

**Article written by David FitzPatrick, a member of the Church of Ireland,** first published in St John's, Sandymount, parish magazine (2002), but also in *Tried for Heresy A 21<sup>st</sup> Century Journey of Faith* (by Andrew Furlong)

## THE DEAN IN CONTEXT

“The old sacred and pre-scientific universe passed away long ago. It was given up by degrees, very slowly and reluctantly, between about 1500 and 1900 – Erasmus to Nietzsche. Today it is irrecoverable, and nobody seriously thinks of returning to the view that earthquakes are acts of God, that sickness is a divine visitation, or that a human being may wield supernatural powers.

Since about 1880 the old world-view has been finally dead. But still we cling to it – in fact, more determinedly than ever. The carol service, a classic example of popular supernaturalism, may pretend to be medieval but it dates in fact from 1918 – after the birth of modern physics!...

The clergy spend most of their energies in staging re-enactments of the old sacred world-view, and devote their sermons to explaining its symbolism and commending it. In fact we are so busy trying to market our heritage religion that nobody has time to think what kind of religion we'd come up with if we threw out all the nostalgia and sentimentality, and tried to keep strictly within the parameters of today's world.

It's time to throw off the nostalgia and the illusions and make a fresh start. Fantasies of wielding supernatural power are not of much help to children and the belief that unseen powers will look after us and make sure that nothing very bad ever happens to us doesn't do adults very much good either. If we could see the old pre-scientific culture more clearly we wouldn't really want to go back to it. If we were not so weighed down by false nostalgia we might be able to create something very much better, and more suited to our own time.”

No – Not the thoughts of the Dean of Clonmacnoise but of Don Cupitt – Anglican priest and Fellow of Emmanuel College, Cambridge. For most of the twentieth century debate has taken place about the relevance of Christianity in the modern world. Dietrich Bonhoeffer writing from prison in the early 1940s addressed the questions raised from the development of a society without religion; how do we speak of God without religion? How do we speak in secular fashion of God? What is the significance of a Church in a religionless world? Paul Tillich, in *Shaking of the foundations*, in 1949 published a sermon ‘The depth of existence’ in which he brought God down to earth describing Him as the Ground of our very Being. Rudolf Bultmann in 1941 developed his theme of demythologisation published in English as *New Testament and Mythology*(1953) These writers and others pursuing similar lines of thought gave rise to the publication of *Honest to God* in 1963 by John Robinson. This of course, as many will remember, was followed by enormous controversy. One of the areas of discussion in *Honest to God* was that “the centre of today's debate is concerned not with the relation of particular myths to history, but with how far Christianity is committed to a mythological, or supranaturalist, picture of the universe at all.” Is it necessary for the biblical faith to be expressed in terms of this world-view, which in its way is as primitive philosophically as the Genesis stories are primitive scientifically?

Dr Robinson followed *Honest to God* with other books: *The New Reformation* (1965) and *The Human Face of God* (1973) The debate continued but less in the public eye and the Church at large settled back into its comfortable pew.

In the late 1980s the Bishop of Durham caused a further disturbance when he said that he did not believe in the Virgin Birth or the Resurrection. In 1999 the Church of England introduced a code of practice and said that clergy who profess atheism or who deny the doctrine of the Trinity or the Incarnation should be disciplined. This was regarded as a return to heresy trials, the last of which was held in 1847. It is not clear if the proposal was passed or implemented but it itself gave rise to controversy. A BBC poll asking the question, "Would the Church be right to expel 'Godless Vicars'?" was given an 84 per cent NO response.

Later, Don Cupitt wrote in a *Guardian* article (July 2001): "The Church is understandably terrified of ideas. In the past when the common people have become interested in theology it has led to bishops being burnt, exiled to Paris and having their palaces burnt down. We can't have that. The correct response to any flare-up of ideas in the Church is always to deplore it, and to look for the best way to calm it down. This is best done by kicking the question upstairs to the doctrine commission. After that the years will pass and no more will ever be heard of it. When an issue has been buried by referral to the commission it stays buried. The commission really exists not to promote the discussion of Christian doctrine but as a safety valve which is used to ensure that the Church never gets carried away by dangerous and unsettling ideas."

