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UNITED REFORMED CHURCH HISTORY SOCIETY

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founded in 1899, the Presbyterian Historical Society of
England, founded in 1913, and the Churches of Christ
Historical Society, founded in 1979)

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EDITORIAL

Arthur Leitch Macarthur (9 December 1913-1 September 2008) was loved, respected, and admired in equal measure across the Churches. His life was generously noticed across the broadsheets. *The Times* and the *Telegraph* printed the same photograph of him; the *Guardian* and the *Independent* copied each other with a different photograph. The *Guardian* described him as “cleric”; the *Independent*, more satisfactorily, as “minister of the church”. For all four newspapers it was his role in the formation of the United Reformed Church (the *Guardian* and the *Independent* had identical wording: “Minister who helped create the United Reformed Church”) that commanded primary attention, but all four paid due attention to his pastoral gifts: he was ordained to pastoral ministry at Alnwick in 1937, he returned to such ministry at Marlow in 1980; his intervening pastorates in New Barnet and North Shields were notable and all who encountered him knew that in fact he never ceased to be a pastor. They also paid due attention to his administrative skills (he was General Secretary to the Presbyterian Church of England 1960-72, and the United Reformed Church 1972-80) and to his ecumenical standing: he was a statesman in the hey-day of the British Council of Churches. They also referred to his political skills, most dramatically shown – if least widely known when, as Chairman of the BCC’s Irish Advisory Group, he met the IRA Army Council at Feakle, Co. Clare, in 1974. As the *Independent’s* obituary noted, the resulting “draft statement submitted to the Government was essentially similar to the Downing Street Declaration 20 years later”.

Arthur Macarthur was thus a man who made history as well as a man with the historian’s instincts. He was a past-President of our Society. He was most recently an invaluable consultant for *Who They Were* (reviewed in this issue). Indeed, he contributed six biographies to it and his own was contributed by Martin Cressey. He also figures in the pages of this issue. Two of our reviewers, Keith Forecast and David Thompson, wrote the appreciations in the *Guardian* and the *Independent* respectively, and his presence inevitably informs the third of Martin Camroux’s four contributions to the *Journal*.

So to the present issue. Martin Camroux continues to address the URC’s “failure”; David Peel continues his debate with Alan Sell. While that particular debate ends here, readers will note that Alan Sell’s review of David Cornick’s *Letting God be God* draws attention to matters raised by both Dr. Peel and Mr. Camroux. They may also feel that the nature and variety of books reviewed demonstrate the lively scope for continuing, relevant, and constructive debate, the sort that issues in movement and is conducive to mission.

We are indebted to A. J. Coates for translating the account of how Congregationalists and the Evangelical Church of the Palatinate first shared pulpit and table fellowship (was that the fruit of theological rigour, theological laxity, or the theological insight born of relaxation?) originally printed in *Blätter für Pfälzische Kirchengeschichte und religiöse Volkskunde*. Mr Coates has served

as a United Reformed minister in Cambridge, Bristol, and Essex, as well as with the WCC in Geneva and the URC in Tavistock Place. We welcome as reviewers Andrew Bradstock, Director of the Christian Socialist Movement and Co-Director of the Centre for Faith and Society at the von Hügel Institute, St. Edmund's College, Cambridge; Stephen Gregory, Librarian at Union Theological College, Belfast; David Sullivan, Tutor in the School of Lifelong Learning at Bangor University; and we owe a particular debt of gratitude to Wendy Baskett, who has compiled the Index for Volume 7.

Notes: Dr Geoffrey Nuttall: with the death of Geoffrey Nuttall in July 2007 the need to preserve his archive is clear. His many friends are well aware of the extent and breadth of his voluminous correspondence and also how much his correspondence will reveal of his interests and his character. It is hoped to compile a central depository of his letters at Dr. Williams's Library. Those who wish to donate/deposit any letters from him may do so through Dr Alan Argent at: Dr Williams's Library, 14 Gordon Square, London WC1H 0AR.

Help Wanted to trace Historic Annual Reports: Andrew Reed (1787-1862): this noted Congregational Church minister and philanthropist founded The Asylum for Fatherless Children (later renamed Reedham Orphanage). Your help is requested in tracing copies of the annual reports of the institution. These are known to have been issued in the same format each year between at least 1868 and 1920 (booklet of 64pp, 184mm x 122mm, with distinctive yellow covers bearing the logo of clasped hands within the motto "Charity makes all one"). Along with other information each report included a list of the children currently on the strength. If you have any information please contact: Derrick Smith, Hon. Historian for the Reedham Old Scholars' Association. Telephone: 01202 732505, or e-mail: derricksmith29@hotmail.com

Wilson Family: Malcolm J. Harrison's *Unravelling the threads: A Guide to the Wilsons of Stenson Derbyshire, 1664-1880* (illustrated and with 150 pages of text and family trees) is obtainable from the author, 78 Dulwich Road, Holland on Sea, Essex CO15 5LZ, Tel. 01255 813616. Cheques payable to Malcolm J. Harrison for £17 incl. p&p. within UK.

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WHAT DOES THE PICTURE TELL US? A FURTHER NOTE

We may now throw a little more light on the history of the John à Lasco picture at Westminster College, the subject of an article in an earlier edition of this Journal.¹ Vernon H. Nelson, an expert on Moravian art and archives, has published details of Lindsey House and its pictures.² In an additional note at the end of the article the editor of the *Moravian History Magazine*, Edna Cooper, has written about the dispersal of the pictures, from which what follows is derived.³ After the sale of Lindsey House in 1774 the pictures, or some selection of them, were taken to the Moravian meeting in Fetter Lane. Here they were taken from their frames and cut to fit the panelling, where they gathered dust and tobacco smoke. After that they were relegated to a loft, where the canvases were rolled up. They were rescued by the Moravian John Birtill (1761-1809), who began the work of restoration, which the Brethren could not afford, but he died before it was completed. This information came from Sarah Martyn (1789-1879), Birtill's daughter. Her mother paid for the work to be completed, although two pictures were lost or stolen during the process. When Mrs Birtill died in 1818 Sarah Martyn's house in Bristol was too small to accommodate all the pictures and some were hung by her aunt in Cotham. Sarah Martyn, in her 1871 recollections, claimed that a picture of Edward VI was sold to a gentleman who "was making a collection of the Kings of England". This suggests, though we have no final proof, that George Weare Braikenridge purchased what we now call the John à Lasco picture direct from Sarah Martyn rather than through a London dealer, as was proposed in the first article. This explanation neatly accounts for the picture's moving from Lindsey House to Bristol by invoking the activities of the Birtill family. It may account for the cutting down of the picture, which could have suffered damage during its period of neglect in the late eighteenth century. It also neatly delivers the picture to Braikenridge's house by the 1820s, when we know it hung there.

STEPHEN ORCHARD

1 "What does the picture tell us?", *JURCHS* Vol 7, No 6, 2005, 345-352.

2 *Moravian History Magazine* No. 30, which is wholly devoted to Lindsey House.

3 *Ibid*, 31-32.

DARING TO BE ECUMENICAL

The Fiftieth Anniversary of Pulpit and Table Fellowship between the Evangelical Church of the Palatinate and the International Congregational Council.

[Introductory note by the translator: The Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) is a federation of the German regional churches (Landeskirchen). The Evangelical Church of the Palatinate, a united church of Lutherans and Reformed, is one of its member churches. Between the EKD and the regional churches, there are intermediate groupings: the Evangelical Church of the Union (EKU), now the Union of Evangelical Churches (UEK), which is a grouping of united churches; and the United Evangelical Lutheran Church of Germany (VELKD), which is a grouping of Lutheran Churches. The title Oberkirchenrat (OKR) is given to executive officers in the central administration of German regional churches.]

On Monday 14 November 2005 a major conference of the Union of Evangelical Churches (UEK) and the United Church of Christ, USA (UCC/USA) at the Johannesstift in Spandau, Berlin, was drawing to a close. Some eighty participants had gathered on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of church fellowship between the Evangelical Church of the Union (EKU, now the UEK) and the UCC to discuss the theme "Church fellowship confronting the challenge of peace and justice".

