

pay for rigidly rationed water and inadequate electricity supplies, while Jewish settlers enjoy free water and electricity; of being labelled “terrorists” when they use retaliatory force to try and wring concessions from the Israeli government, and being subjected to massive, disproportionate military responses that exact huge death tolls among the general Palestinian populace.

The experience of Apartheid has sensitised the South Africans to the fact that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not a “problem” that requires a solution, but an absolutely urgent matter of life and death to its Palestinian victims, whose life under occupation is a living hell.

The South Africans likewise resist the myth that criticism of Israeli Zionist policies is anti-Semitic, in the same way that they resisted the myth of black inferiority. The Israeli government has captured this narrative in the international arena as effectively as the Apartheid government disseminated the notion that blacks required white guardianship. It silences international condemnation and blunts the sort of concerted international action that proved so crucial in the final collapse and abandonment of Apartheid.

**UP**  
**RISE** **TOGETHER FOR JUSTICE**  
**KUMI**

*The Kumi (Rise Up) Now initiative is led by the Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center*

## Taking sides

The indigenous Christian church in the Holy Land is Palestinian. They feel bewildered, angry and betrayed by the failure of the international Christian church to stand in solidarity with them and to recognise the need to take their side in a grossly unequal struggle against state violence and oppression.

That call to take their side unequivocally sits uneasily on predominantly liberal URC ears for the reasons we have been exploring. The issue of Palestinian violence is as difficult an issue for many of us as armed struggle was for the South African church under Apartheid.

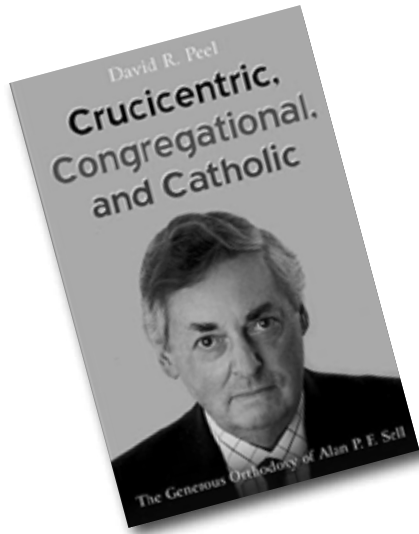
Once we realise the phenomenon of structural violence, however, we can no longer maintain the myth of “Christian neutrality”. In an inherently violent situation, that is effectively taking the side of the status quo.

In South Africa, Desmond Tutu pursued a path of what he termed, “critical solidarity with the oppressed”. He personally disagreed with the ANC’s armed struggle, but was unequivocal in the need to take the side of the black struggle against Apartheid. For him, critical solidarity meant taking the side of the victims, and from that position of commitment (ie “within”), engaging in critical debate with the ANC over the use of violence. Is this a helpful insight that will help conflicted liberal members of the URC to engage in the Palestinian situation in a more effective, Jesus-shaped way?

*Lawrence Moore is a former Director of the Windermere Centre and is now a freelance Mission & Discipleship consultant, working on a Pay What You Can basis*

## End notes

1. “The Definition of Black Consciousness”, in Steve Biko, I Write What I Like, Heinemann, 1978, p49
2. “The Quest for a True Humanity”, Ibid, p89
3. The Kairos Document: Challenge to the church - A Theological Comment on the Political Crisis in South Africa (1985) sections 5,1/5.2



*Crucicentric, Congregational, and Catholic:  
The Generous Orthodoxy of Alan P.F. Sell  
by David Peel*

*Reviewed by Martin Camroux*

Once met Alan Sell for lunch. He was rather typically distressed that the URC had failed to mark the 350th Anniversary of the Great Ejection by issuing teaching material to introduce the topic to the young people in our churches. I was less than totally sympathetic since so many of our churches have no young people and, anyway, is this really high on the agenda for 21st Century Christianity? But that was Alan, as ever deeply committed, in a way that few are today, to the relevance of dissenting history. There was a kind of “Back to the Future” quality about him, he not only valued our past, but seemed rather more at home there than in the contemporary world. As he says, “Some theologians are adept at being children of times earlier than their own”. I had a slight suspicion that he was one of the last to suspect that God might be a Congregationalist. One of the reasons he himself chose to be one was his belief in the Church meeting. He could quote Dale’s enthusiasm for it, “to be at a church meeting ... is for me one of the chief means of grace...