In view of these attitudes it is not surprising that over the past twenty years or so a number of groups has developed world-wide who would seem to be concerned primarily with promoting the relevance of the Church and Christianity to the world today. These include: The Sea of Faith Network, The Center for Progressive Christianity and the Jesus Seminar. These vary in their orthodoxy but would have in common the objective of bringing modern critical theology to the general public.

This then is the context in which the writings and ideas expressed by the present Dean of Clonmacnoise should be considered. When *Honest to God* was published Andrew Furlong was 16 and, having studied Philosophy in Trinity College, Dublin, went to Cambridge where he obtained an honours degree in Theology and before being ordained in 1972 studied at Westcott House Theological College in Cambridge. It is probably not irrelevant that Dr John Robinson was in Cambridge at that time having been a Fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge from 1969. It is also obvious from his writings that the Dean has spent many hours in the last thirty years reading widely and agonising within himself about his ideas and beliefs. It is a criticism of our Church that this has had to be done almost alone and that he has felt inhibited from being transparent about these. With regard to his present position in Trim he says that a growing number of his parishioners have come to know his thinking whereas previously he had been much more reticent about sharing his beliefs.

In his paper *Pain and Integrity: reform from within* Dean Furlong has detailed his present beliefs. There is no doubt that many of these are controversial and one would have to differ from his attitude towards Christ whom he seems to abandon. However, has Christ not been abandoned before and did not those by whom he was denied return as faithful followers? However, he does look on the "Christ figure as a symbol of the relationship of God to her/his world, a relationship of love. (God the Father symbolises the God who is ever before us, beyond us and in front of us. God the Holy Spirit symbolises the ever present reality in which we live, the love, however mysterious and paradoxical, that will never let us go)."

The themes which pervade Dean Furlong's writing are those of compassion, integrity and understanding. He also, by placing Christ in the politico-religious context of His time, suggests that the Church today must concentrate on how the message of Christianity as it has been delivered over the centuries can be made relevant to those living in a secular world. He would speak of "the costliness of God's suffering love and forgiveness... of the call to look with compassion on a broken world... and of the human hoping centred in God, both for our own future and the world's both here and in eternity." To this end – that of increasing the relevance of the Church – Furlong has suggested that revision of our creeds would be timely, and indeed invites his readers to consider their beliefs and write what they consider to be contemporary creeds.

Dr Richard Clarke in his book *And is it True?* (2000) points out that the creeds developed over centuries amid controversy and hostility on all sides. He also comments that the language of the creeds is that of Greek philosophy and not a mode of thought or expression which is fully understood today. He continues "If we were to write creeds today, they would be vastly different, both in language and the concerns addressed. The creeds should, nevertheless, be taken both seriously and intelligently. But we should hold, in some form of tension, the function of the historical creeds in opposing distortions, with their settings in cultures and thought patterns totally different to ours."

One of the concerns many people would have regarding Dean Furlong's thoughts would relate to his attitude towards the Eucharist. He "finds himself detaching the bread and the wine in his mind, from a link with Jesus. The bread becomes a symbol for dependence on God... and a symbol of our interdependent corporate life; the wine becomes a symbol of suffering and of joy. Anyone who commits himself/herself to a moral vision of life will come inevitably to suffer for what they believe in. The wine symbolises the costliness of such a commitment... it also symbolises the joy we will have one day of celebrating the fulfilment of the created order."

It is possible to regard these ideas as being extensions of the traditional view of the Eucharist. There are similarities – viz. the bread a symbol "of interdependent corporate life" and "We being many are one body for we all share in the one bread"; the concept of the wine as a symbol "of suffering and joy" (presumably of the world as well as individuals) and the conventional view of the wine representing the suffering of Christ and the Resurrection.

Whether the Dean would agree or not his view of the Eucharist would seem to have developed from the usual interpretation of its significance. His interpretation provides a meaning for it, which those lacking in faith or who are sceptical about the reality of the Incarnation and the Resurrection can accept. Such acceptance should only lead to an increased awareness of the problems which beset the world and it might be hoped a furtherance of Christian values which would be generally welcomed.

