

Can Liberal Christianity be Revived?

By Theo Hobson

First of all I'd like to say I'm very honoured to be invited here - right in the heart of liberal Protestant tradition. It's also a bit daunting, given some of the criticisms I make of that tradition - but I know you will be tolerant!

Can Liberal Christianity be Revived? I am going to address this question in a fairly personal way - describing how my view of liberal theology developed in my student years, and how, a bit later, I began to diagnose a major failing within the tradition, and attempted a sort of solution. And how this attempt at a solution gradually pointed me beyond theology - and towards trying to make a creative contribution to Christian culture of a different sort - making art.

In fact I'm going to start before my student years - with my school years. Liberal Christianity came very naturally to me - it felt right. I was surprised to find that it was a tradition in steep decline. I was surprised that my friends dismissed religion as pointless. And I was surprised that the few people who were mostly religious were drawn to extreme, simplistic versions of it. For it seemed like a pretty good tradition - mainstream Anglicanism.

The tradition I was raised in is defined by reticence, and entitlement. One does not need to explain one's religious allegiance, even to oneself, for it is not an expression of difference. It is not something remarkable; instead it is a mark of allegiance to the official national creed. My family belonged to the old Anglicanism of tradition, order. This form of religion was quietly aware of its centrality to the national character, of its establishment in a wide sense. It did not seem to have a style, an accent - it was just normality - what kings and queens believed, what inspired the Empire, what the Bible was written for - well, the Bible in its Authorised Version. Other forms of Christianity were known to exist, but this was the authorised version.

I experienced a more enthusiastic, evangelical form of religion at school, where there was a Christian Union (CU). In the summer and Easter holidays we went on 'houseparties' – lots of playing games and praying together, and sing-songs with cocoa. It was bliss, like being at Hogwarts. The theology was gently evangelical, in the public school tradition of 'muscular Christianity' – the cultural glue was 'games', meaning sport played in a particular spirit of fun and fellowship. Every evening there was a service in the chapel, at which an 'officer' gave a talk. It was so much more fun than stuffy old church! These impressive young men (of about nineteen!) would testify that their lives were committed to God, that they tried to be good Christians. They warned that being a Christian wasn't all fun, it meant a lot of effort, it meant daring to seem uncool. But this effort, this sacrifice was worth it; it gave one a 'relationship with God' (that was the key phrase).

But the theology was often simplistic, banal. I remember one young man drawing a little diagram with a stick man - showing how we're redeemed from sin by the cross. I felt this can't be right - this feels like a chemistry lesson or something. Religious truth is about mystery and beauty.

Soon I was confirmed - which had more to do with middle-class tradition than religion. Did I give any thought to the Church I was being confirmed into? No, the Church of England was just normality. I was vaguely proud of its national character, and the fact that it was Protestant. I learned in history that the nation had become Protestant under Henry VIII, that the English Reformation was a massive act of modernization, a clear-out of medieval superstition. Protestantism was therefore progressive, and it helped to make us the pioneer modern nation. On some level the Church, despite being 'in decline', still provided the nation with its official ideology. I felt vaguely proud to be part of this. As my Dad later quoted to me: there's life in a ruin.

My thoughts about religion, which I loved airing in CU discussion groups, were dominated by an instinctive liberalism – by which I mean an assumption that moral idealism was the essence of this religion, and that the supernatural stuff was interesting packaging that had to be handled carefully. Doing good for its own sake, which Jesus modeled for us, was the point, and the idea of getting to heaven was a dubious distraction.

So I was instinctively in tune with liberal Protestant thinking - Kant, Hegel, Harnack, etc. I soon read one or two of Don Cupitt's books. Cupitt was an Anglican priest and Cambridge theologian who had recently become well-known, due to a television series. He campaigned, with evangelical zeal, for a total break with the supernatural trappings of the religious past: we had to admit that religion was not literally true, that it was a good story that humans had devised. Instead of rejecting it as false we ought to hold on to it as a valuable source of human meaning. I agreed. I edged away from the CU. Its cliquy atmosphere stifled intellectual inquiry. It seemed guilty of peddling myths as if they were truths, and discouraging us from learning a sanely critical approach to our creed. When I came across the term 'de-mythologizing' it seemed the obviously right approach. Intelligent people couldn't take it literally - therefore they had to choose between this approach and atheism.

