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Slight softening of the 39 Articles

The Church of Ireland's General Synod, meeting this month, has passed a resolution to 'soften' the language of the historic document known as the 'Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion'. The Articles, written in the confrontational days of the Reformation, contain many negative statements about Roman Catholicism. Anglican churches in many other countries have distanced themselves from them, but in Ireland they were reprinted in the new Book of Common Prayer, and clergy are still required to 'assent' to them.

Synod decided that future editions of the Prayer Book would include an explanatory note before the Articles. This will not remove the requirement of clergy to assent to the Articles. The Rt Revd Michael Burrows, Bishop of Cashel and Ossory, told this newsletter that such a note might, however, be thought to place them in a 'helpful and historical context.'

Call for same-sex marriage

It should be possible for persons in same-sex relationships to marry in a way that is supported by civil society and by the Church, Professor Margaret Farley said at a recent conference in Trinity College Dublin.

'For the institution and sacrament of marriage, [the gender] need not matter,' she said. Neither the Bible, nor Church tradition, offered incontrovertible grounds for prohibiting it.

Margaret Farley is a Professor of Christian Ethics at Yale Divinity School, and a nun, of the Sisters of Mercy order. The conference was organised by the Irish School of Ecumenics.

Anglican Bishop Michael Mayes, speaking at the same conference said he had no problem with the Church

affirming and blessing such relationships, but couldn't use the word 'marriage' since he understands procreation to be an essential ingredient of marriage.

But after the Irish Bishops' Conference last week a statement was put out in which they renewed their opposition to gay marriage, insisting that sexual differentiation is intrinsic to the sacrament of marriage.

*Information from The C. of. Gazette, 06.06.08
and The Irish Times, 17.06.08*

Taizé happenings

About 900 people, mostly aged 15-35, gathered in Dublin's Pro-Cathedral one evening in April for a service in the style of Taizé, the ecumenical community in France. Representatives of various Christian denominations were present, including Archbishop Diarmuid Martin. The evening prayer and vigil lasted for over 90 minutes. It was hosted by the prior of the Taizé community, Br Alois, who was making his first visit to Ireland.

Earlier this year a group of Catholic and Church of Ireland students from Trinity College Dublin spent a week together at Taizé. They took part in all the usual activities, including Bible study, workshops and housekeeping, and the morning, noon and evening prayer sessions for which Taizé has become so well known and loved.

The students were led by the Church of Ireland chaplain, the Revd Darren McCallig, and one of the RC chaplains, Fr Paddy Gleeson.

A regular prayer service with Taizé songs is held in the Gallery Chapel at TCD on Monday evenings in term time from 6.00 – 6.30pm.

Religion of Post Christian Ireland

Report of a talk given by Don Cupitt, Life Fellow Emmanuel College, Cambridge, in Belfast, June 10th 2008.

The talk was sponsored by the Sea of Faith movement, and also Ikon and the Open Christianity Network. It was repeated two days later at Trinity College, Dublin, where it was sponsored by Sea of Faith, the ISE, and OCN.

Don Cupitt spoke to an audience which packed the Black Box venue in the Cathedral Quarter of Belfast. He gave a sweeping outline of the critical developments in the religious and sociological history of the search by human beings for explanation and meaning in their lives. He then looked at the current situation of Christianity and secularism as he saw it with reference to the changing role and place of the Christian Church.

Cupitt suggested that there had been an old order where, as in Ireland and Poland, people were bound together by a powerful folk-Church and community loyalty. This order was based on metaphysical thought and gave way to a philosophy deriving from the human life-world. The traditional knowledge based on the sacred letters of theology and the Greek and Roman Classics is today replaced by critical thinking where human knowledge and belief must be tested and applied. He spoke of the Death of

God and the return of the great questions that modern people are asking since they were no longer looking for salvation from their sins.

What is happening to us and how we are to live in the new situation where the whole culture depends on science and technology and human knowledge generally rather than on Christian doctrine?