In the hostel entrance hall there was a chance meeting of the Palatinate minister, Max Krumbach, from Zweibrücken, and the two authors of this article, Elga Zachau, at that time a curate in the Evangelical Church of Westphalia, and Reinhard Groscurth, who had been ecumenical officer of the EKU in (West) Berlin from 1969 to 1994. Max Krumbach recalled how the Palatinate Church had taken the initiative much earlier than the EKU by making an ecumenical declaration of church fellowship with the Congregationalists in the 1950s. "Yes, I remember it too," responded Reinhard Groscurth, "That initiative by the Palatinate Church caused a lot of trouble in the EKD at the time." Elga Zachau agreed: in the course of her research into the relationship between the EKU and the UCC she had come across documents from that discussion which confirmed that observation. On the spot the three of them undertook to remind the members of the Palatinate Church of the courageous decision that led to greater fellowship between the churches.

The two authors of this article had the following sources at their disposal. The decision of the Palatinate Synod to enter into pulpit and table fellowship with the International Congregational Council (ICC) was published in the *Amtsblatt* (Official Bulletin) of the Palatinate Church on 24 August 1956. The preceding exchange of correspondence between the Palatinate Church President, Hans Stempel, and the President of the EKD Council, Bishop Otto Dibelius, is to be found in the Evangelical Central Archives in Berlin.

Comprehensive documentation on the issue was published in 1956 by Joachim Beckmann, editor of the church year book, "because it deals with an exceptional and momentous matter: intercommunion between churches of different confessions." In addition to the text of the joint declaration by the Palatinate Church and the ICC, it also includes almost the full text of Stempel's 1956 submission to the Palatinate Synod defending the negotiation process between the two partners with the key sentence, "We place intercommunion above our confessional differences." Other sources have been UCC archives in the USA.

1. The situation within the EKD in 1955-56

A glance at the 1955 church yearbook reveals the tensions within the recently formed EKD. Joachim Beckmann reports on the "controversy over the EKD Foreign Affairs Office" (Kirchliche Aussenamt, or KA). It was "one of the most unedifying and problematic areas of conflict within the church" involving "public debate that was painful, acrimonious and passionate." In the General Synod of the VELKD, its press officer, OKR Friedrich Hübner, savagely attacked the KA, particularly because insufficient attention was being given to the Lutheran side in the EKD congregations abroad. That criticism was indeed softened in the General Synod by the Regional Bishop of Hanover, Hans Lilje, and OKR Volkmar Hertrich, from Hamburg, but the impression remained that the KA was failing in its task.

Only two synods within the EKD had the courage to resist these attacks. First, the EKU Synod in May 1955 unanimously voted for a strengthening of the KA. Secondly, in June 1955, the Palatinate Synod, having heard of "this disconcerting attack" on the KA, resolved: "The Palatinate Synod has taken careful note of the EKU Synod's decision in this regard. It regards as essential the efforts of the EKD KA to resist confessionalization of our congregations abroad."

The intensity of the debate is not only to be explained by the issue of "confessionalization". Criticism was also being directed personally at the head of the KA, the President of the Church in Hesse and Nassau, Martin Niemöller. He had been heavily criticised, and not only in Lutheran circles, but also in parts of West German public opinion, because of his insistence on the importance of the Stuttgart Declaration of Guilt, his visits to countries in the so-called Eastern Bloc (beginning with Moscow in early 1952) and his constant criticism of the arms race and the rearmament of the Federal Republic of Germany.

2. The Palatinate Church's approach to ecumenism

This situation of conflict within the EKD has to be taken into consideration in our assessment of the steps taken by the Palatinate Church towards pulpit and

table fellowship with the Congregationalists. The initiative for it certainly came from the English side. Reinhard Groscurth remembers a remark by the Palatinate OKR Fritz Roos. He had told him that these relationships had come into being because Congregational Churches in England after the Second World War had shown great concern for German prisoners of war, among whom there had been several ministers from the Palatinate. These contacts resulted in the sending of practical aid to Palatinate parishes. There ensued exchanges of theologians and youth groups. On both sides of the English Channel there were people who recognised that here was an opportunity for closer partnership and drew the necessary conclusions.

Very soon after the end of the Second World War, the Palatinate Church President, Hans Stempel, had had a concern together with Bishop Julius Bender of Baden to form a closer link with French Protestants. Together with the French military chaplain, Bishop Marcel Sturm, Stempel was one of the instigators of the German-French Fraternity, which was founded in Speyer at a meeting 17-19 March 1950, after preliminary discussions on 2 December 1949 in Bad Gleisweiler and negotiations with the French High Commissioner, André François-Poncet in Königswinter. Stempel had early recognised that reconciliation between the churches could be a contribution towards good relations between nations. Through his experience at the annual meetings with French Lutherans and Reformed, Stempel had discovered that none of those participating had any difficulty with joint communion services.

3. The negotiations between London and Speyer

The negotiations between the London-based International Congregational Council and the Palatinate Church in the years 1955-58 can best be presented in diary form, which also includes the involvement of the EKD . . .

1955

26 July. The Moderator of the ICC, Sidney Berry, and its Secretary, Maurice Watts, who was also at the same time Secretary of the Congregational Union of England and Wales, visit the Palatinate and explain that both bodies offer pulpit and table fellowship to the Christians of the Palatinate.

8 September. The governing body of the Palatinate Church is informed of the offer and declares the fellowship to be mutual.

30 September. The Palatinate Church President, Hans Stempel, informs the EKD Council President, Otto Dibelius, of these developments and requests him "to be so kind as to inform" the EKD Council of them. At the same time Stempel informs the KA of the EKD and the Ecumenical Central Office in Frankfurt. The latter's response takes the form of a very positive letter from its leader, Wilhelm Menn.

4 October. Otto Dibelius replies: "What we have here is a development with ecclesiological implications. For myself, I have no objection to it." He does, however, ask, "Is the establishment of pulpit and table fellowship really something that has to be formally declared in such a way?" He adds that, on the EKD side, there is certainly, though, no objection constitutionally.

25 October. Stempel writes again to the EKD Council President to remove possible misunderstandings. After making six very clear points, he concludes with the sentence, "We feel confident in assuming that any hasty judgments or any hasty consequences are far from the mind of the Council."

26 October. The reply from Berlin comes by return of post. Dibelius writes to Stempel that he would be "the last to cause you any difficulties." He declares himself "not to be confessionally rigid in any way", but he is "just slightly worried that developments, which I can only foresee in broad terms, might be triggered off by the Palatinate's action."

3 November. The President informs a meeting of the EKD Council in Freiburg; the Council expresses the wish that the Church Conference should discuss the matter.

3 December. In response to a request, Stempel sends the relevant documentation to the EKD Church Chancellery in Berlin.

15 December. The Church Conference meets in Berlin with the relationship of the Palatinate Church with the ICC on the agenda. Stempel is unable to attend the session, having to turn back halfway because of black ice on the road.

1956

1 March. Representatives of the Palatinate and the ICC, meeting in London, draw up a Declaration of Pulpit and Table Fellowship, to be submitted to their respective governing bodies for decision.

16 March. The relationship between the Palatinate Church and the International Congregational Council appears again on the agenda of the Church Conference. Hans Brunotte, the President of the EKD Church Chancellery emphasises that it should "be only a general debate on to what extent relations of EKD member churches with one another will be affected by the establishment of pulpit and table fellowship with churches that do not hold to the confessions recognised in the EKD." The EKD Council, he adds, is of the opinion that member churches should "seek the opinion of the EKD Council before concluding such agreements." The consideration of that agenda item in the Church Conference was overlaid by other issues, with the result that, with reference to Stempel's explanation, the minutes merely state that "a vote by the Council was not sought by the Palatinate Church, because it understood that the conduct of ecumenical relations was a matter for member churches themselves. No decision on the matter was thus made."