But aged about 17, theology was in the background - my passion was English Literature - like lots of sensitive young men I was fascinated by Hamlet. I saw him in a slightly religious way, as a truth-teller, a prophet. For the same reasons I was also interested in Luther - the drama of the individual holding fast to the truth in defiance of the orthodoxy around him. I liked the Protestant pathos - of heroic individualism, prophetic impersonation, dramatic reformism. Now I just needed a grand cause.

As an undergraduate, studying literature, religion was in the background. Then I had an existential crisis. I felt the need to engage with religion more intensely - having a vague allegiance and a few ideas about demythologizing was not enough - I was prone to despair, so I needed a strong 'existential' sense of faith. As you may have guessed, I was reading Kierkegaard. I was his ideal reader in a sense - I felt I had moved away from a naïve childlike idea of religion to a modern rational view - and now I saw I needed the basic pathos of the soul submitting to divine authority. I got something similar from George Herbert, the C17 poet - his devotional poetry is full of angst, internal dialogue - and a decision for the childlike simplicity of faith.

I saw that that this is my psychological language - despite the irrationality, despite the retrograde, unsophisticated image of religion. In fact something in me rather liked the

drama of defying the common sense view. I had always liked that Hamlet quote - 'There are more things in heaven and earth Horatio than are dreamt of in your philosophy'.

On one hand I accepted Kierkegaard's critique of humanism, progress, Enlightenment - the idea that God is distinct from such values. But I also found that my new sense of faith intensified my connection with an aspect of liberal theological tradition - religious socialism. Up to then I had been a bit reactionary, sceptical of left-wing idealism. To my surprise, this scepticism melted away. Christianity was a religion of radical hope – of hope for the total transformation of the world! I began to understand that Christianity had to be completely revolutionized. Surely this was my mission, to be a sort of Moses, announcing this wonderful message of peace on earth and goodwill to all men.

My radicalism was learned from Leo Tolstoy, the novelist-turned-utopian-Christian. He said that true Christianity was not the supernatural stuff taught by the churches but was the rational desire for the kingdom of God on earth. I had heard plenty of progressive Christian rhetoric from trendy lefty priests and was never very impressed. But this was different: Tolstoy believed in this ideal with the appropriate intensity, simplicity, absoluteness. He saw the need for a revolutionary approach to Christianity: by rejecting its otherworldly past, it could become an effective utopian movement. It need only focus on the teaching of Christ. 'Were all men to fulfil Christ's teaching, the kingdom of God would have come on earth'. Simple. Why had I never heard anyone say this with such clarity? Surely this was the authentic version of the Marxist dream – this version could make that dream into a reality! For without Christ, such idealism would be tainted by violence, and power-lust. Self-sacrificial love had to be at its heart. This was the big idea that really could unite humanity, bring peace on earth! And social justice! And purpose: this was the cause that would banish meaninglessness, unite people in holy purpose.

But a new form of Christianity had to replace the old. Tolstoy denounced the Russian Orthodox Church, and all other churches, as a straightforward betrayal of Jesus' vision. I was excited by this anticlerical utopian confidence, this idea that Christianity is *not* what the churches teach. I felt I was the secret devotee of this half-mad creed: Christianity announced the kingdom of God on earth, it was basically *utopian*. This vision felt like the

secret truth – and I'd been allowed a glimpse of it. I felt a bit like a secret agent, entrusted with this massive secret knowledge: all would be well, history would rectify itself, leading to hippy-type love and peace. Wow.

So in the space of a single year I had these two very strong and rather contradictory religious impulses. I was drawn to the Protestant fideist tradition that emphasises the otherness of God from all human categories - and I was drawn to the religious socialist tradition. A sort of conversion - but it didn't lead me to any settled community of belief - rather I felt like a very unsettled seeker after some new form of Christianity.

How does the religious socialist tradition relate to liberal Protestantism? Well, it talks about the moral essence of the gospel, it criticises the ritual and doctrinal traditions of orthodoxy, it often sounds like a radical humanism. But it also has an intensity that normal liberal Protestantism lacks - it wants more than the normal liberal view of gradual progress - it sympathises with the Marxist idea of a total transformation - and yet it also has a vaguer, more mythological idea - of the kingdom of God.

So this was what I was trying to work out - before I was even a student of theology - how can Christianity be transformed into a movement that transforms this world? Should it move away from old-fashioned church, and old-fashioned doctrines?

