

HOW MUCH DIVERSITY?

Diversity is the buzz-word of our age. Every employer, school, political party, church, or media outlet has to have a Diversity policy. If they do not, they can lose business, face legal action, or even be wound up. And surely this is a good thing! Why should people face discrimination because of their gender, or the colour of their skin, or because of a disability, or because of anything else that is theirs by accident of birth. Those of us who are part of the majority community need to ask ourselves what it might be like to be on the wrong end of discrimination, if people were turning *us* down on account of things we could do nothing about. But diversity goes further than combatting discrimination. During the last thirty years or so a philosophy called Postmodernism has swept the board. One of the tenets of this philosophy is that there is no such thing as a meta narrative. A meta narrative is a story that makes sense of the world and the things that are in it. Every religion has its own meta narrative. So do many secular ideologies and political creeds. Communism and Nazism had powerful meta narratives - the former about the eventual rise of the downtrodden working class, and the latter about the superiority of the so-called master race. All of these metanarratives contradict each other, of course. Each of them tries to explain the reason for everything, so they cannot possibly all be right. They could, logically, all be wrong, and that is the position Postmodernism takes. There is no story, history, or myth that can make any sense of life. If you find something that works for you, stick with it, but it might not work for others, so don't expect everyone else, or even anyone else to go with you, because what works for you may not work for them.

This leads to a bewildering amount of diversity in ideas. On the one hand, none of these ideas are of universal worth, but each must be respected because they "work for" somebody or other. Some people may be glad to see religious types getting their come-uppance, being ignored or slighted after centuries of judgementalism. And many new ideas can flower in an environment where everyone's point of view is respected. However, if everybody's ideas are to be respected, does that include the ideas of the flat-earthers, or those who believe aliens from outer-space have invaded our planet, or even the ideas of neo-nazis and extreme jihadists? Indeed, if there is no universal metanarrative, but everyone can seek a metanarrative which works for them, who are we to pour scorn on the metanarrative of someone who believes God will save the world by forcibly converting people to Islam, through means such as mass bombings and flying aeroplanes into high buildings? Wheeling out more moderate imams to deny that this was never the Prophet Mohammed's intention will not work, because the extremists will do what extremists have always done - they will maintain that they are the true believers and the others have gone astray. And they will continue to maintain this even though they remain a tiny minority and the moderates are an overwhelming majority. The idea that God is on the side of the minority and will soon step in to bring the majority over to their side - or to destroy them - has a long history - in many religions and in many parts of the world. We may hate the racism and terror tactics of the Nazis, but if there is no universal metanarrative - even the eighteenth-century Enlightenment metanarrative that lies behind the American Declaration of Independence and the Declaration of Human Rights - who is to say they are wrong, and on what basis do we counter their poison? After the Second World War there was a determined effort to play down the things that divide people - especially their metanarratives (though nobody called them by that name). Those metanarratives were not rejected, merely put on the back burner. The next generation then failed to see the need for them at all and rejected them outright. But in trying to put an end to the causes of division, did these people just sow the seeds of other, more deadly wars, which would be harder to fight because the common values that bound people together during the Second World War (even though in many cases the values were no more than skin-deep) had been thoroughly destroyed? Was John Lennon right to think that people would stop fighting if only there were no heaven and no religion too? Or would people just find something else to fight over?

The counterpart of this way of thinking is that there are no universally-valid codes of morals or behaviour. Those who have suffered under an extreme conservative upbringing, who have been subjected to an extremely strict moral code will be grateful that burden is now lifted. Those whose lives have been made a misery because they were born out of wedlock, or because they made a mistake early in life they were not allowed to forget, will give a cheer. But now there are many young people out there who want to say "no" to sex, because they don't feel ready for it, but fear that to do so would make them the "odd one out" among their peers, who would just love society to re-impose its ban on sex before marriage so they do not have to bear

the burden of the decision alone. And is it true that there is no universally valid code of morals? Is there truly nothing which is wrong everywhere it occurs and for everybody? What about paedophilia? Surely the use of children who are too immature to make decisions for themselves as sexual objects is abhorrent in any society? But paedophiles will claim they are just another part of the diversity that makes up humanity. That they were born that way and are as entitled to express their sexuality as anyone else (the question as to what extent anyone has a right to express their sexuality is too seldom asked). If there is no universally valid code of ethics, society has no grounds on which to resist paedophilia. If paedophilia is generally and universally condemned, then there must be a universally-valid code of ethics? But what is it? And on what basis is it founded. More than 230 years ago, the founders of the United States of America stated, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness" In actual fact just about every part of that statement is questionable. History shows that most of those who signed this statement, when they said "all men" probably meant "all white men", and certainly excluded women! In fact, it is quite likely that a fair proportion of them did not believe in a creator. And the truths they proclaimed are not perceived to be self-evident (and surely they can only be self-evident if everyone perceives them to be so) by everybody today, any more than was the case in 1776.