18 April. The Palatinate Synod agrees to the Declaration drawn up in London

on 1 March 1956. Full mutual pulpit and table fellowship between the Palatinate Church and the International Congregational Council is thereby declared. The Synod further resolves that "This agreement be publicly demonstrated in both London and Speyer in solemn acts of worship including joint celebration of the Lord's Supper."

1957

28 April. One year after the decision by the Synod, the planned joint service of communion takes place in Speyer. Howard Schomer, of the Congregational Christian Churches, USA, gives a word of greeting on behalf of the International Congregational Council. As the Europe Secretary of the United Church of Christ, which came into being at the end of June 1957 by the union of the Congregational Christian Churches and the Evangelical and Reformed Church, he was later to become the most important representative of his church *vis-à-vis* the EKD in the 1970s.

1958

15-21 May. A Palatinate delegation visits the International Congregational Council in London. OKR Walter Ebrecht, later to become Church President of the Palatinate Church 1969-75, preaches at the joint celebration of the Lord's Supper. The proceedings to establish pulpit and table fellowship thus reach their conclusion.

4. Reactions within Germany

With hindsight it is not surprising that many reactions in the EKD were very critical of the step taken by the Palatinate Church. There were two contributory factors. First, after the isolation of the churches in Germany in the years 1933-45, knowledge of worldwide ecumenical developments was very limited. It seems that hardly anyone knew that the famous Pilgrim Fathers of New England were originally English Congregationalists. Also, there was hardly any knowledge of the existence of the International Congregational Council (founded 1891), nor of the oldest Christian world communion, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (founded 1875). By contrast the Lutheran World Federation had been founded as recently as 1947. Moreover, within the EKD hardly anyone was aware of the series of united churches that had come into being with Congregationalist participation in the first half of the twentieth century (Canada 1925, South India 1947, the Philippines 1948).

Then, secondly, particularly on the side of the Lutherans (that is, before the signing of the Leuenberg Agreement in 1973), the Palatinate understanding of an open invitation to communion was unacceptable. According to the understanding of the Lutherans, the painfully begun debate on communion within the EKD had to be taken further before intercommunion with ecumenical

partners of a different confessional tradition could be entered into. Joachim Beckmann summarizes the issue in these words: "It was inevitable that certain circles in the VELKD would attack the decision and describe it as a dangerous step that would further increase tensions that would threaten the fellowship within the EKD... How would it be possible to achieve pulpit and table fellowship within the EKD, if a united church established full church fellowship with a church group whose doctrinal status was in doubt?" We can be certain that Beckmann, who was a convinced member of a united church, thought otherwise.

Dibelius had already, in his abovementioned initial reaction to Stempel of 4 October 1955, suspected that "through such an emphasis on the congregationalist character of your church, impetus will be given to the Lutheran demand to have their own congregations in the Palatinate." The Palatinate Church President expressed his surprise "that the establishment of this table fellowship could be used against us by the Lutheran churches, or by certain Lutheran circles, as a tactic in church politics." Lutheran misunderstandings became particularly evident in an article in the *Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirchenzeitung* of 15 December 1956, which asked seven critical questions: "How can we be assured that tomorrow yet another EKD member church will not draw us into one church with churches that are quite different from ourselves?" The article concludes: "It is not helpful to give up careful detailed theological work and make ecumenical decisions based on sentiment."

In addition to the Ecumenical Central Office's positive reaction already mentioned, the step taken by the Palatinate Church also met with a positive response from the EKU. Gerhard Brennecke, the Director of the Berlin Missionary Society, by decision of the EKU Council, invited eleven theologians on 4 March 1956 to form an ecumenical theological study group. "The starting point for setting up this study group has been the agreements on table fellowship entered into between the United Protestant Church of the Palatinate and the International Congregational Council." He refers to the fact that, at the Second Assembly of the World Council of Churches at Evanston in 1954, delegates from the EKU had conversations with representatives of the Church of South India. In his opinion it was urgent for the EKU to devote attention to church unions. As a united church, it "was called... actively to cooperate on ecumenical issues," not in order to set up a world body of united churches, but further to develop the ecumenical movement. The background to Brennecke's plea is the longstanding relationship of the EKU with the Evangelical and Reformed Church in the USA, a united church formed in 1934, which, because of its roots in Prussia, was also a daughter church of the EKU.

The International Congregational Council informed the Palatinate Church in September 1957 that in June of that year the Evangelical and Reformed Church and the Congregational Christian Churches had united to form the United Church of Christ. After the two Joint Presidents of the UCC, Fred Hoskins and James Wagner, had had discussions in New York in August 1957 with Heinrich

Held, the Präses of the Rhineland Church, and Joachim Beckmann, a Rhineland church leader, on establishing "closer fraternal relations" between the EKV and the UCC, the International Congregational Council enquired of the Palatinate Church whether it had table fellowship with the EKV. Documents available in the archives give no indication as to whether this enquiry of the ICC to the Palatinate was ever followed up. In 1959 the EKV ecumenical theological study group became the EKV Ecumenical Committee.

In April 1967, under the auspices of the WCC Faith and Order Commission, there was in Bossey a meeting for the first time of representatives of united churches and of churches engaged in union negotiations, in order to discuss their contribution to the unity of the Church and their relationships to one another. This work has been constantly supported by the EKV and, to date, has led to six further International Consultations of United and Uniting Churches. It should not be forgotten that the Palatinate Church, on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the Palatinate union, made a special collection in 1968 resulting in a not inconsiderable contribution to the holding of the Second Conference of United and Uniting Churches in April 1970 in Limuru, Kenya.

At the end of the First World War individual Christians from former enemy nations made efforts to re-establish dialogue between the churches. In so doing they had to contend with considerable difficulties: the issue of German war guilt made ecumenical understanding difficult if not impossible for more than a decade. At the end of the Second World War the Stuttgart Declaration of Guilt was the point of departure for a truly new beginning. It was the basis that made it possible to venture to take new steps at all levels to restore fellowship between churches and community between nations. Today, half a century later, it is still possible to admire the courage of one single EKD member church that was the first to dare to enter into binding agreements with churches beyond its national frontiers and was not deterred by objections. The appeal made by Hans Stempel, as President of the Palatinate Church, to the Synod of his church in April 1956 remains valid: "There is much talk about understanding between nations and peace, and unfortunately much of it idle talk. The establishment of pulpit and table fellowship indicates that members of very different nations can meet one another in the one authentic and real peace that is God's gift to us."¹

REINHARD GROSCURTH and ELGA ZACHAU

1 Translated, with permission from the original German by A. J. Coates. The original, which contains detailed foot notes giving sources is in *Blätter für Pfälzische Kirchengeschichte und religiöse Volkskunde*, Jahr 74, 2007, 157-168.

WHY DID THE UNITED REFORMED CHURCH FAIL? (III) THE SEARCH FOR IDENTITY

The failure of the United Reformed Church's hope that its creation would break the ecumenical log-jam, and the reality that it would instead continue as a separate church into the foreseeable future, left it with an acute dilemma. What exactly was this new church for? What did it believe? Why should anyone join it? Answers were to prove difficult to find. Arthur Macarthur's warning that, without a wider union, "any union between the Congregational Church and ourselves [the Presbyterian Church of England] would result in a united church confused about its purpose and unable to find a role"¹ is a prophecy which has come to haunt the United Reformed Church.

The Presbyterian and Congregational Churches represented two distinct theological traditions. Congregationalism gave priority to the local congregation which it believed was the Church in its fullness and therefore rightly independent. It stood for freedom of conscience and drew on a tradition which included politically radical and Anabaptist elements. Presbyterianism too had its identity. It also had little time for bishops but it did not share the sometimes bloody-minded independency of Congregationalism or its distrust of creeds. Instead there was a strong cultural link with the Church of Scotland, and sometimes with Irish Presbyterianism. Finding yourself in a Presbyterian congregation you would be unlikely to mistake it for a Congregational one – the identity would be given away by the metrical psalm or the way the children's address talked about playing wing-half for Scotland. What kind of shared theological vision could unite these traditions and give a purpose to the United Reformed Church?

