

IS GOD RELEVANT?

By John E Staton

"Relevance" appears to be the "Holy Grail", the "must have" accessory of our modern generation. Artists and musicians seek it, young people crave it as if it were an addiction, politicians are in relentless pursuit of it (in fact, it appears the worst criticism one can make of a politician these days is to call him or her "out of touch"). And where these go, the Church cannot be far behind. Many books have been written, many conferences held, and many words spoken in the quest to discover how we can make the church, its worship, its message, its God relevant to the modern generation. One may reply that it has always been so.

The Church has, since its earliest days, related to the society in which it found itself, and the thinking currently in vogue. Certainly, the most prominent features of Celtic Spirituality, Anglo-Saxon Christianity, of the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic strands of the Christian faith, and also of the Reformation became established because they "rang bells" for people in the society in which they evolved. Celtic monks filled the hole left by the old Druids, Anglo-Saxon church leaders behaved much like the noblemen many of them had once been, or at any rate like the Frankish counterparts they wished to emulate, just as their secular opposite numbers were seeking to do in their own sphere. Roman and Eastern Clergy were more or less consciously mirroring the culture of the late Roman Empire in their respective areas. And the Reformation in its desire to bring the Bible to the people was jumping on a bandwagon of extending education to all - especially to the increasingly powerful middle-classes - that had been rolling for some time in the secular world. But this is not the whole story.

Alongside these, and other signs of relevance, there lies a current in the history of the Church that suggests God has always been to some extent irrelevant to human society, and that the Church has often done its best work, and been seen to be at its best, when it has been irrelevant. When it has stood up against the current trend and been counted. Whom does history judge the more kindly? The German Confessing Church who consistently opposed Adolf Hitler from the start? Or the more relevant majority, who at best kept quiet because they wanted to relate? And who comes out of the Soviet era with most credit? The relevant majority who played things the Soviet way, and collaborated with those who were oppressing their brothers and sisters? Or the "Underground Church" who refused to compromise? I realize that nothing is quite so black and white in the heat of the moment and that judgement is much easier with hindsight. But these two examples suffice to show that "relevance" may not be the universally desirable goal we might believe it to be.

ESSENTIAL DISSENT

Every society has to have some way of allowing dissent to be voiced in a way that will not bring the system crashing about people's ears. Even the most autocratic regime needs a way for people to get dissent "off their chest". The Romans had the anarchic feast of Saturnalia, where masters changed places with servants, cross-dressing occurred, and for a short time normal rules were suspended, until normality reasserted itself after the feast was over. Medieval England had Christmas, with its customs of "boy bishops" who lorded it over the proceedings for a few days, and kings had their court jesters who could get across a much-needed, but unpopular, message through the medium of comedy. Today we have "Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition" - a contradiction in terms in medieval society, who have a role of questioning everything the government does to ensure all legislation is thoroughly thought through. The church too, had a role in expressing dissent. In Medieval times, the spheres of influence of Church and State were strictly defined and separated. By the time of the Reformation, this strict separation of powers had led to some gross abuses. But the same separation of powers had allowed the Church to criticize the monarchy in its most gross evils, and to speak out against oppression. Arguably, it was when the Church was at its most relevant that it was at its most corrupt. When it suffered itself to be "irrelevant", it was most faithful to its founder. One thinks of such "irrelevant" people as St. Thomas Becket, St. Thomas More, Thomas Cranmer, John Wycliffe and many others who stood up to autocratic authority and thus bore faithful witness to their Lord. But all of them died because, by the time of their death, they had become "irrelevant" to the prevailing mood of their society.