So on what basis can one distinguish between truth and falsehood, between right and wrong? The only answer postmodernism can give is "resonance". The test of whether a belief or a type of behaviour is acceptable or not is whether it "resonates", either with an individual or with a larger group within society. Anything vaguely Celtic, alternative, meditative, or connected with social media may be considered to "resonate", whereas traditional Christianity, words, anything considered cerebral or "establishment" would not resonate. Diversity, equality, and peace resonate. Discrimination, prejudice, rules and regulations, and a high moral stance do not. The only trouble is that this "resonance" idea does not work.

A former District Chair of mine was admitted to hospital and after he came out he told a District Meeting that it was only when he went into hospital that he realised how racist the country still was. The picture of what does or does not resonate given above is a picture of what the world looks like to academics, writers and other creative people, and media types. And because so many of us encounter the world through television and radio, through books, films, and art, we tend to think that is how the world is. But go into hospital as an in-patient, go into a pub, go to a football game, or read a tabloid newspaper and you will get a very different view of the world, but one that is shared by the overwhelming majority of the population. In this view, what resonates is : "hang 'em and flog 'em", repatriate the immigrants and restrict entry to new ones, castrate sex offenders, force idle people on benefits to go to work, and remove restrictions on smoking and other ordinary persons' pleasures. The majority of people who think this way can properly be said to be overwhelming, because even many of the people who publicly sign up to the former vision really believe the latter one, something which comes out only when they are a little inebriated or believe themselves to be "among friends". I remember once being in a meeting of church ministers where sexist jokes were told, even though the people telling them would be ever so careful to use inclusive language in public. And I can't imagine the situation is different in other institutions of the liberal establishment. Let us remember Hitler only got away with his heinous policies because what he said "resonated" with ordinary German people. "Resonance" is a very weak basis for distinguishing wrong from right.

Human beings in general throughout history have only been held in check by self-interest and religion. But self-interest is not a sufficient basis for morality, because occasionally the self-interest of the individual does not coincide with the interests of the community at large. Only religion can supply a sufficient ground for a universal morality. Humanists may live exceedingly moral lives. Their morality may even occasionally exceed that of the religious. But they have no rational basis for that morality. They claim to be demonstrating that one does not need to be religious to be moral, but they fail to deal with the question as to why one should be moral if one is not religious? Such an attitude would appear to be borne out of a desire to compete with and prove a point to the religious. Many such people were brought up in conservative religious homes, or once were conservative believers themselves. They naturally have a point to prove to their family members or former co-religionists. But the second generation, who do not have that motivation, may well see no need to be moral at all.

That leaves only religion as a reasonable basis for morality. But which religion? There are many, and even within a single religion there is much diversity. People who a few years ago probably put all religious people in the same category, now have to learn to distinguish not only between Catholic and Protestant, but between Sunni and Shi'a, between Orthodox and Reformed Judaism, and between many different strands of Buddhism, Hinduism, Sikhism, and so on... All the well-established religions have a basis for a workable code of ethics, precisely because they are well-established and have had to provide a way for their people to live and work together in harmony over centuries. But there are always new religions being created. And some religions are absolutely evil. Even in the most respectable religions there are fanatical and dangerous sects. People who grew up thinking religious fanaticism was Protestants and Catholics shooting and bombing one another in Northern Ireland, now have to come to terms with radical Muslims blowing large numbers of people up, with supposedly peaceful people like Hindus, Sikhs, and Buddhists, committing assassinations, blowing up buildings and killing people. Yet within the religious sphere we hear the virtues of diversity extolled. Perhaps the idea is to persuade the fanatics that there are other points of view. That is an impossible task. You have to wait for the fanatic to become disillusioned with his belief or his sect for himself, just as you have to wait for an alcoholic to admit he is a drunkard. Neither can be helped until they are prepared to admit to themselves that there is a problem, whether with the drink or their belief/sect. But I suspect the diversity drum is being banged loudest by liberal believers who feel they are being condemned by their conservative co-religionists, and who are seeking to defend their position and to keep the believing company together in the same ship. They have a point. There is nothing so unlovely as a conservative religious movement in the ascendancy. While in the minority, especially if they are a persecuted minority, they have an appeal as faithful and courageous martyrs. When they emerge victorious they can begin to persecute others with the same ferocity with which they themselves were persecuted. A healthy church or religion will permit a wide range of opinions and allow plenty of room for friendly disagreement. But how wide a spectrum can be tolerated? Only God knows the answer to that question. But it surely cannot be an infinite amount. Otherwise the religion abandons its own metanarrative, and along with that it's only power to give life any meaning.