When seeking to evaluate the emerging theology of the United Reformed Church a major problem is the lack of serious theological reflection within the church. It has not been without its scholars. George Caird was its fourth Moderator of the General Assembly and there have been other significant New Testament scholars such as Graham Stanton. Colin Gunton played a significant role in introducing Barthian insights into the URC. There have been historians like Clyde Binfield, Geoffrey Nuttall and David Thompson. From very different theological positions John Hick and Lesslie Newbigin explored the meaning of the gospel in an age of religious pluralism.² Hick was a classic liberal drawing on a Kantian distinction between the real in itself and the real as perceived, seeing all the major religions as ways in which the Real is imperfectly manifested and experienced. Newbigin, by contrast, grew increasingly conservative and had a profound influence on the URC in the late

1 Arthur Macarthur, *Setting up Signs*, (London: United Reformed Church, 1997), 89.

2 See John Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths*, (London: Macmillan, 1974); *The Rainbow of Faiths* (London: SCM, 1995), Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, (London: SPCK 1978).

1970s and early 1980s. There was also specialised work by Alan Sell on the intellectual and historical heritage of Dissent. But none of these gave any powerful stimulus to the emerging theology of the church.

For many years there was an almost total lack of serious ecclesiology. It was not until 1998, and the publication of David Cornick's *Under God's Good Hand*³, that a history of the traditions which came together in the United Reformed Church was published. Today it is no longer in print. It was 2002 (thirty years after the church's foundation) before the United Reformed Church published David Peel's *Reforming Theology* which set out to explore the theological ethos of the United Reformed Church. The next year the church also published Tony Tucker's *Reformed Ministry: Traditions of Ministry and Ordination in the United Reformed Church*. The stark reality of the URC has been the intellectual poverty of its ecclesiology.

There was more than one factor underlying this. David Peel, remarking that "it is interesting and noteworthy that it took the URC twenty-five years and more to publish books which covered its historical foundations and theological ethos," links this to the URC's original hope that it would be the catalyst for an imminent wider union.⁴ There would be no need to define the ethos of the URC if the church were simply a staging post on a journey – which is another way of saying that beyond its ecumenical commitment the church's founders had no vision of its nature or role. In part, the lack of significant theological reflection was also a function of the diminishing theological expertise within the United Reformed Church. When he was Moderator of Assembly (1996-97), David Thompson challenged the church as to where it expected to get its new theologians from. At the 2004 Assembly he observed that he had had no answer to his question. The URC is a church with no serious theological journal, diminishing theological resources in its colleges, and few serious academic theologians, even fewer of whom are actually employed by the denomination. Alan Sell points out that in 1950 the Congregationalists had 1,968 ministers (including 407 retired ministers) of whom seven then in employment held a DD. Of these six were working for the denomination and one, CH Dodd, was working at a university (and he had taught at Mansfield College in the past). The English Presbyterians in 1950 had two DDs – both of whom were employed by the Church. "In 1999 out of 1,825 URC ministers (including 759 retired and 193 non-stipendiary ministers) only one had an earned DD (Colin Gunton) and he was not employed by the denomination"⁵ (In fact there were two since Geoffrey Nuttall had an Oxford DD as well as an his honorary DD from the University of Wales). David Peel disputes the significance of this,

3 David Cornick, *Under God's Good Hand* (London: United Reformed Church: 1998).

4 David Peel, *Reforming Theology*, (London: United Reformed Church, 2002), 4.

5 Alan Sell, "The Theological Contribution of Protestant Nonconformists", in Alan Sell and Anthony Cross, (editors), *Protestant Nonconformity in the 20th Century*, (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2003), 60-61. One might also note that Geoffrey Nuttall and Charles Cranfield were F.B.A.

arguing that the theological health of the Church should be measured not “by how many of its members hold earned DDs” but by “the ability of church members to give an account of the hope that is in them in word and by deed”⁶. No doubt the latter test is ultimately the more significant criterion for the health of the Church but that in no way diminishes the significance of the first criterion as an indication that the United Reformed Church has a serious deficit in critical scholarship. The inescapable conclusion is that one reason why the United Reformed Church failed to provide a significant theological apologia is because the Church suffered from a severe theological deficit which has still to be taken seriously.

A Reformed Identity?

Both Congregationalism and Presbyterianism were products of the Reformation and within Congregationalism there had been an attempt by an influential group based mostly at Mansfield College, known as the New Genevans, to re-emphasize this heritage. It has, therefore, been to the Reformed Tradition that the United Reformed Church has looked for its theological identity.

This has proved more problematic in practice than it might seem in theory. In the most authoritative modern study of the origins of Reformed Protestantism Philip Benedict emphasizes that from the first the tradition was multipolar and multivocal. It was Calvin, but it was also Zwingli and à Lasco and Bullinger. The problem intensifies when considering the diverse history and current variety of the tradition. Liberal theology, biblical literalism and evangelical revivalism all originate in the Reformed tradition. As Benedict admirably puts it: the tradition was “not a fixed set of dogmatic positions as much as an enduring and expanding range of doctrinal possibilities.”⁷

In reality the Reformed tradition is no more uniform than is Anglicanism and as Amy Pauw says: “The doctrinal and affectional centre of contemporary Reformed faith and worship is remarkably hard to locate.”⁸ The tradition is open to both radical and conservative interpretations. Whether one looks at Princeton, or Kuyper and neo-Dutch Calvinism, conservative Reformed theology has a sinewy intellectual strength and respectability which arises precisely from its Westminster ancestry. It was Princeton Presbyterianism which produced a list of “fundamentals” and so originated the term fundamentalist. On the other hand if we follow Jürgen Moltmann in identifying the defining centre of Reformed theology as “*ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda, secundum verbum Dei*” – (“the church reformed, must always be

6 David Peel, “So Last Century”, *JURCHS*, Vol 8, No 1, 2008, 54.

7 Philip Benedict, *Christ's Churches Purely Reformed*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 298.

8 Amy Pauw, “The Future of Reformed Theology”, in David Willis and Michael Welker (editors), *Toward the Future of Reformed Theology: Tasks, Topics Traditions* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, Eerdmans: 1999), 463.

reformed according to the word of God”) – then the essence of the Reformed tradition will be a radical commitment that subjects a church to constant critical enquiry.⁹ This is what Paul Tillich called “the Spirit of Protestantism.” Reformed theology can take forms which are not only significantly different, but sometimes incompatible.

T.S. Eliot once said, “Tradition is not something you inherit – if you want tradition you must obtain it with great labour.”¹⁰ The challenge for the URC was whether out of wrestling with such a diverse tradition it could find a relevant way to communicate the truth, hope, and promise of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The extraordinary lack of serious reflection upon the Reformed tradition within the URC is evidence of how inadequately the church responded.

But perhaps this is to underestimate the problem the new Church faced. Congregationalism was never a classical Reformed church but a blend of Reformed and radical Anabaptist. In the radical crucible of Cromwell’s army ideas such as congregational autonomy, the democratic constitution of the church, the repudiation of a liturgy in favour of spirit-led worship, and the freedom of the spirit over against creeds and formal religion gave Congregationalism a distinct identity. As Forsyth points out, if Calvinism was the father of Independency, Anabaptist theology was its mother.¹¹ If Congregationalism was a form of Reformed theology it was a very distinct form which in practice rarely saw itself in that light. Charles Silvester Horne could write a history of the Free Churches with only one reference to Calvin – and then only that his influence had hindered the development of church music.¹² In defining itself as a Reformed Church one might argue that the URC was the first post-modernist church in that it chose a historical tradition that it had not, in fact, fully ever held. In other words, did the Genevans invent a heritage? What were the chances of engaging the new church with a tradition of which most of its members were largely unaware and which for a good many, was not their real tradition anyway?

David Peel’s *Reforming Theology* is the only really serious attempt to define the theological ethos of the URC¹³. Its first sentence may be the most significant: “The first problem the writer and readers of this book face is that the

9 Jürgen Moltmann, “Theologia Reformata et Semper Reformanda” in David Willis and Michael Welker (editors), *Toward the Future of Reformed Theology*, 120.

