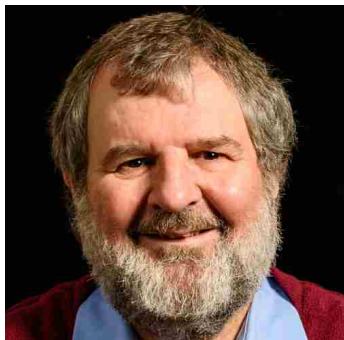


# Christian dogma and free enquiry

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'Christ and the Creeds' was the title of Modern Church's<sup>1</sup> most famous conference, held a hundred years ago this summer. It caused such a furore as to make the front pages of national newspapers. There is to be a day conference on 11th September 2021 to celebrate it.

My first thought was: how things have changed! A century ago, Anglicans fell out with each other over the divinity of Christ, solemnly recited in the Creeds. Today, instead, we fall out about same-sex partnerships.

On reflection, though, much has stayed the same. The presenting issues come and go; what persists is the tension between the people who want to maintain what they have been taught and the people who want to think it through again. Some are committed to truth through reason; for others, any deviation from what the Church teaches and you shouldn't be a bishop. Or even a priest.

## The historical context

Between the two sides the pendulum has been swinging for a thousand years. With the revival of learning in western Europe, Anselm set out to prove by logic that the Christian doctrines of the Incarnation and the Trinity must be true. His successors gradually concluded that doctrines like these were beyond human logic. The dominant conclusion, by the later Middle Ages, was that they were known to be true because God had revealed them. Reason wasn't up to scratch, usually because of the Fall. Reformation debates were characterised by Catholics and Protestants claiming to uphold the supreme authority of divine revelation while accusing each other of depending on mere human reason. The main sixteenth century defenders of reason, the Socinians, were expelled from one country after another.

The reaction against this downgrading of reason was equally extreme. The Enlightenment - the Age of Reason - began by questioning all authority claims. Descartes and Locke thought they could establish certain knowledge by starting from scratch. By the end of the eighteenth-century French atheists were denying the existence of any spiritual realities. In their view, all that exists is physical nature. True knowledge of reality can only come through the physical senses. We humans are part of nature, wholly subject to its laws. Belief in God was a barrier to progress.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See: <https://modernchurch.org.uk>

<sup>2</sup> Kors, Alan Charles, 'The atheism of D'Holbach and Naigeon' in Hunter, Michael, and Wootton, David, Eds, *Atheism from the Reformation to the Enlightenment*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1992, pp. 276-278.

Most western churches conceded empirical science but stressed the importance of spiritual realities beyond it. Evangelicals insisted on the verbal inerrancy of the Bible as God's complete revelation to all people at all times. Spiritualist churches produced clairvoyants. Catholics produced science-defying theories about the sacraments. Catholic theologians who didn't toe the line were denounced by Pope Pius X as 'modernists'.

## Modernism

The Pope's language outlived his disapproval. A growing Modernist movement produced radically new ideas in the early twentieth century. It was best known in art and architecture; but even chess had its Modernist movement.

Those who believed Christianity had nothing to fear from science, and could adapt its teachings in the light of new insights, saw themselves as part of the Modernist movement. The Churchmen's Union for the Advancement of Liberal Religious Thought, founded in 1898 to defend free enquiry in the Church, later changed its name to the Modern Churchmen's Union. (Later again gender awareness demanded a dropping of the 'men'.) History had shown that the Church had often changed its doctrines; if some of the old ones were being refuted, it could adapt accordingly.

Its journal, in its early days, had two mottoes. One, attributed to Erasmus, was

By identifying the new learning with heresy you make orthodoxy synonymous with ignorance.

The other was from Edmund Burke:

A state without the means of some change is without the means of its conservation.

This was the Modernist mood at the time of the 1921 conference on Christ and the Creeds.

## Dogmatism

On the other side of the debate, dogmatists appealed to the teachings they had inherited. As long as it was widely believed that reason led to atheism, defenders of faith felt the need for a divine revelation that gave the answers once and for all.

Perhaps the dogmatists' biggest weapon has always been government legislation. Legally imposed statements of belief like the Nicene Creed and the Thirty-Nine Articles have imposed orthodoxies more effectively than theological arguments can.

For the Roman emperor Constantine, the Council of Nicaea was to stop the bishops arguing with each other. Bishops who did not assent to the agreed statement could then be removed from office. Although subsequently omitted, the final sentence agreed at Nicaea was:

But as for those who say, There was a time when He was not, and Before being born He was not, and that He came into existence out of nothing, or who assert that the Son of God is from a different hypostasis or substance, or is created, or is subject to alteration or change—these the Catholic Church anathematizes.<sup>3</sup>

On reading the debate about the 1921 conference, one finds that the disapprovals were not characterised by theological analyses explaining why Christ must have been divine, or why the Creeds described him correctly. There was not even an echo of the fourth century debates. What stirred up the emotions, rather, was the very idea of questioning those teachings. This, of course, is what we would expect from a culture content to accept whatever they had been taught and suspicious of any attempt to question it.

## Weaknesses

The two sides are often called 'liberals' and 'conservatives'. Neither of these terms is accurate, so for now I stick with 'modernists' and 'dogmatists'.

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<sup>3</sup> Kelly, J. N. D., *Early Christian Doctrines*, Edinburgh: R & R Clark, 1968, p. 232.

The greatest weakness of the Modernist tradition is the assumption that it can ignore the past and work everything out from first principles - as Descartes and Locke had believed. In fact we have been formed by the traditions we have been brought up in, and so has the society around us. The way we think - what we believe reason can do - is largely the product of our tradition.

The dogmatist tradition has two inescapable flaws. One is the need to appeal to a supreme authority which lays down correct teaching clearly and consistently. For most Christians that authority is the Bible. However the Bible is nothing like that. Its thirty-odd authors or groups of authors disagreed with each other about a great deal. In practice dogmatists develop traditions about which texts to emphasise and which to ignore.

The other flaw is that, in order to defend its teachings as the only legitimate ones, it presents contemporary challenges as a deviation from an otherwise unified tradition. In fact the history of Christianity has been full of debates about all sorts of matters. The divinity of Christ and the status of the Creeds have been questioned over and over again.

## Tradition without dogma

Over the centuries we have fallen out over many things, but behind them is a recurring tension. One side defends tradition, and is easily tempted to treat it as an unchanging monolith. The other side defends reason, and is easily tempted to forget how much it owes to the past.

We need tradition. We have all been brought up to think and act in ways our tradition has taught us. Yet traditions keep changing. Every generation buries one element and adds a new one. Every age has the potential to discover something new and exciting, and thereby contribute to the formation of the future. Christianity is not what it was a hundred years ago, let alone a thousand. As Gustav Mahler put it,

Tradition is not to preserve the ashes, but to pass on the fire.

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