But where should one draw the line? Different religions have different ways of defining what is right and what is wrong - or to put the matter more exactly, what is acceptable within its tradition and what is not. Some religious traditions (one may think of ultra-orthodox Judaism, conservative Islam, and the more conservative fundamentalist Christian groups) lay down very clearly what is allowed and what is not. It is all laid down in the Torah, the Qur'an, the Bible. But even that is not enough. There have been wars fought over the interpretation of these texts. So these ultra-conservative groups have laid down authorised interpretations of these texts. Jews have the Talmud, Muslims the Hadith, and conservative Christians may choose to follow the interpretation of puritan divines, or of nineteenth-century commentators such as BB Warfield or Matthew Henry. But even these interpretative codes are capable of being understood in more than one way, so most conservative believers look to present day authoritative teachers - possibly an individual noted teacher or a court of approved scholars, to hand down judgements on modern cases based on the principles of their Scriptures, as interpreted in line with the tradition they adhere to.

That does not, however, silence all argument, much as the leaders of these traditions might hope it might. One remembers the infamous words of then-President Bill Clinton - "I did not have sexual intercourse with that woman - Monica Lewinsky". The press had a field day with this statement, seeing it as an out-and-out lie. It was not. Subsequent evidence showed that full penetrative sex did not take place. What did take place may well have been regarded as sexual intercourse by the majority of the population, but what most of those hearing these words were missing is that Bill Clinton was brought up in the kind of conservative Baptist tradition which takes a strict line on sexual matters. Because they take such a strict line, they are in need of a clear definition of what "sexual intercourse" is, and many books have been written on the subject. The matter is hotly debated until this day. One suspects Clinton was interpreting his tradition in a rather liberal fashion. Rather too liberal for most of his co-religionists, and Clinton was forced to show some form of public repentance. But Clinton is a good lawyer, and as counsel for his own defence he would appear to have satisfied himself he was the right side of his tradition code - at least before the matter became the subject of press scrutiny. Traditions which set up high standards which are difficult - or impossible for most people to live up to, have need to make careful definitions, and even to identify exceptions, so as not to make it completely impossible to live up to the standard, and to avoid the situation where everybody deserves to be ex-

pelled from the community. This process continues until somebody thinks the liberalisation has gone too far and forms a movement designed to return the religion to its roots, which in effect means returning to an earlier (usually more conservative) interpretation.

Other traditions (e.g. Catholic and Orthodox Christianity) have realised long ago the problems of relying for authority on a book - even a book which has shown itself over centuries to be a good guide. Catholic and Orthodox Christianity accept the authority of the Bible as inspired scripture but see it as the first stage. God continues to guide the canonically ordained leaders of his church, and so the record of their interpretations in commentaries, preaching, and theological works, as well as the records of decisions of Councils of Bishops and Popes and Patriarchs, all help God's people to see God's guidance to his people today. This is the reason some traditions were formerly not keen for the Bible to be translated into the language of the people. The people might interpret the Scripture in the light of the modern day and ignore the centuries of tradition and wisdom which came between. Indeed, one gets the impression that orthodox Jewish and Islamic scholars rely more heavily on Talmud and Hadith respectively, rather than on Torah/Qur'an. But the high respect given to the Book in their religions make it very difficult to say so. However, any teacher in either tradition who suggested throwing out the tradition and relying only on the Book, would be very much a challenging figure, and could well end up being adjudged a heretic. He/she might even be "crucified"!