I breathe a divine air” and comment “such an experience, though never received without wonder and thanksgiving, ought to be normal”. I am glad he told us this because I would never have guessed it otherwise.

We are very fortunate to have this introduction to his thought by David Peel which catches his breadth of scholarship. A quick check tells me I own eight of his books. It also catches the warmth of his personality and his sense of humour. “Some Christians are in pain, and other Christians can be a pain in the neck”. On charismatic worship songs he gleefully quoted an American mantra, “Four words, three notes and two hours”. David catches his strong views, such as his dislike of episcopacy and the establishment of the Church of England and of what he saw as the anti-intellectual bias of much of the United Reformed Church. Far from having a learned ministry anymore he believed we imagine academic theology is irrelevant to ministry. On such topics I quite often find myself cheering him on.

His theological position is complex because his was, as David nicely puts it, a generous orthodoxy, open to other insights. He himself said he was evangelical, orthodox, liberal and Catholic. His list of the four greatest theologians of all time was Origen, Aquinas, Calvin and Schleiermacher. Not one notes Barth. Though respectful of Barth he never entered the Barthian cul-de-sac. His liberalism was tempered by the fear, not sadly entirely unjustified, that too many liberals conceded too much to the secular world.

When it comes to the content of his theology the cross was central, God’s great saving act. David unpacks helpfully the particular way Alan interprets this. He critiqued what he called “grotesque explications of the atonement” which involved an angry God “being cajoled into being loving” by the killing of Christ. He was fond of using a quotation from Forsyth which he saw as the important sentence in 20th Century theology, “The atonement did not procure grace, it flowed from grace”. But more questionably he believed the context of God’s saving work is our experience as sinners set apart from God, in other words it is individual redemption. But what if what oppresses us is not just my sin but the socio-political structures which shape our lives? As David asks what if, as liberation theologians argue, “the angst destroying the human spirit

is caused by oppression?” Would the Jesus whose primary focus was the Kingdom of God really have seen the point of his death as individual salvation? Disturbingly he limits God’s salvic action solely to the cross of Christ, which has exclusivist implications for other faiths.

This touches a somewhat wider problem. While Alan certainly believed Christians ought to work for peace and justice he was concerned this might usurp a proper emphasis on the atonement. He was concerned he had heard too many sermons about the former and not about the latter. Well perhaps it depends which church you belong to, but I am surprised if that was the experience of most of us. Tellingly David points out there are many examples in Alan’s writing where he criticises theologians for neglecting the redemptive in favour of the socio-political “but I know of no instance where Sell criticizes someone for failing to take the emancipatory dimensions of salvation seriously enough”.

For all his respect for Alan David critiques him for being too unwilling to see that doctrine changes as our context changes. “Alan ought to have asked more often the question, ‘What must be the truth now...’ We certainly ought to be generous with our orthodoxy but, since what counts as adequate theology changes over time, we must also face the need, when required, to be less conservative and more revisionary”. The more I reflect on this the more challenging it is in a time when churches are collapsing, and the idea of God in ruins. David, as is his wont, argues strongly for the relevance of panentheism. Over against classical theism this emphasises that God includes the world, but the world does not exhaust the divine reality. In the face of the destruction of God, and our sense of humanity, by neo-liberalism capitalism in favour of an empty materialistic consumerism I doubt this distinction will make any difference. Stimulating as this book is, it is very much an in-house debate.

***Crucicentric, Congregational, and Catholic:  
The Generous Orthodoxy of Alan P. F. Sell***

is available from the URC Bookshop at £24.99.

*A Kindle edition is available on Amazon at £7.63.*

*Free to Believe is an entirely voluntary group which relies on the generosity of its members.  
If you would like to contribute to its work, please consider creating a direct debit using this form.*

# **BANKER'S ORDER**

To the Manager ..... Bank

Address:

Bank Account No.:

Sort Code:

Annual Donation: £

Starting on the ..... day ..... of 2019

and annually on the ..... day of .....

thereafter until notified otherwise.

Please pay the amount indicated on the date specified to:

National Westminster Bank, 36 High Street, Maldon, Essex, CM9 5

Sort code: 60-13-37 Account number: 53754867

For the credit of FREE TO BELIEVE

Name:

Signature:

Date:

Address:

Postcode:

Send this form to: The Treasurer, Free to Believe,  
41 Clowbridge Road, Loughborough, LE11 4SU.