When I started studying theology, as a further degree, there was an obvious guru for me - Karl Barth. In his early work he combined a fideist sense of God's otherness from human progress, and a Tolstoyan sense of the gospel overturning history. Sort of - he was more ambiguous as to whether this was a real revolution in history. But I also saw that he had more theological insight than Tolstoy - he was more in tune with Paul and the Reformers and figures like Augustine. I saw that Tolstoy was still full of rational humanist, or Enlightenment, assumptions - and that the idea of creating the kingdom of God in history was a muddled idea. I saw that I still had a dubious attachment to that sort of liberalism, that I still needed to get my head round the otherness of the core Christian categories like sin and grace. And I became more critical of demythologizing - I saw that we need to affirm

primary religious language - the speech-acts of faith - here Wittgenstein was an influence - and postliberal theology.

So I became more orthodox and more post-liberal - and yet I still had a very liberal Protestant sense of dissatisfaction with traditional religion, church. I was still drawn to Bonhoeffer's religionless Christianity - at least to the idea of a fresh start, a break with the old forms. I suppose I had a strong sense that religion was failing to speak to my secular friends - and so it was dubious to move in a sort of purist reactionary, anti-liberal direction.

And so I felt at odds with the main form of 'post-liberal' or postmodern theology around me - the thrusting new movement called radical orthodoxy - this postmodern Catholic and Anglo-Catholic group was full of a rather arrogant rejection of liberalism, I felt. It too smoothly dismissed the tradition of liberal Protestantism. In my contrarian way, I felt maybe there were aspects of that tradition I wanted to defend.

So over the next decade or so I tried to untangle the good from the bad in liberal Protestantism. I was semi-detached from theology, working in journalism and other things - maybe I needed to be a bit out of the academic world to get my bearings, see the big picture.

My sense of the good within this tradition was sharpened by the events of September 11 2001, and the ensuing debates about religion's place in society. Of course secularists were calling for religion to be kept in check, its influence curtailed, for example in state education. And religious groups were rejecting such calls, warning against secular arrogance. I felt that this was a simplistic polarity - I wanted to put the old liberal Protestant case - that there's a strong affinity between Protestantism and liberal values, even secular liberal values. I argued for a fuller separation of church and state - the disestablishment of the Church of England - I wrote some articles about it, and soon a little book. I tried to see this as a reforming cause that might help Christian culture to renew itself. Let's draw a line under the old days of Christendom. Let's affirm the liberal state with new clarity.

I was partly motivated by an urge to say that not all religion is the same, in relation to liberal values. Protestantism breaks away from the theocratic and legalistic impulses of other

monotheisms - we should not hide this light under a bushel of interfaith sensitivity. So a liberal Protestant should dare to sound more critical of other religions than other religions are about each other. For example we should say that Muslims, Catholics and Jews all have a tendency towards theocracy and legalism that only liberal Protestantism really rejects.

I began to explore the history of the issue in more detail - I wrote a book about Milton, the poet and radical thinker of the English civil war era, in the seventeenth century. I argued that he and a few other thinkers pioneered the liberal state - by means of a radical religious vision. They said that God requires a new sort of state in which there's freedom of conscience, toleration - rather than an official orthodoxy. Paradoxically these liberal puritans were more boldly liberal than more secular thinkers. So the initial energy of the liberal state came from this new sort of Protestant vision. Soon it was semi-secularised by Locke and then the American founders, who were more deist than Christian.

So I wanted to do an incredibly unfashionable thing - to affirm the link between Protestantism and the liberal state - which clever people dismiss as a dated 'Whiggish' delusion. OK I'll come back to this theopolitical strand of my thinking in a minute.

But something else was going on at the same time. Around the time I was finishing my PhD, my soul got sick of books, and words, and footnotes - maybe especially footnotes. It felt a bit futile, trying to come up with the magic theory that would explain the truth of Christianity. It was like a very erudite version of that diagram someone drew for me as a teenager about a stick man getting redeemed from sin. I didn't like the pseudo-scientific air, the suffocating cerebral nature of it.