BIBLICAL PRECEDENT

And do we not see the same principles at work in the Bible. When King Jehosaphat of Judah asks Ahab to consult a prophet, it is the "outsider", Micaiah ben Imlah - the one who dares to be different to all the others - who is the faithful prophet of Yahweh, a fact proved by the accuracy of his prediction of disaster for Ahab. Elijah complained "I, even I only am left". He was exaggerating, but it shows he was not exactly in the main stream. His successor Elisha and all the writing prophets were continually pedalling a message that was unpopular in their time, and accepted by very few of their contemporaries. That, coupled with the fact that their prophecies were not likely to be fulfilled until after their death, probably gave them the incentive to have their words written down. Jesus too was constantly in conflict with the authorities of his own day. Some scholars, it is true, have painted a picture of Jesus which portrays him as entirely at home in his culture, alongside other travelling preachers and miracle-workers. But they have to answer the question: "Why were none of these others put to death on a cross?" Jesus must have challenged the society around him in some way - indeed in a big way - to end up executed! Those who were "disciples, but secretly for fear of the Jews" are judged by history to have acted less honorably than those who followed Jesus openly (though it has to be admitted not many followers of Jesus come out of the events of Gethsemane and Calvary with much credit - except the women!). So then, what is the message?

THE IRRELEVANCE OF GOD

Maybe the message is that, in all our constant search for relevance, we will never find God there, because God is essentially irrelevant. That is not to say God does not matter. It is to say He is the only one who matters. But God can never be fully relevant to any culture or generation. If He were, we would have captured God. He would be our servant. Whereas, in fact, we are His servants. He stands alongside us and outside of us. Sometimes He stands over us in judgement. Sometimes He just stands patiently by while we insist on wasting our time on things that don't matter or schemes that won't work, until we finally come around to seeking His way. And if the Church is meant to be representing God to the world, perhaps we have got to be a little irrelevant too. We need to stand outside our own culture and time (metaphorically speaking), so we can be judiciously critical (and self-critical). We need to affirm the philosophy and culture of our age when it has grasped something of the truth about God, but to stand up in protest against those parts of that philosophy and culture which are opposed to God's revelation in Christ.

We must, of course, be clear about what is an essential part of God's revelation in Christ. There are no "brownie points" in heaven for holding on to the cultural baggage of a past age. But neither should we throw up our hands in despair when some essential part of Christ's revelation appears to have no relevance or meaning to people today. Arguably it is that part of the message we should be preaching with renewed vigour, because it shows up the blind spot in our generation.

But if the Church and its message are necessarily irrelevant, how can we hope to reach our generation and see them come to faith in Christ? It is possible, but it is hard work. We may never see very large numbers of converts. But maybe that is not the way it is to be. Very often, when large numbers of people convert all at once, there is either some form of compulsion at work, or there is some all-too-human motive mixed in with the divine. Some of those converts will last and become outstanding Christians. But some will have undergone a very superficial emotional process which may succeed in inoculating them against religion for life.

Perhaps instead we are called to proclaim the whole message of Christ - the relevant and the irrelevant - and perhaps it is when people begin to feel their own irrelevance, that they will begin to respond to Christ as Lord. And make no mistake, there are many out there who do feel irrelevant. And not just those you would expect: the poor, the immigrants, the drop-outs, and the socially-excluded. There are many whom the world would consider as very relevant, who would appear to have got their life together and to have all this world had to offer. But they would consider themselves to be irrelevant to everybody and everything - or at least to the people and things they hold most dear. We may think the world out there is full of together people who have no needs or anxieties, who have no need for God or anyone else. The world is in fact full of people with hang-ups who are frightened to admit it and to ask for help. And sometimes, when the Church comes in with its zany message, they find the space to admit their need and they find that need met in Christ.

Maybe when we seek to be relevant, we just reinforce the feeling of helplessness in those who find the surrounding culture to be part of their problem. Perhaps we need to take the risk of appearing to be irrelevant in order to address to the world around the message it wants to hear, but can't admit to wanting to

hear. And maybe in the meeting of an irrelevant human being with an irrelevant Christ, that human can find that they are indeed relevant, and find the one is most relevant of all in the universe, in Christ.