10 T.S. Eliot “Tradition and Individual Talent”, *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism*, (London: Routledge, 1922).

11 P. T. Forsyth, *Faith, Freedom and the Future*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1912), 120.

12 C. Silvester Horne, *A Popular History of the Free Churches*, (London: James Clarke, 1903), 249.

13 David Cornick’s *Letting God be God – the Reformed Tradition* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2008) was published too late to be considered here.

evidence suggests there is no such thing as *the* theology of the URC.”¹⁴ Peel recognises that the theological spectrum is in fact so wide “that the church has an acute identity crisis when it comes to the content of its belief, and the church policy and practices which flow from it”. None the less Peel believes there is a shared Reformed tradition that “includes Calvin and Schleiermacher, Forsyth and Oman, and more recently Newbigin and Hick.”¹⁵ He argues that there are five features of the Reformed tradition which are of lasting value in the URC’s contemporary search for the Gospel.

(1) “*Our emphasis on the Bible means that the URC follows a theological model which helps to keep us in touch with the quarry from which we are hewn.*”¹⁶

As far as this goes no doubt it is true. But how is this a distinctively Reformed doctrine rather than one which Anglicans or Lutherans or Methodists would be happy to accept? Certainly Peel would not want to isolate Scripture. “However loud some shout *sola scriptura*, in practice they cannot avoid altogether bending the knee towards the liberal observation that common experience and reason play a crucial role in theology.”¹⁷

(2) “*We fully recognise that tradition is not static... While the URC is a reformed church, it is nevertheless a church which recognises a need always to be reforming itself.*”¹⁸

This is the principle of *semper reformanda*. This is clearly vital. As John Buchanan puts it, “Reformed faith is a living tradition, and a living tradition resists being pinned down too precisely,” it will “always be writing new statements of faith and will never be content and convinced that finally we have got it all right.”¹⁹ Liberal Christians in general would find this congenial.

(3) “*A third principal feature of the URC theological heritage is its openness to ideas and insight from outside itself.*”²⁰

This underlies, for Peel, not only the commitment to ecumenism but also a willingness to listen to secular ideas and to the other world religions. John Hick would certainly agree with this. So would liberal Christians of other traditions. Some conservative URC members might well dissent.

14 Peel, *op.cit* 3.

15 *Ibid* 7.

16 *Ibid* 323.

17 *Ibid* 25.

18 *Ibid* 324.

19 John Buchanan, “The Reformed Theological Tradition: A Way of Being Christian,” in Robert H. Bullock Jr (ed), *Presbyterians Being Reformed*, (Louisville: Geneva Press, 2006), ch. 5.

20 Peel, 324.

(4) *"URC theology should be thoroughly practical."*²¹

What Peel means by this is that Reformed theology will find expression in changed personal lives and renewed social and political structures. This is a view which would find wide agreement, at least in principle, across most of the Christian Church.

(5) *"The Source of grace is also the seat of judgement"*²²

"What we are called to do in God's service is not to satisfy ourselves but to please God. We take our bearings from what God requires rather than what we want."²³ This would be common again to most Christians.

What Peel is offering is a liberal Protestant theology of a kind that may well describe the theology of quite a few members of the United Reformed Church (or other mainstream churches). But does it really capture the dynamic of Reformed theology? One anonymous seventeenth-century writer observed, "I had rather see coming toward me a whole regiment with drawn swords, than one lone Calvinist convinced that he is doing the will of God" – a statement that Robert McAfee Brown says "illustrates both the glory and demonry of Calvinism"²⁴. The question about David Peel's summary is whether it expresses the distinctive radicalism of Reformed theology?

So, for example, in asserting the primacy of Scripture the Reformers were not making an assertion about the Bible in itself as much as indicating its primary position over against extra-biblical tradition and affirming that scriptural interpretation is not the sole prerogative of ecclesiastical or even scholarly authority. The point of the classical Reformed principle of *sola scriptura* is that by elevating the Bible as the primary witness to God's living reforming word, it serves the ongoing reformation of the Church (*semper reformanda*). What was distinctive about Reformed churches was not that they revered the Bible but that if God's authority is absolute no-one else's is and so there is a radical approach both in church and in state. Calvin taught that individuals have the right to participate in their governance; to elect pastors and leaders in church, and magistrates in the city. Benedict concludes that Reformed theology sparked off more resistance to political power than any other tradition. As James VI and I put it "A Scottish presbytery . . . agreeth as well with monarchy as God and the Devil! Then Jack and Will and Dick shall meet and censure me and my council."²⁵ In 1641 Hanserd Knollys saw the same fact from the opposite perspective: "God uses the common people and the multitude to proclaim that the Lord God Omnipotent reigneth."²⁶

21 Ibid p.324.

22 *Ibid.*

23 *Ibid.*

24 Robert McAfee Brown in Herbert F. Vetter (ed), *Speak Out Against the New Right*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1982).

25 Benedict, 481.

26 Christopher Hill, *God's Englishman: Oliver Cromwell and the English Revolution*, (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1970), 244.

In church order, too, the distinctiveness of a Reformed ecclesiology is noticeably lacking – perhaps unsurprisingly since Peel ranks himself as among those who “are prepared to ‘take episcopacy into their system,’ and do not regard ‘establishment’ as a living issue.”²⁷ While it is true that originally neither Calvin nor Beza condemned outright the presence of elements of episcopal hierarchy within a Reformed Church, the logic of Reformed theology was clearly against it and this led Beza and most of the tradition, explicitly to repudiate episcopacy as detrimental to the good order of the church and a denial of the principle of equality of ministers.²⁸ A willingness to adopt a system of episcopacy, which cannot but be influenced by pre-existing models of deference and hierarchy, is to risk losing the distinctive character of Reformed ecclesiology. As for the establishment of the Church of England no longer being ‘a live issue’, in fact, in an increasingly pluralistic society an established church is more and more anachronistic. If it is not a live issue that the Church of England is able to put non-elected members into the legislature it ought to be. The peculiar, theologically indefensible, Anglican mix of Church and state is no more justifiable now than it has ever been. The Basis of Union has it right: “The Lord Jesus Christ, the only king and head of the Church, has herein appointed a government distinct from civil government and in all things spiritual not subordinate thereto”²⁹. At the very least it is apparent that compared with, for example, the self-confident Congregationalism of C.J. Cadoux or Albert Peel it is harder to justify the existence of a separate denomination on the basis of David Peel’s ecclesiology or to motivate it if it does exist.

As Douglas John Hall says, Reformed faith is based on an ethic of resistance and an ethic of responsibility. “Historically and classically understood [it] implies an *a priori* polemic against all pretension to finality of doctrine and understanding . . . But Protestantism is not only a protest against doctrine put forward as final truth, it is also a protest against power masquerading as ultimate.”³⁰ The radical story of grace needs to lead to a distinctive ecclesiology.

If David Peel offers a statement of liberal Protestantism that might be held just as easily outside Reformed theology as within it, so from the conservative side of the Church, GEAR’s statement of faith makes no reference to the fundamental Reformed principle of *semper reformanda* but includes a fundamentalist understanding of Scripture: “We believe that God has made himself known implicitly in creation and explicitly through the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. We affirm that the Bible is His written Word, inspired by His Spirit, entirely trustworthy and supremely authoritative for the faith and conduct of all people.”³¹ There is also a commitment to a visible

27 David Peel, “So Last Century”, *JURCHS*, Vol 8, No 1, 2008, 50.

28 Benedict, 167.

29 United Reformed Church Basis of Union.

30 Douglas John Hall, *Confessing the Faith: Christian Theology in a North American Context*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 333.

31 GEAR website, *The Faith We Hold*.

second coming when “Christ will pronounce God’s just condemnation on those who have rejected Him and receive the redeemed to eternal glory.” Such views could have been affirmed by evangelicals in other denominations but not by liberals in the URC. It is also significantly different from the Barthian emphasis of the URC’s Basis of Union that “The Word of God in the Old and New Testaments, discerned under the guidance of the Holy Spirit” is “the supreme authority for the faith and conduct of all God’s people.”