Dean Furlong would 'jettison' the cross as a symbol – "a radical implication of my position". He would replace it with the ring and he defines its symbolism. "In human relationships it is used as a sign of commitment, of trust and love. It could also have another meaning, which would speak of the relationship between human beings and the divine mystery of life. The ring could symbolise that we are invited to put our trust in this mysterious hidden God."

Tradition suggests that the symbol used by early Christians was a fish. This obviously changed but just when the Cross became the universal symbol is

debatable. It is worth remembering the problems that the use of the Cross as a symbol caused in the Church of Ireland as recently as the last century. The controversy in St Bartholomew's Church comes to mind, as does the debate in the 1960s before the placing of a Cross on the altar was accepted. Even then this was allowed only with the express consent of the Vestry of the Parish concerned. The practice of making the sign of the Cross is still an illegal practice. Is it not odd that making the sign of one's faith is forbidden? It is difficult, however, to envisage a situation in which the Cross would be replaced. Dean Furlong might find it possible to compromise by using the ring in conjunction with the Cross symbolising both the conventional tradition and the innovation suggested by him.

At the present time the controversy caused by Dean Furlong's expression of his ideas both on paper and verbally to his parishioners has died down. This is probably a temporary lull and when the Dean has completed the period of reflection he was asked to observe by Bishop Clarke one cannot but think that further publicity and controversy will follow.

What has he done? He would appear to have thought deeply about his faith consistently over a period of some thirty years. He has formulated and expressed views which at best are controversial and to some disturbing. To others these ideas verge on the heretical and have caused many to sit less comfortably in the pews where they have listened happily to sermons which for a great part may be platitudinous or boring. At the same time he has stimulated discussion although much of this has been muted. Because the Church of Ireland is one of the more conservative members of the Anglican Communion the initial official reaction has been to ask the Dean to go away quietly for a time, presumably to let the dust settle. The official reaction as typified by that of the Archbishop of Dublin has been to dismiss the Dean's position as unacceptable but no attempt appears to have been made to consider his views with any attempt at understanding them.

This attitude seems to confirm the thoughts expressed in Don Cupitt's Guardian article quoted earlier. It also answers the rhetorical question asked by John Robinson in *The New Reformation* – "Is the Church [of England] not an archaic and well-protected institution for the preservation of something that is irrelevant and incredible?"

So what is to be done or what will happen now? The simplistic answer would be that Dean Furlong should resign and go away or else be asked to do so. But perhaps this is to dodge the issue in the hope that it will go away.

John Robinson wrote in *The New Reformation* – "There are many who would sympathise with the German theological student quoted by Dr A. Vidler in *20th Century Defenders of the Faith* 'we must try to be at one and the same time for the Church and against the Church. They alone can serve her faithfully whose consciences are continually exercised as to whether for Christ's sake, to leave her.' As one who knows in his bones that he could not put himself outside I want to plead for those who feel they must."

Monica Furlong in *C of E: The State It's In* is quoted by Dean Furlong. She quotes Dr George Carey as having said, "I'd like to argue you know that the broad church that we are now is probably a foretaste of what is to come. If we want to think about the coming great church, then it is going to be one in which we have to accept huge differences within the family, and we are not going to final answers this side of eternity. Living with differences I think is actually the genius of Anglicanism."

Finally, Dr Clarke (op. cit.): “The Church must therefore always be in the process of risking its survival, and thus living outside the walls of the ghetto. Any community functions best as a real community when it works for a focus beyond itself and its own continuance. The Christian community is at its most effective when it is not feverishly plotting its own survival, but is functioning unselfconsciously for an end beyond itself and its survival. That is by any calculation, what the overused word mission actually means.”

Andrew Furlong is within the Church and struggling to stay there. He has undoubtedly ruffled some feathers, but he has also caused some people to reflect and reassess their own beliefs. He has not insisted that others should believe as he does. At the same time the Church of Ireland might be stimulated were it as a community to consider his writings and their relevance to the Church and the wider community to which it belongs. Instead of pushing him away from the ghetto perhaps the Church should encourage him to remain within and join in the process of looking beyond the walls.