And in reaction I had a new sense of the centrality of art and ritual in religion. Of course on one level I already knew this - I had read lots of articles about it - but now I *felt* it. I felt the excitement of religion as a practice, a form of cultural action, creativity. Before, the idea of religious practice felt a bit depressing - that's what happens in church and it's not good enough, it doesn't connect with my generation. I knew I was meant to be positive about it, but I couldn't quite manage it. That's maybe why I inhabited the world of abstract ideas - to

flee the inadequate realm of church worship and find the super-idea that could revive religion - maybe a new practice would flow from the super-idea.

But now I saw there was great force in actual religious practice - and I glimpsed this through my interest in art. I'd always been interested in art, including making it - doing the occasional painting - but it had never felt very serious. Seriousness meant ideas, books, theories.

But now I felt the power of certain religious images and I felt the urge to make my own versions of them. For example the image of Christus Victor - Christ defeating Satan - is one I reflected on in my work, especially in relation to Luther. But I now had a sense that words weren't necessarily the supreme medium for this. When I watched a TV programme mosaics I decided to make that image - of Christ crushing the serpent with his heel. It wasn't just light relief to do a bit of art - I had a liberating sense that my religious passion could express itself in the world, and I could overcome a sense that religion cut me off from the cultural world around me.

Soon this creative impulse was centred on ritual. As a liberal Protestant youth I'd been suspicious of ritual. Surely it was a colourful distraction from the austere business of faith - and also the austere business of bringing about the kingdom of God. Surely we should present Christianity as the clear and convincing idea, the Super-Idea, and not get sidelined by the frilly theatrical weirdness of old-fashioned religious worship.

There is a complex psychological aspect to this. At the risk of putting myself on the couch, I had the old male Protestant view that ritual is a bit effete, unmanly - and of course in Anglicanism there is a strong tradition of camp theatrical ritual. I was interested to see that both Barth and Reinhold Niebuhr had this sort of unease about ritual - a sense that this religion is already a bit unmanly - so why on earth accentuate this by prancing around in long robes? So it took me a while to get over this knee-jerk reaction - this sense of let's keep religion as sober and manly as possible.

My studies had already made me a bit more open-minded - through pondering religious language, and postmodern thought, especially that associated with Wittgenstein, I had a sense that faith was rooted in certain speech-acts that had a ritual dimension - for example the act of praising God was more basic than any theory about God's power. And the thorny question of 'Do I really believe in this religion?' is in a way solved by the idea that one participates in these speech-acts of worship - and that's where belief really happens.

So Wittgenstein enabled me to affirm ritual. He was very critical of the rational-Protestant approach to ritual that saw it as based on mistaken magical thinking. He wrote about the Victorian anthropologist James Fraser who looked at hundreds of tribal rituals and shook his head at the naivety of their practices - eg thinking you can harm your enemy by making a doll of him and sticking pins in it.

Wittgenstein said - Don't be so quick to dismiss such rituals. Even today human culture is more ritual-based than rational. If we look honestly at how we make meaning, there is a primitive core there - an attachment to myth, and to basic practices like celebration, or warding off evil forces. And of course Christianity is still doing these basic primal things, though most of its thinkers prefer not to reflect on it.

Paradoxically, this rationalist anthropologist James Fraser who misunderstands the power of ritual, wrote the book, *The Golden Bough*, that is the most exciting record of the power of primitive religion. Through reading it, I saw that religion was a primal form of culture. Religion should be a sort of primitive tribal action - a performance that feels essential, vital.

Why didn't I feel this about Christian ritual in church? Partly my own prejudice - I was so used to seeing it as boring. And partly because it really was pretty boring.

So, in my late twenties, my engagement with religion shifted - from a verbal theoretical register to an artistic-theatrical-ritual register. I was excited by the idea of creating new rituals, performances - soon I liked using the word 'cult' to describe the sort of religious event I advocated.

Of course I didn't mean cult in the brainwashed sense - but in a way I did want to identify with the shocking otherness of such things. We should import the vitality of religion once seen as pagan, heathen, exotically tribal - I know this is politically incorrect and I apologise if there's any offence. For example I saw a documentary about a Hindu temple in India which had a pet elephant that was the star of its rituals - if one of my local churches had a pet elephant, or even a horse, I might turn up more. Or if it had rituals involving dressing up, face paint, group drumming - anything fun and colourful.

So I started fantasizing about creating new rituals - spectacular public events mostly. And that's still really what my artistic practice is about. Imagining ritual events that have the power to revive Christian culture. At first I envisaged a large carnival on Easter day - a public festival in which resurrection joy is very visibly expressed. I also proposed some smaller scale rituals, in which Christians do a sort of performance art in public space.