In view of the diversity of Reformed theology it is no surprise that attempts to define the Reformed heritage of the United Reformed Church should be so varied. There is no reason why in a Reformed Church there should only be one interpretation of the tradition. The real problems are more substantive. The suspicion must be that for both liberals and evangelicals these self-identifications are more important than any shared Reformed tradition. Above all what is remarkable is the paucity of substantive attempts to rejuvenate Reformed theology. This reflects both the increasing failure of intellect in the URC and the lack of a serious quest for a Reformed heritage. All this has contributed to an increasing trivialization of theology and the erosion of any sense of what it is to be a Reformed Church.

A Liberal Church?

Historically the Congregationalists were the most liberal of all British Trinitarian denominations. To some extent the creation of the URC diminished this distinctiveness. Presbyterianism was never as liberal as Congregationalism, despite Oman and what one might term the “Westminster” tradition – Hick was always balanced by Newbigin. The range in Scotland from the Willie Still evangelicals through to George Newlands might be more indicative of the instinctive theological range of English Presbyterians. None-the-less the URC still has a greater proportion of liberals than any other denomination. In its search for identity one possibility for the United Reformed Church might have been to define itself as a progressive liberal church. There were those who looked for this – for example Donald Hilton, in his 1993 Moderator’s address, “To follow truth, and thus . . . an elliptical faith.”³² But in reality the URC’s liberalism was of a largely negative nature and among both its ministers and its congregations there was movement in a conservative direction.

It is true that the 1989 English Church census showed that 24% of United Reformed Church congregations identified themselves as “evangelical”, 37% “liberal” and 36% as “broad”.³³ Normally the General Assembly has a liberal majority and only a minority of the Moderators are evangelical. But this overstates the liberal nature of the URC. For many, categories such as *liberal*

32 Donald Hilton, *To Follow truth and thus . . . an elliptical faith*, (London: United Reformed Church, 1993).

33 Interestingly the figures for the number of members show 12% were “evangelical”, 48% “liberal” and 37% “broad”. Peter Brierley, *Christian England*, (London: Marc Europe, 1991), 164.

or *broad* are more a way of making the point that they are not evangelical rather than evidence of any substantive liberal identity. Granted that most of John Hick's career has been outside the URC, it would be difficult to point to much strongly liberal scholarship within the church. Liberals within the United Reformed Church nearly always found themselves looking outside it for inspiration to scholars such as Bishop Spong, or Marcus Borg, or Bishop David Jenkins, or even Don Cupitt. The kind of liberal leadership given by Cadoux earlier in the last century is now virtually absent.

And there is now a growing, assertive, conservative and even fundamentalist minority. The conservative evangelical Group for Evangelism and Renewal (GEAR) was set up in 1974 with a theology reflecting some of the "fundamentals" drawn up in Princeton in 1909.³⁴ It would like to amend the Basis of Union to read, "The Bible is His written word". An increasing number of candidates for the ministry held conservative or fundamentalist views, sometimes coming into the ministry from a conservative evangelical background in other churches. A sign of the changing climate in the URC was that in 1995 Donald Hilton and Martin Camroux organised a conference at the URC's Windermere Centre out of which a liberal network, called Free to Believe, was born. A Free to Believe pamphlet claimed, "There has been a 'dumbing down' process within the URC, a decline in the quality of scholarship within the denomination, and a resurgence of a narrow fundamentalism quite alien to our ethos."³⁵ A significant number of those who joined were lay people who felt isolated in churches which had moved in a fundamentalist direction. A number of ministers claimed that putting *liberal* on their CV made it harder to get a church. Even in supposedly liberal churches it could be quite difficult for the more liberal to say what they really believed. Writing in a Free to Believe *Briefing* Chris Avis could say, "I know from my own experience as an outspoken pew dweller the risks involved in raising one's head above the parapet of traditional church conservatism."³⁶ The forming of Free to Believe was a sign that liberals were no longer so sure that this was their church.

The critical test for the URC as a liberal church came in 1993 when two gay candidates applied for training for URC ministry. On the advice of his province one applied to enter Westminster College, the URC theological college in Cambridge. The college was divided on his admission and therefore sought the guidance of the denomination which proved to be equally divided. An acrimonious debate took place in the Councils of the Church. On the conservative side of the debate, a group called BASICS was set up (largely from members of GEAR). This acted as an organised caucus with strategy meetings and identically worded resolutions surfaced in a number of synods. There

34 *In Gear*, 57, (January 1993).

35 *Free To Believe: An Introduction*, 2.

36 *Briefing*, Free To Believe, December 2004, 15.

were threats of secession from a number of churches and ministers if homosexual ordination were sanctioned. The other gay candidate was rejected by the Thames North Province Ministries Committee since the denomination had not pronounced on the eligibility of such candidates. His appeal was heard at a formal closed session of Thames North Province, at the City Temple, which upheld it, and he was allowed to proceed to training at Mansfield College, which had accepted him as a candidate.

In 1999 the Mission Council moved resolution 32 at General Assembly which welcomed people of homosexual orientation as members of the United Reformed Church, "But does not believe that there is a sufficiently clear mind within the Church at this time to affirm the acceptability of homosexual practice". This was carried by 326 votes to 189,³⁷ and then referred to synods, district councils, and local churches for wider discussion with the rule that if a third of any of these groups objected, it would not be proceeded with. In fact 25% of local churches, 39% of District Councils and 50% of synods registered an objection so the resolution fell.³⁸ The Assembly admitted its inability to find a common mind by resolving "that any further resolution attempting to declare the mind of the church on this subject would be unlikely to find sufficient support at this time." For a period of seven years, therefore, there should be no further attempt to define the policy of the church on homosexuality. The situation of homosexual candidates for the ministry would be whatever it had been before the debate: i.e. no explicit policy of any kind.

This controversy was deeply revealing. It exposed the URC as a church with a plurality of theologies rather than any clear theological consensus. Had the URC clearly accepted homosexual and heterosexual equally this would have given it a distinct liberal identity within British church life. What the debate made clear was that this was not possible. The URC was too theologically heterogeneous for any such role.

What is more, the debate was illuminating about the nature of the United Reformed Church's Liberalism. Three-quarters of URC churches may describe themselves as "liberal" or "broad" but the fact that only a third were willing to block resolution 32 suggests that in many cases such designations mean little more than "not evangelical". Sometimes indeed the suspicion must be that "broad" indicates a lack of a coherent theology of any kind rather than a reasoned liberal position.

Does the URC have an identity?

Arthur Macarthur's fear that "any union between the Congregational Church and ourselves [the Presbyterians] would result in a united church confused about its purpose and unable to find a role" has proved well founded. The Church Life Survey found only 25% of URC members had a strong

³⁷ *United Reformed Church Assembly Record*, 1999, 23.

³⁸ *United Reformed Church Assembly Record*, 2000, 36.

commitment to the Church³⁹. Of all denominations URC members moving to another area were least likely to maintain their denominational link. On arriving at University URC young people were the least likely to continue within the URC. It could be that part of this is a reflection of the URC's ecumenical spirit but it is also almost certainly a reflection of URC members' weak sense of denominational identification. As the URC becomes more theologically diverse many conservative fundamentalist or liberal members feel more in common with other conservative evangelicals or liberals than with fellow URC members of a different theology.

In my experience of thirty years of pastoral ministry within the URC I have had a minority of people in all my churches who did identify strongly with the denomination but in almost all cases this was because they carried over a Congregational or Presbyterian identity. Very few who come into the URC without that prior commitment form such an identity. Very few church members, if asked what the Reformed tradition is, could give a coherent answer. Nor could the URC any longer be identified convincingly as a liberal church.