Having said this, a religion based on a living tradition which stretches back centuries but continues until the present day may seem a very reasonable proposition. The historical perspective prevents it being the ephemeral brainwave of a modern person which cannot stand the test of time, but because the tradition reaches to the present it is relevant to the present time. Except that it isn't. Because religions of this type tend generally to choose the most conservative and backward-looking people for high office, so the church remains decades (if not centuries!) behind the world. The other problem is that the longer a tradition goes on, the more opportunity there is for human error to distort the message. There is a joke which would appear to go back to the Second World War, which tells of a command sent verbally along a line of soldiers, which started as "Send reinforcements: we're going to advance" and ended up as "Send three and fourpence (Three shillings and four pence in UK pre-decimal currency), we're going to a dance!" Obviously apocryphal, but it makes the point that even though the incremental shifts in interpretation may seem reasonable and understandable, what comes out at the end of the process may be a travesty of the original message. And that is assuming everybody intends to remain "on message" from the beginning of the process to the end. Knowing what one does of human nature, that would appear too confident an assumption. Wars have been fought over which branches of tradition are authorised (in the case of Islam, such a war is currently raging between Sunni and Shi'a), traditions may diverge (e.g. Orthodox and Catholic Christianity, Coptic Christianity etc) and refuse to recognise each other. The living tradition, while excellent in theory, appears as flawed in practice as any other means of establishing acceptable teaching or ethical judgement.

Such concerns also apply to the tradition which lies behind the original Holy Scriptures, of course. Both Jewish and Christian Scriptures are composed of a number of books written over a number of decades (in the case of the Christian New Testament) or centuries (in the case of the Jewish Scriptures/Christian Old Testament), but obviously these concerns apply to a greater extent in respect to a longer tradition, than they do to a tradition that runs for a shorter period.

Other religions have a diversity of scriptures and traditions. Hinduism has an entire pantheon of gods, a multiplicity of scriptures, and a myriad of teachers. Which scriptures one uses for guidance, and which teachers one follows is up to the individual worshipper. This is a diversity of a totally different category to that which exists within Christianity. In Christianity, each diverse opinion must be justified in reference to the Bible. Some of the interpretations of the Bible may appear to an outsider to be somewhat strained; some of the believers may not live up to their standards; some believers may be hanging on to the church by their fingernails. But at least they all refer to the same authority. Hindus can pick which Scriptures they adhere to, and which teacher they trust to interpret their tradition. Some traditions are connected with certain regions, others with certain castes. In fact, Hinduism is not really a single religion, but a number of different religions and philosophical traditions combined together. Some rely on scriptures, some on remembered traditions, some on rituals. Some of these may help to bind people together in a particular region or within a particular

caste, and give them a reason for living and living ethically. But viewed on a wider scale it is a cause for disunity, and gives endless opportunity for a cynical person to do precisely what they will and find a religious justification for it. This kind of thing happens the world over, but the greater diversity Hinduism offers makes it far easier.

Buddhists also exhibit great diversity. Buddhist schools vary on the exact path to liberation, the importance and canonicity of teachings and scriptures and especially their respective practices. There are two or three great schools of Buddhism (according to one's point of view), but there are many subdivisions. They not only differ in their ideas and practices, but they differ as to which writings should be considered scripture and how authoritative those writings should be. This also makes it possible to justify almost anything with reference to Buddhist teaching, which may have explained its attraction for the "flower power" generation. Indeed, the one thing "everybody knows" about Buddhists is that they are pacifists and vegetarians because they do not believe it is right to take life. But Buddhists have been involved in violence and war - and have killed people - in Sri Lanka and Myanmar. Some of them are also prepared to eat meat, as long as the animal was killed by a local non-Buddhist. Here too there is no firm guidance, and there appears to be no universally acknowledged leader or body of leaders. The world acknowledges the Dalai Lama as a Buddhist leader, but he is only acknowledged by Buddhists in Tibet, or by Tibetans living abroad, and maybe not by all of them.

Sikhs have nine gurus, or acknowledged teachers, of which their scripture, Guru Granth Sahib is the ninth. These scriptures sum up the teaching of the gurus, whose own writings are also authoritative. Ordinances binding on all Sikhs by the Serbat Khalsa, but local Sikh communities meeting in a gurdwara largely govern themselves though there are certain practices (notably the prohibition on cutting hair and the requirement to cover the head) which are incumbent upon all, and which are usually adhered to. Here the definition of scripture is firm, though the writings and stories of the gurus help to guide the interpretation, and there is some overall authority. But the abolition of a priestly caste in Sikhism has meant anyone can read or teach Guru Granth Sahib in the gurdwaras, and the possibility of the message getting lost is great. Guru Nanak appears to have founded Sikhism as a way of uniting Hindu and Muslim, but Sikhs have fought bitter wars against Hindus and Muslims in India.