At this time I was quite anti-ecclesiastical - I argued that conventional church was standing in the way of such new forms, that we should try to make a deregulated religious culture. I felt that to try to create something radically new one should boldly step away from the conventional forms. Nowadays I am more moderate - I think the old forms are needed as well as new ones. I'll come back to this.

So I began to have a sort of double life, theologically. I was beginning to work out my sense of ritual-artistic calling - which was a very slow process - and I was writing about religion, liberal Protestantism. My writing was affected by my interest in art and ritual. When I looked at the emergence of liberal Protestantism in the seventeenth century, I was struck by how disastrous it was that rational deism was allowed to dominate. A thinker such as Milton had the right political ideas about religious liberty, but was too suspicious of religious culture, shared practices - religion became too inward, cerebral, abstract. That opened the door to deism - the idea that religion should conform to reason. In reaction against Catholicism, liberal Protestantism made a huge mistake - buying into rational humanism, as if it was part of the Christian reformist agenda. Protestants failed to prioritise faith and ritual. That failure became part of the meaning of liberal Protestantism.

There should have been a great Protestant thinker who was full of modern political enthusiasm AND who saw that ritual and faith were central. As a literature student I was drawn to one person who almost fitted the bill - William Blake - but he was a bit mad. So this led to my book of 2013 - Reinventing Liberal Christianity.

I tried to tell the story of the tradition, unpicking these two strands. The good liberal theology that affirms the liberal state. The bad liberal theology that neglects faith and cult in favour of rational humanism. I showed how the two became bundled up together - to make modern liberal Protestantism.

So the great saviours of Protestant thought - Kierkegaard and Barth - were right to reject rational humanist assumptions - but they wrongly failed to reaffirm the old link between Protestantism and the liberal state. In Barth's case there was a failure to affirm the liberal politics of the Weimar republic - he was ambivalent, flirting with reactionary existentialism. Yes he soon attacks the Nazis in a nice macho way, with lots of old-fashioned rhetoric - very like Churchill in fact - but that doesn't prove he has the right theopolitics.

By the way Bonhoeffer was arguably looking for this sort of way forward in his prison notes - a way of affirming the good in liberal theology while rejecting the bad. I know every crackpot tries to recruit Bonhoeffer's ambiguous radicalism to his cause, but in my case it's true. He was raised in liberal theology, then turned very Barthian, agreeing that we must cast off liberal humanist assumptions. But he soon sensed that Barth was too dogmatic, and looked for a way of reaffirming aspects of liberalism. In prison his initial insight is that we must affirm modern liberal politics and culture - 'the world come of age', free of religious authorities and rules. This tradition is not simply secular, he implies, it is partly formed by the radical Pauline tradition of rejecting circumcision, ie outward religiosity, legalism. So he looks for a new and deeper sort of Christianity that is in tune with the virtues of secular liberalism. But he fails to keep out the bad sort of liberal theology - the rational humanist sort. He fails to reinstate faith and ritual in a clear way. And so after his death his work contributes to the liberal theology of the 50s and 60s - the death of God school - in which we get the same old respect for rational humanism, the same old neglect of faith and cult.

So good liberal theology affirms the liberal state but also affirms the role of faith and cult. What are these things, faith and cult? which is primary?

I had come to feel that the essential core of Christianity was certain speech-acts - those in which faith is proclaimed, performed - in which the authority of God in Christ is asserted - in which penitence is expressed - and so on. In a way this is quite a Protestant view - it sounds like the individual can do the essence of Christianity in isolation. But actually no, language is rooted in communal practices - these are ritual-based speech-acts, even when individual faith is centre-stage.

Most of Protestantism overstates individualism, sometimes mixing it with Romanticism, existentialism. But I felt that postmodernism reacts too far against this - in talking about communal practices, it almost implies that faith is a dubious category. So I felt we need a balance of the individual and corporate aspects of this religion, a way of seeing them as ultimately united.

And fortunately there is a tradition which fuses the corporate and the individual voice. I mean the Psalms. Ancient worship songs in which there's a strong sense of a community, a holy society - and also a strong sense of the isolated voice crying out to God in his or her need.