When the United Reformed Church was dreamed of no one imagined that a shared theological identity would be necessary and little effort was made to promote it. The very formation of the URC took away a significant part of the tradition of Congregationalism and so further undermined identities which were already being lost. On the other hand, the merging of a still ethnically based Presbyterianism into a larger whole undermined its cultural character. In the past many Scots travelled long distances to a Presbyterian Church. Now they might go to a more local URC where they would not find the same cultural identity. One of the features of the URC is the drastic collapse in membership in many of the large former Presbyterian churches. Of the fifteen largest URC churches in 1976, ten were former Presbyterian churches but by 2005 only four out of fifteen were.⁴⁰ What the URC did was to accelerate the decline of old identities without offering a clear alternative.

Ironically, a factor in the failure of the URC to develop a theologically coherent identity was its commitment to ecumenism. The URC contains over 200 joint URC/Methodist churches. In many of these URC members will be a minority and therefore tend to be absorbed by the stronger theological and cultural identity of Methodism. But even where that is not the case the very nature of a joint church makes it very difficult to teach denominational history or develop a sense of URC identity. Even the attempt seems unecumenical, as Arthur Macarthur realised: "Unity was our boast but by its nature it is self-denying."⁴¹ The URC's principle that all new church plants should be ecumenical may be theologically worthy – but in practice it means that the URC

39 Alison Gelder and Phillip Escot, *Church Life Profile* www United Reformed Church.

40 *URC Yearbook*, 1996 and 2005.

41 Macarthur, *Setting Up Signs*, 108.

tradition will usually be the weakest represented and the declared URC membership often more theoretical than real. The URC's practice of training many of its ministers ecumenically may be admirable but it militates against developing an awareness of a theological identity. When I trained for the URC ministry at Mansfield College I was never once asked to read Calvin. Shamefully I have never read the Westminster Confession in my life. No doubt this is an extreme example but it exemplifies the lack of seriousness with which the URC faced the difficult task of developing a theological identity and ethos. The long gap before David Cornick's now out-of-print history appeared is the sign of a church that never took a commitment to its tradition very seriously because it seemed that an ecumenical church ought not to do so.

Both Congregationalism and Presbyterianism were declining traditions long before the URC was formed. When, despite its hopes, the new church found itself a continuing part of the English church scene, a crisis of relevance and identity was inevitable. The Reformed tradition, with its belief that if God alone is ultimate, everything else is open to reformation, might have offered resources to provide such an identity. But it is not clear that the URC ever really wanted to do this. If the opportunity were ever there it was certainly missed. Forty years on few in the United Reformed Church have a clear idea of why it is here.

MARTIN CAMROUX

STILL SO LAST CENTURY?

In a recent edition of the *Journal* I was privileged to review Alan Sell's *Nonconformist Theology in the Twentieth Century*.¹ One of the major critical points I made was an *historical* one. It concerns the adequacy of interpretation of Nonconformist theology during the latter part of the century under review. In my opinion, he has not done justice to the way in which Charismatic Renewal and the various liberation theologies – most clearly feminist theology – influenced Nonconformist theology during the period. They radically challenged some of the prevailing presuppositions within academic theology concerning the nature of theology and its ownership.

I was glad that the Editor invited Alan to respond to my review, not least because the invitation indicated that I was raising issues significant enough to warrant a reply. That our two pieces found their way into an issue which also contained Martin Camroux's essay on "Why did the United Reformed Church Fail?" may have given the impression that "theology" was replacing "history" as the focus for the *Journal*. Some have even said that, since the *Journal* is the

1 *JURCHS*, Vol 8, no 1, 2008, 49-54.

only organ for serious and sustained writing in the United Reformed Church, that may be no bad thing.² Whatever the truth of that view, no contemporary theology will be adequate which has not learned from the accumulated weight of tradition or fails to respond to shifts in perspective brought about by the passage of time. Viewed holistically, theology needs historical acumen. Without that skill our account of the Christian faith becomes severed from its anchorage in a living tradition of faith. Theologians, therefore, have continually to look back in order to have any hope of taking the church's thinking in a faithful direction. No less that the historian, "In looking back they are bound to move on" since "Revisionism is built into their system".³

My reading of twentieth-century theology (of which Nonconformist theology is a small but very influential part) suggests that the revisionism now called for in these difficult times for the church is greater than many of us imagine, or perhaps are prepared to envisage. Whatever theology has meant for us over the years, it has not prevented a situation arising in which large numbers of our church members are incapable of "accounting for the hope" they share with Christians worldwide and down the ages (1 Peter 3:15) to their like-minded friends, never mind to those who do not share their Christian commitment. Nor has this theology done much to address the exponential numerical decline which gained momentum in the 1960s. In the course of thirty years the United Reformed Church has lost members at such a rate that it would take a revival of the proportions of the Evangelical Revival to get us back to where we were numerically at our foundation in 1972. There is no single reason for this state of affairs, but Martin Camroux is certainly correct to cite "theological poverty", as one of the "factors specific to the URC" among several possible reasons.⁴ However, in my opinion, the problem has not been a lack of theology – as Alan Sell's survey shows that there has been plenty of that. The problem has been that little of it seems to have been owned by church members, some of whom after the *Honest to God* episode came to view theology as subversive of faith. At best, theology for them is something others do – clergy, dons, or even both rolled into one: at worst, it provides evidence to support an anti-intellectualism within the church which once prompted a Congregational deacon to inform a well-educated candidate for the vacancy within his church that "ministers close churches by degrees".⁵

2 All those I have heard putting forward this view have done so without implying anything negative about *Reform*, the monthly magazine of the United Reformed Church. What they have been saying is something like this: the Anglicans have *Theology*, the Methodists have *The Epworth Review*, but what do we have akin, other than the *Journal*?

3 Clyde Binfield, "Editorial", *JURCHS*, Vol 8, No 1, 2008, 2.

4 Martin Camroux, "Why did the URC Fail?", *JURCHS*, Vol 8, No 1, 2008, 30-45.

5 The anecdote comes from the early 1960s. It reminds us that concern about church decline and attribution of simplistic reasons for church closure were around well before the United Reformed Church.

At a time when people were being liberated to think for themselves, no longer beholden to the views of employers, teachers, ministers, or parents, there were few available lay people equipped to enable grass-roots theological conversation in churches within which theology had become monopolised by ordained ministers and professional theologians. Also, quite often, the existing theological commitment was made to serve secular expectations of the academy rather than those of the church. A collusion between pulpit and pew has often ensued that in effect takes theology out of local congregational life.⁶ Martin Camroux describes it well: “only rarely were the vital questions honestly faced and a good many ministers were either not capable of addressing them or else did not do so for fear of upsetting their congregations”⁷ Just as it is impossible to explain the rise of Nonconformist culture, either Independent or Methodist, without reference to study and learning among the (so-called) laity, so it is doubtful whether its decline can be wholly explained apart from the fact that for a long time now church members have had difficulty and experienced unease when required to engage in grass-roots apologetics. We live with paradox that the most highly educated congregations ever known to Christianity are, at one and the same time, the most biblically and theologically illiterate. Part of my complaint about Alan Sell’s survey of twentieth-century Nonconformist theology is that he makes little mention of how ineffectual the prevailing type of theology seems to have been in the life of church members during the latter part of the period. Nor does he give an adequate account of those theological approaches which have challenged that way of doing theology which now finds most of our church members deeply guilty about the biblical and theological illiteracy they are experiencing.

His defence is that “*his* brief” prevented him from taking “feminist theology or . . . the several varieties of liberation theology” more fully into consideration.⁸ His “brief” though was *his* choice. Another reviewer has suggested that, in Alan’s survey, “only those who write books get counted”, but he then opines that “perhaps this is inevitable”.⁹ Why “inevitable” when the unfortunate result arises from a choice based upon a human judgement? It is undoubtedly the case that in our Western post-denominational world Nonconformist theology in the last third of the twentieth century has been influenced significantly both by the books written by Nonconformists and by those who believe, following the writers of those books, that the Christian tradition is more likely to be faithfully handed on through the gathered saints becoming reflective practitioners of the gospel than by “book-length contributions” from professional theologians.

6 See my *Reforming Theology: Explorations in the Theological Traditions of the United Reformed Church*, (London: The United Reformed Church, 2002), 9-11.