Other people would take a totally different line on this matter. Quakers seek for the "inner light" which God shines into the heart of each person. Pentecostals may give priority to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Others would say the answer lies in a personal relationship with God. Many Christians would say it is not the Bible that is authoritative, but the person of Jesus. But just about all we know about Jesus comes from the Bible, and those who seek a Jesus who is different from the one we meet in the pages of the Christian Scriptures (New Testament) end up very largely discarding bits of the Bible they don't like and believing the rest. During the nineteenth century many liberal scholars rejected the church's portrayal of Jesus and sought to write a "Life of Jesus" which seemed to them to be more true to the Jesus of History. George Tyrell, writing at the beginning of the twentieth century and reviewing their work, said they resembled nothing so much as men staring into the bottom of a deep well and seeing the reflection of themselves. Maybe not everything the church says about Jesus is true. Maybe the biblical accounts are biased, having been written by his supporters. But if we rule out everything the church says and everything the Bible says from the start - or even if we assume a sceptical stance towards it until it proves reliable - we shall be relying largely on our own imaginings, which are no more reliable than those of the church and the biblical writers. Each of these approaches ends up by giving permission to the individual believer to believe what they like. "Why not?" you might think, if they are choosing to believe in peace and loving one another? But what if they choose to believe God was calling them to execute his judgement on gays and adulterers? And if one has removed all external authority, on what basis do you say the former is right and the latter is wrong?

The problem appears to be that extremely prescriptive ethical systems do not work. So many people find it difficult to live up to the standard and the thought that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23), while it may be true, is too hard for the majority of people to take for very long. So there have to be accommodations: definitions and exceptions that make the rules easier to live by. That leads to arguments between moderates (who desire to make the system user-friendly) and fanatics, who insist on the

strictest possible interpretation of the rules in case any possible infringement might anger the Almighty. And it is never difficult at any time to find bad news which can be viewed as a sign of God's displeasure - if one is that way inclined. However, the polar opposite - no universally-binding ethical system - leads to chaos, confusion, and everyone doing what is right in their own eyes. So what is the way forward? Perhaps it lies in committing to an ethical system which has clear principles, but in which there is room for a considerable amount of freedom in the interpreting of those principles. We have already seen that religion offers the best hope as the source of such principles. But to which of the varieties of religion we have discussed should we turn?

There needs to be a clear statement of principle, but not too much direction in the application of the principle. That would appear to rule out traditions which are governed by continuing tradition, because if the tradition is continuing, there is the continual temptation to make the rules clearer and yet more prescriptive. Before the publication of *Humanae Vitae*, a Catholic could practice contraception without offending against the religion's principle of the sanctity of life. Of course, some Catholics would have always thought that the practice was an offence, but it was a matter of opinion because the matter had not yet been the subject of an official ruling. A Catholic practising contraception could claim to be adhering to his/her church's tradition. After the publication of the Papal ruling, that room for manoeuvre was removed. After that, any Catholic who wished to practise contraception had to disobey the Pope's teaching. And many did, for the first time in their lives. And a rich vein of work finding loopholes and exceptions in the ruling has been created for an army of canonical lawyers.

But, as we saw above, even religions based on a book are subject to the same kind of problems. The chain of authority among protestant evangelicals, charismatics, and pentecostals may not be so clear. They are not united movements and owe allegiance to different authorities and different teachers. There is not one Pope, there are hundreds. And they don't have the bureaucratic and theological backup that the Pope in Rome has. And they all give different rulings. But any one of them can land themselves in a similar situation to the one Pope Paul VI was in, and many of them do. But because their followers are less numerous, their difficulties are less well documented.