So I was trying to get away from the idea that faith and ritual are opposed. In fact faith is a ritual linguistic tradition. To have faith is to take part in a tradition of speech, and that tradition is forged through certain communal rituals. One can pray in isolation, but the language of prayer comes from communal rituals.

And so Christianity is essentially this cultic-linguistic tradition, in which the individual perspective plays a crucial role. A major theme is God revealing himself to the individual, and the individual struggling to respond to this.

So - to be authentically Christian - liberal Christianity must remember its faith-cult base - and that means being wary of rational humanist assumptions.

And what does it mean for it to be liberal? I've given the main answer - it means affirming the liberal state. To be more precise that means the principles of toleration, religious liberty that emerged in the C17 and gradually became built into the politics of the West, especially in Protestant countries. It entails affirming secularism - in the sense that good politics renounces religious unity. For a while I felt that it should affirm an explicitly secular state but I gradually re-thought this - I'll return to the issue.

But there's another aspect of liberal Christianity, which I began to speak of in my book of 2013. In this tradition there is an intellectual openness that corresponds to the dialectical structure of faith. I mean the believer's sense that he or she is both within and without the sphere of God's grace. Both justified and a sinner. This is the Pauline idea that is central to Augustine and is rediscovered by Luther. In fact it's already there in the Psalms, where we see a struggle to trust in God - and in Job, who both trusts in God and rages against him. As I mentioned earlier, I was very influenced by this theme in George Herbert's poetry.

I also found it in Barth's Romans commentary - he unpacks the Pauline drama of being taken over by the Spirit - but also remaining oneself. One of my favourite passages in theology is his response to Harnack who says that his Romans commentary presents Christianity as impossible to believe in. Barth says - 'But is it not included in the concept of revelation, and really not only in my concept, that it is not possible to 'believe' in it?' The claims of scripture are 'unheard-of, unbelievable, and of course offensive...the acceptance of these incredible testimonies I call faith...let no one deceive himself here concerning the fact that this is a unheard-of occurrence, that the Holy Spirit must now be spoken of.' This is Barth's greatest moment, and it gradually gets buried under all his systematic theology.

What does this have to do with liberalism? Well, it means that faith has an openness or honesty at its heart - and that means it can be in dialogue with discourse that challenges it - it can admit the contrary perspective, let it in. This is an intellectual openness based on tension - it is not the calm reason of Erasmus (sorry not to side with the Dutchman) but the tense drama of Luther.

My next book was published in 2017 - God Created Humanism; the Christian basis of Secular values. I tried to offer an apologetics in the form of a bold simple account of theopolitics. Christianity gives rise to our modern political worldview, to humanism. Even the worldview of the atheist comes from Christianity - as long as he is a humanist atheist and not a complete nihilist. This was Nietzsche's great insight. It's hard to get this across to non-Christians - a lot of them say yes we already know this, that our liberal morality has Christian roots, but they fail to see that it matters, that it is more than a historical curiosity.

I approached the issue of western ideology with a sort of optimism or conscious naivety that I'd like to reflect on for a moment. Beneath all the complexity and division, I said, we have a shared belief and it is good. I mean the sort of universalist humanism we sort of take for granted. Equality, human rights - even conservative types sign up to this - they affirm liberal democracy, and nearly everyone agrees the shared discourse of this should be non-religious. The most succinct term for this is secular humanism - even though it is commonly used in a more partial way.

We should sometimes step back and celebrate this. Saying this feels foolish because it seems to ignore all the problems, all the division between our political tribes - talking of the underlying unity makes one feels like a real innocent. It sounds naïve at any time - but I finished the book in about June 2016 - it was at the publisher when the Brexit vote happened, then the election of Trump. So I thought, do I want to sound so sanguine? But yes I think I do.

I think in order to understand the bigger picture we have to be sceptical of the normal negative tone of political discussion - the habit of ignoring the positive shared ideology. Yes the fight between liberals and conservatives is often very bitter and tribal but it's a civil war over a shared assumption - what I term secular humanism. Of course I define this very vaguely - a belief that all human lives are theoretically of equal worth - and agreement that the shared public language of this is secular not religious.

As I see it, the average conservative or populist voter is not really rejecting this worldview - but he or she is willing to give the impression of rejecting it, because he or she so dislikes

the way it is framed by the liberals. And he or she has a point - the liberal claim to own humanism can be so assertive that conservatives are prodded into playing the role of rejecting humanism. (And by the way European populism has a pro-secular liberal aspect to it, as it's partly a protest at excessive toleration of Islam's defiance of liberal values.) It may sound oddly optimistic, but there is a deep shared humanism that is obscured in all our debates.