The human life-world is the only world bound by time contingency and death but which is the world of our language, an ever changing continuum like the sea with nothing anchored or objective. It is a package which has to be accepted as it is a world to which we will all contribute by inheriting one construction of everything and bequeathing another.

Cupitt went on to maintain the Christian roots of the secular world in that critical thinking, involving self questioning, the pursuit of personal integrity, and a striving for betterment began in Christian spirituality and now pervades the whole culture of law, science and politics.

He described the way the church used to perform the works of mercy which are now delivered far better by the state whose citizens remain culturally Christian. He said that God was a secular humanist content to come into the world and to die. He saw Jesus as an anti traditionalist who began the new ethics of human relationships and started an ethical revolution.

The religion of ordinary life was described by Cupitt as Solar living. He contended that in traditional theology the Church is only a stop gap. Eventually it must yield place to something greater, the so called "Kingdom of God on Earth" In practice the church became a religion of eternal salvation and a great machine for deferring the kingdom which becomes mistaken for Christianity itself. Today we are forced to go over to the Kingdom order which accepts and confirms our life as it is, against a background of a general loyalty to Christian culture which is still alive and developing.

Religion is a commitment to life. Solar living is the conquest of death, the love of life to our last breath. As the sun expends its life gloriously we should commit to life and hold back nothing for a future life. The roots of Solar living are in the Sermon on the Mount.

This talk gave rise to a very animated debate that has continued since in various forms Don Cupitt spoke again in Dublin on June 12th.

Anne Odling-Smee

The Portadown Gender Controversy

'Women are now ordained in the Irish Presbyterian Church with little if any objection,' it said recently in the 'Presbyterian Notes' in the Irish Times. Not everyone agrees, it seems. Here is one minister's view.

Since Christmas the media in Northern Ireland has been pre-occupied by a controversy concerning two Presbyterian Churches in Portadown. The matter has not been widely reported in the Republic, but needs to be taken seriously so that important lessons can be learned.

First Portadown and Armagh Road Presbyterian churches enjoyed a sixty-year tradition that they should hold only one service on Christmas Day. The service alternated between the churches with the visiting minister being the preacher. As Christmas 2007 approached, it became apparent that the new minister of Armagh Road would not be welcome as preacher in First Portadown. The reason was that she was a woman. Her Kirk Session decided to hold their own service separate from their neighbours for the first time in over half a century. One of the elders, a journalist, reported the controversy in the press and a general debate ensued, focusing on the rightness or wrongness of the ordination of women, the authority of the Bible and the authority of the church.

The Moderator of the General Assembly visited both ministers in a noble attempt to mend broken fences. However, when interviewed on the radio about his role as mediator, he was reluctant to state his personal view on the issue of womens' ordination. Only when put under pressure by the interviewer did he confess that he is opposed to women being ordained.

The minister of Armagh Road Church, Rev. Christina Bradley, said on the radio that she was deeply hurt by the whole business. Rev. Stafford Carson, minister of First Portadown, declined to be interviewed but justified his stand on the basis of the famous "headship" passage in First Timothy chapter 2, verse 12: "I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent." The controversy has rumbled on in the letters pages of the Northern Ireland newspapers.

Those of us who support women's ministry cannot help but be concerned by the controversy. It brings to public notice a fact that we have always known, namely that a significant number of people within our Presbyterian denomination feel that the ordination of women is "unscriptural" and therefore contrary to the will of God.

But are they right to take such a position? What does the Bible actually say? There are seven letters which no one disputes as coming from the pen of Saint Paul. In these letters Paul treats women as his equals in the leadership of the church. In Galatians 3.28 Paul asserts that in Christ there is neither male nor female. He acclaims Pricilla as a missionary with equal status to himself (Romans 16.3). He acknowledges that Junia is an apostle, no less, and that she was called to be an apostle before he was (Romans 16.7). He recognises the right of Chloe to lead a house church (First Corinthians 1.11).

As for the "headship" passage, Paul's authorship of the letters to Timothy and Titus has long been disputed, because their vocabulary and theology seem to place them in the years after the death of Paul. It would seem that a later generation, while trying to carry on Paul's tradition, was uneasy about his stance on equality and decided to dispense with the leadership of women.