So where do we go? Some would say we rely on the personal guidance of God, a personal relationship with Jesus, or the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. But what do we know of God, Jesus, or the Holy Spirit, except for what we learn of them through Scripture and tradition? I feel the answer must start with the Book. As a Christian, I would of course take the Bible as the centre of my system, but the principles I am about to discuss would work if Torah, Qur'an, or Guru Granth Sahib were taken as the centre. Books, however, need to be interpreted. Few Christians read the Bible in its original languages (there are three!). More Jews, Muslims, and Sikhs read their Scriptures in the original tongue, but for many of them it is not their first language and I know from personal experience how easy it is to mistake the meaning when one is reading in a second language. And even those who are reading in their mother tongue may mistake the meaning of the texts, because meanings of words change over years, So the text needs to be interpreted. But instead of delegating the responsibility for this interpretation to a group of specially trained and authorised teachers, I would put the burden of interpretation on the individual reader. The individual reader needs to take responsibility to do the study necessary to interpret the text for themselves. There is a need of teachers and scholars to assist in this task, and it is important for the individual to take account of the teaching of people well qualified in their field. But the responsibility for interpreting the Scripture lies with the individual him- or herself. Some people may be less capable of study and understanding than others,; different people studying the same passage will come to different conclusions one may end up with groups within the same tradition believing mutually-contradictory things. But provided they are honestly seeking to interpret the one Scripture and the one set of values the faith community will just have to live with the result. Only if a person rejects the values or the Scripture out of hand would there be cause to sever that person from the community.

But it is not precisely the words of the text which are authoritative, rather the principles those words teach. One needs to get behind the words to the principles. And that may mean comparing what our text says with what other texts written in a similar time and place were saying. The question is what *could* the text have been saying? What is it *not* saying? An example of this is the oft-quoted verse from Leviticus, "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth". In today's language this is a demand for strict retributive justice and adequate

vengeance. In the Ancient Near East revenge was often the only kind of justice there was, and it was often disproportionate. A person might take a life for an eye. In this context, the injunction is setting a limit to revenge and may in fact be suggesting that mercy, rather than revenge, is God's dominant characteristic. Requirements that women cover their heads in worship look a little different when one considers that, at the time this text was written, only a lady of ill repute would go out with her head uncovered. The *principle* is not one of covered heads, but one of dressing modestly - so as not to shock or to provoke. Then that principle needs to be applied to the present, and there are a number of different points of view as to how that principle should be put into practice today. And the right answer in New York may not be the right answer in Kandahar

But can it be left up to the individual to interpret these texts, and then to define and apply the principle(s) involved? Unfortunately, it cannot. Imaginative minds have the capacity to interpret a text to mean the opposite of its natural meaning. The history of the interpretation of the Christian Bible gives us plenty of evidence that the Church has known many such imaginative minds. And I have no reason to believe that teachers of other religious traditions have been any less imaginative. There needs to be some checks and balances to ensure the principles of the religious tradition or value-system are faithfully transmitted from one generation to another. The text itself is one check. People can make a text mean all kinds of things, but if they have constantly refer to the one text, that should place at least something of a brake on flights of fancy. But it is not enough on its own. There needs to be some higher authority, some authorised teachers and a means of appointing new ones, some board or council to which appeal may be made to determine whether some particular matter of teaching or ethical practice is authentic to the tradition or not. There needs to be some local authority, so people can be taught locally and have some local point of guidance, and some authority at a higher level which can take decisions that are binding over people beyond a local area and which can hold local leaders to account. Movement like the Quakers or Sikhism fall down here, because their reasonable desire to abolish status distinctions between people have led them to abolish any kind of regulated teaching. There are meetings which might fulfil the council function, but their concern for individual and local freedom means they are often no more than toothless tigers. However, something like the Roman *magisterium* goes too far the other way. It is the principles taught in Scripture that are of final authority, not the rulings of earthly leaders and councils. The latter merely help us to understand and apply the former. We need authorised teachers to help us understand and apply the Scriptures, and supra-local authorities to keep good order and to ensure we do not depart too far from the original vision, but the control must not be too tight. We must allow people who sincerely believe in a different interpretation of Scripture to follow that interpretation, as long as they do not throw away the Scriptural baby with the bathwater of the traditional interpretation

So how much diversity should be allowed? As much as is consistent with a serious attempt to interpret the principles taught in Scripture, interpreted in accordance with all the resources of rigorous linguistic and academic study, and applied to everyday life by the individual believer, with the help of authorised teachers, who themselves are regulated and held to account by properly constituted authorities. Will this eliminate diversity? In no way. It will in fact leave a fairly messy situation where people who believe opposing things may have to find a way of living together in the same faith community. But if we accept that God is the creator and we are mere creatures, the fact that there is considerable room for misunderstanding and disagreement should come as no surprise. Each person should hold to their own understanding until they become personally convinced, hopefully under the inspiration of God, that they are incorrect. They should then correct their stance and hold the new opinion as firmly as they held the old one. Christians believe that at the end of all things, God will make everything clear. Until then we just muddle our way along with the light God gives us and try to work together with the people God sends our way - whatever we may think of them!