Why is it obscured? Maybe because it is too large to be a normal ideology - so we have to cut it to the size of our tribalism and our self-righteous impulses. So we say the goodness of western humanism is expressed in this progressive agenda - or in this conservative agenda. We prefer fighting culture wars to admitting the embarrassing fact that we are all, or nearly all, engaged in this broader ideology. Why is it embarrassing? Because it is so ambitious - it is about the good of all humanity, worldwide peace and justice - and we know we can't live up to it, that all actual politics will betray it. So we pretend that what really matters is this little issue in which we are clearly in the right, fighting for some tangible result - and this heightens tribal division.

Maybe we should admit the bigness, the impossibility of the humanist vision, the fact that it can't be captured in this or that cause. But secular thought can't really do that, it can't really admit that its ideal is beyond human powers of realisation, and that the ideal exposes human weakness.

So I try to draw attention to the extremism of the humanist ideal. It is a desire for liberty and justice for all, globally, which is perfectionist or utopian - it's the desire for the kingdom of God, secularised. This is embarrassing to the agnostic, who wants it to seem like rational common sense. You could say that the agnostic humanist is literally unable to think about his core belief - he lacks the necessary concepts. For we cannot really think about the good of all humanity except in mythological terms - we are exceeding the sphere of the practical and the rational. It is possible to overlook this, and to equate this ideal with common sense - to say that it is obvious and axiomatic that there must be liberty and justice for all, that this is the default view of a sane person. The agnostic humanist has to believe this, has to elide the perfectionist idealism that hovers around his worldview. And interestingly the Marxist is

in a sense more intellectually honest - his idea of revolution acknowledges that this humanist ideal is not about common sense, enlightened self-interest - he rightly rejects normal liberalism as dishonest, and opts for secularised eschatology.

So I was arguing that apologetics should be centred on this strong claim - western humanism is a form of faith - and it derives from Christianity. And Christians should respond carefully to this unstated faith around them. We should not react against it as neo-orthodoxy does - and we should not try to merge with it as the bad sort of liberal theology does. We must dialectically affirm it. We must say that secular humanism is the right public ideology, but it's too thin to give lives meaning. So we must affirm both secular humanism AND the faith it derives from.

Also I return to the dialectic of faith. I imagine someone agreeing about the religious roots of secular humanism but still assuming that belief is something that he or she just can't imagine doing. And I go a bit further with the idea that faith entails internal argument with doubt, and though it sounds impious I suggest that authentic Christian faith means half-believing. The idea of full belief is a mistake. Why? Well as I've said belief is about being related to the otherness of God, in a sense performing that otherness. Or you could say, because belief is ritual-linguistic. I believe through participating in this ritual speech-form. And I cannot always be doing ritual - I also have to use mundane language and use common sense rationality, and so on. Belief is not a normal stable opinion, but a claim that God's Spirit inhabits one - and also does not. So that was the final chapter in a book that was otherwise about theopolitics, the Christian roots of humanism.

In the few years since writing that book I have tried to prioritize my art practice. In a sense I have tried to come out as an artist as well as a writer. I have continued imagining large-scale ritual art events - but I have also become more positive about art in the more normal sense - I took a fine art course to try to get more comfortable in that world. I have learned to speak about 'my practice as an artist'. Well, my practice is to make icons that partly inhabit the world of contemporary art, and partly inhabit a more religious ritual space.

I am drawn to four or five themes -

Victory, shame, joy, sex, pain.

Victory - As I mentioned, I was first drawn to the icon of Christus Victor. Related to this is the theme of exorcism - the casting out of evil spirits.

Shame - I mean penitence. I once visited Spain at Good Friday and was impressed by the hooded penitents. That's the sort of basic sign-making we should try to revive.

Joy - I mean trying to convey Easter joy in the form of some sort of public event. As I said I wanted to promote an Easter day carnival - later I felt that maybe a central art work was needed - a huge sculpture of the risen Christ. Maybe too triumphalist. So I made an icon of the resurrection that is more ambiguous - a puppet who rises and falls.