As we read the Bible today, we need not be surprised to find different parts of scripture saying different things. As we seek to follow Christ, we will find guidance not in quoting isolated verses, but in entering into a dialogue with the writers of the various books and in company with them trying to seek the will of Christ for our day.

The Presbyterian Church in Ireland, like many other denominations, is convinced that the spirit of scripture demands equality between men and women within the church of Jesus Christ. We have admitted women to the eldership since 1926 and to the ministry since 1973. In this action our denomination has given priority to the witness of the seven undisputed letters of Paul.

The Portadown controversy reminded me of what happened to New Testament scholar John Dominic Crossan when he visited the ruins of ancient Corinth a few years ago. In his 2004 book "In Search of Paul" Crossan recalls wandering through the ruins and stumbling on a little group of pilgrims celebrating Holy Communion and using the familiar words of our Lord quoted in Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians: "This is my body.., this cup is the new covenant in my blood...., do this in remembrance of me...., etc." Witnessing the little service Crossan felt especially close to Paul, not least because the celebrant was an Episcopal priest, a Cathedral canon, and a woman.

*Denis Campbell
Minister*

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Book review

Gordon Lynch, *THE NEW SPIRITUALITY: An Introduction to Progressive Belief in the Twenty-first Century*. (ISBN 978 1 84511 414 5)
Published by I. B. Tauris

Gordon Lynch is Professor in the Sociology of Religion at Birkbeck, University of London. He identifies with 'Progressive Christianity' and openly acknowledges his potential bias in concluding with a favourable assessment of the movement. His book is not theological. He addresses the roots, ideologies, structures and activities of organisations associated with Progressive Christianity.

He understands the progressive milieu as a diffuse collection of individuals, organisations and networks across and beyond a range of religious traditions that are defined by a liberal or radical approach to religious belief and /or a green or left-of-centre set of political attitudes and commitments. Progressive spirituality, he suggests, is a particular form of religious ideology that has been refined over the past thirty or so years.

Professor Lynch argues that the roots of progressive religion have emerged out of four key concerns:

- A desire for an approach to religion and spirituality that is appropriate for modern, liberal societies.
- The rejection of patriarchal forms of religion and the search for forms of religion that is authentic and liberating for women.
- The move to re-sacralize science, particularly quantum physics and contemporary theories of cosmology.
- The search for nature based spirituality that will motivate us to try to avert the impending ecological catastrophe.

Lynch understands progressive spirituality as being grounded in belief in the immanent and ineffable divine which is both the intelligence that guides the unfolding cosmos as well as being bound up in the material form and energy of the cosmos. He takes a panentheistic view of the divine and endorses feminine metaphors for describing the divine.

According to Lynch progressive organisations and networks have four key areas of interest:

- To provide an environment and resources for the spiritual development of individual members.
- To act as advocates for the progressive cause in larger religious institutions and traditions.
- To provide a progressive religious presence in the wider public domain.
- To build up stronger communications and collaboration within the progressive milieu.

Lynch concludes that progressive spirituality will remain an integral and possibly growing part of the religious landscape in the west but will not form a religion in its own right.

This book is interesting in so far as it attempts to bring some coherence to what is a number of diffuse, loosely coupled institutional developments. In this Lynch succeeds. The book will be of considerable help to those involved in the new progressive networks and to those seeking to understand them.

What is not so clear is the impact and potential of electronic communication on the diffusion of the religious ideas that Lynch examines. Also, these new institutions are not primarily known as movements but as networks and whilst a new religion may not form in its own right it looks as though we may already be in the midst of significant changes in patterns of religious association. This is both a challenge to traditional local church structures and to the new networks themselves. It is worth recalling that in terms of ideology and theology John Wesley claimed to be no other than orthodox and Anglican, yet even for this self confessed conservative the sociological dynamics of early industrialisation were ultimately to be a significant influence on the establishment of Methodism.

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