Sex - Since reading Milton's epic poem Paradise Lost I have been very interested in prelapsarian sex. Adam and Eve

Pain - I mean the Passion. For some years I have been trying to organise a large public sculpture of the crown of thorns

So let me tie up some of these threads and return to my question - Can liberal Christianity be revived? I've mostly been talking about certain theoretical clarifications that I think are needed, if we are to have a fresh account of this tradition. But of course a tradition is a living culture - or in this case, it often seems, an only-just living culture. So the question is, Can the liberal tradition within the church be revived?

It's a hugely tricky issue, because there are so many complex traditions, even just within the Church of England. And also because liberalism is not straightforwardly such a good thing - as I've explained there's a dubious theological liberalism that of course finds expression in church culture as well as in abstract theology. It's a small force these days but it's still there in politically minded theology, and identity politics and so on.

I am in sympathy with the liberal wing of the Anglo-Catholic tradition, which you could call mainstream Anglicanism - except that Evangelicalism now has a claim to be more dominant in some ways. This tradition has of course been in gentle decline for fifty years or so, but it is still alive, mainly thanks to middle-class middle-aged people. Can it find new energy, appeal beyond its base?

It's hard to see how it can. The problem is that in our era religion's energy is counter-cultural, so conservative forms have a script to follow, of assertive dissent. A liberal form of church is closer to the creative and moral energies in the wider culture, so it lacks definition. It doesn't present itself as a necessary commitment, a site of authority - instead people are almost expected to be lukewarm, to turn up just some of the time, when it suits them. We can't really get round this. A liberal form of church is inevitably somewhat weak, somewhat awkward - it is conscious of performing traditional things that are a bit stiff and strange and feel a bit unnecessary. Of course this can be done in an appealing way - a nice gentle space for reflection. But the appeal is limited - probably to a middle-aged middle-class person who likes the calm familiarity. It's difficult for such people to get their children and teenagers to come, due to the lack of dynamism.

And any attempt to make things slicker and sexier will feel like a loss of authenticity, for in this space there is a lot of tolerance for the ordinary muddle of local communities. A good minister respects this, rather than seeking to make it an impressive bit of culture. In church there is a certain cultural weakness that we have learned to associate with the holy weakness of the gospel.

But why should church be a weak, unimpressive form of culture - why can't our worship of God feel more vital, why can't this be a site of cultural excitement? Pondering this is difficult - one feels guilty for complaining about the actual worship that exists, surely one should declare the glass half full?

I don't really see a solution, in terms of the local church. You can't really imagine it becoming a site of new cultural energy. Not while Roger is still there, mucking up the music - not while Gloria stutters out the notices, not while Alan rambles on about his simplistic

theology. On one level that's OK - church can be a place of stability, quiet authenticity, with an awkward, underwhelming but definitely Christian aura.

But on the other hand it is valid to protest: this is not good enough. Why should this culture that worships God be weaker than secular arts culture, and politics and sport and commerce - why should we be inferior to all that creative energy, that carnival of human exuberance?

But we can't get rid of Roger and Gloria and Alan and it would be wrong to seek to. These are not real people by the way - or rather these are not their real names. So we need a both-and approach - we need both church and something else - there has to be a parallel culture, a fringe, of creativity. It can overlap with the wider culture's idea of creative dynamism. It can be impressive, surprising, challenging - it can resemble the practice of the avant garde. It can have that sort of otherness, or strangeness, as well as the otherness of religion.

So the church needs a fringe of arty experimentation. And this will mostly be separate from the church as an institution. Maybe we should aim for a Christian culture that is made up of the stability of church, and the radical creativity of an arts wing. To put it differently, two legs are needed for movement - another dialectic.

So the aim is not to reform church worship but to create new bits of Christian culture outside the church. These might have a trickle-down effect on church culture, making it a bit more attractive to the average liberal arty sort of person. But that's not really the aim - it's an end in itself, to create strange new bits of Christian culture.

So - this really is the conclusion -

A revival of liberal Christianity needs 4 things:

A fresh affirmation of the liberal state, or the humanist ideology of the west - Christianity's proper setting, which it has itself set up.

A new account of the danger of bad liberal theology, the sort of that neglects faith and cult in favour of rational humanism.

A new account of faith as a performance we can only half-inhabit, something that co-exists with scepticism.

A new appetite for cultic creativity, which should be explored at one remove from church, in the cultural space called 'the arts'.

ends