7 Martin Camroux, “Why did the URC Fail?”, 42.

8 Alan P.F. Sell, “So Last Century? – a Response”, *JURCHS*, Vol 8, no 1, 2008, 56. Italics mine.

9 David M. Thompson, “Where are the theologians?”, *Reform*, March 2008, 32.

How is it possible, therefore, to write a *full* account of Nonconformist theology in the twentieth century when the chosen parameters at the outset restrict the evidence to the “published works” of theologians who happen to have been Nonconformists?¹⁰ When challenged about not taking into account significant theological movements, it will hardly do to say that they could not be covered appropriately since they are not represented by books written by Nonconformists – not least when the movements in question present a rigorous critique of the theological methodology found in those books.¹¹

Alan’s response to my criticism concerning his assessment of Nonconformist theology in the later part of the twentieth century includes some rather odd reasoning. He seeks to justify his omission of Brian Wren’s *What Language Shall I Borrow?* from his survey by pointing out that “it concerns worship and liturgy (its sub-title is *God-talk in Worship*)”¹² But it makes equal sense to say it should have been included precisely because “God-talk” is contained in the title. What is “God-talk” if not theology? Why does theology contained in academic books count, while theology in worship and liturgy is ruled out? What lies underneath Alan’s judgment is the compartmentalized view of theology developed by academics since Schleiermacher, in which understandable demarcation lines so often undermine more holistic approaches to Christian theology.

Christian theology is the process and product of critical reflection upon what Christians claim and practice. In Christian theology’s search for adequacy there is an explicit intention to stand faithfully within the Jesus tradition as that has been borne by the movement called “church” and is normed by the earliest Christian witnesses to the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus. Of equal importance is the way such theology seeks to speak with prophetic and persuasive power to the context it addresses. It will only ever have apologetic impact if it is found credible and purposeful outside the circle of faith. Therefore, theology must seek to be constructive just as much as it needs to be critical. When Alan argues that “systematic, doctrinal and constructive theologians speak from faith to faith” and that “their calling is to address the

10 Alan P.F. Sell, *Nonconformist Theology in the Twentieth Century*, (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2006), 4. In his reply to my review, Alan describes his brief being limited to “published book-length contributions” – not simply “published works” as stated in *Nonconformist Theology in the Twentieth Century*.

11 The kind of books I have in mind are Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1973), Juan Luis Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1976), Rosemary Radford Reuther, *Sexism and God-Talk*, (London: SCM Press, 1983) and Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, (London: SCM Press, 1983). It is arguable that books such as these did more to influence British Nonconformist theology in the last quarter of the twentieth century than anything published by British Nonconformist theologians.

12 Sell, “So Last Century? – a Response”, 56.

Church”, some will be led to conclude that theology’s apologetic calling to address context as well as congregation is in danger of being at best blurred and at most lost?¹³ If so, this is a great pity because one of the strengths of *Nonconformist Theology in the Twentieth Century* is Alan’s treatment of the Nonconformist reaction to Barth. Many will be relieved to know from Alan that worthy Nonconformist predecessors proved it is possible to avoid being utterly sucked into the Barthian circle, maintain a place for reason in theology and yet still be Nonconformists. They know that any theology which solely aims to speak from “faith to faith” is in danger of becoming totally sectarian. As David Tracy has argued powerfully, theology must speak “from and to three publics: society, academy and church”.¹⁴ That requirement is a worthy counsel of perfection, one to which we should aspire even though we will repeatedly fall short.

But I have drifted into “theology” and away from “history”. Readers of the *Journal* will perhaps forgive me for that if I end by addressing Alan’s views on the education of our ministers, given that he advocates a practice which has been taking place throughout my involvement with theological education these last twenty years but presupposes a situation in the latter part of the century contrary to the evidence. During the 1980s and 1990s it was virtually impossible to find from within the United Reformed Church men and women who were qualified and able to take up teaching positions in the URC-related colleges. Our colleges found that they had to turn to Scotland and the USA as well as to English Baptists and Anglicans to fill their vacancies. By the early years of the twenty-first century, however, and despite the rapid decline in the numbers of ministerial candidates and the fact that many of them are mature in age and embarking upon a second career, the situation had changed to such an extent that one of my colleagues could say during a conversation he had with me that “we now have most bases covered”. There is now within the ministry of the United Reformed Church a supply of people qualified and able to be considered for teaching posts in our colleges when they become vacant. Instead of urging that the “churches take steps to ensure that their younger candidates at least receive a full and rigorous academic course”, Alan would have been truer to the facts if he had congratulated the colleges over the last twenty years for giving their able students greater opportunities than his generation ever had to study for higher degrees.¹⁵ Also, more candidates for stipendiary ministry leave College with a degree qualification than they once did, and the higher degree courses available for ministers to pursue in their period of continuing ministerial education is almost at saturation point. Strategies have long been in place to achieve what the earlier post-war era

13 *Ibid.*, 58.

14 David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (London: SCM Press, 1981), ix.

15 Sell, *Nonconformist Theology in the Twentieth Century*, 191.

clearly failed to achieve. And they do not involve Alan's suggestion that the kind of "learned minister" we need, can be prepared with "fewer visits to hospitals and prisons".¹⁶ The context of society as well as church is believed to be as important to such learning as is the academy. But let no one be led to believe that our colleges are not committed to producing the "leaven of highly-trained ministers" the church requires, nor that they are failing in the task.¹⁷

I also stand by my claim that most of Alan's contemporaries were "ill-equipped for ministry" when they arrived at ordination. I know many of them; some of them were placement supervisors to Northern College students when I worked in Manchester, and their experiences were not hugely different from those who prepared for their ministry in other places. I base my claim on oral history – I simply report what I have been told by them.¹⁸ But it is plainly wrong-headed for Alan to suggest that being "ill-equipped" directly entails or even loosely implies that his contemporaries did not faithfully preach the gospel or care for their flocks during a period of disquieting numerical decline.¹⁹ Nor did I come near to suggesting that "the type of training" Alan received caused church decline. But what I am very confident about is that it did not sufficiently address it – in fact, even a generation later it was still not a prominent issue in discussions within College life. Unlike the current generation of young ministers we did not debate whether we would have a job until retirement. As far as ministerial drop-outs are concerned, what I had in mind were precisely those whose theological education did not equip them to cope with what Alan calls "the theological ferment of the 1960s" and those who painfully found that the questions "out there" were totally different from those they had been trained to cope with within college and university.²⁰ Some of them as a result suffered the double whammy of being theologically as well as practically ill-prepared for ministry. In answer to another of Alan's queries, I do not know whether current "action-reflection-action" models of learning have reduced the drop-out rate, since we cannot compare like with like. In the modern Section O era, codes of discipline have an understandably more rigorous approach to ministerial misbehaviour and may have substantially increased the number of ministers who are dismissed (or leave voluntarily) on disciplinary grounds. Necessary legal frameworks have now replaced more *ad hoc* procedures, which sometimes took great risks in offering "a second

16 *Ibid.*

17 *Ibid.*, 192.

18 Two curriculum reviews in the period 1998-2003 sought out the opinions of former Northern College students concerning the adequacy of their preparation for ministry and its strengths and weaknesses. One of Alan's direct and distinguished contemporaries even appears on a College video referring to some of those weaknesses. He provides examples of the skill-deficiencies that ordinands found they possessed and which were commonplace at the time.

19 Sell "So Last Century? – a Response", 57.

20 *Ibid.*, 58.

chance". The results of that risk-taking, of course, have contributed to the decline in the general public's estimation of and respect for churches.

To return to one of my central points: Alan is more confident than I am of top-down approaches to theological education in the church – what he describes as theologians “discharging their primary [=the first] reflective responsibility” to “stimulate the churches to action”.²¹ All too easily this theological strategy can lead to the suggestion that “thinking” is the province of some while “action” is the job of others. It does not have to, but it often does. We need to recognize, therefore, that a great deal of evidence suggests that ‘top-down’ rarely works. In a world which treasures autonomy and habitually questions authority figures, the opinion of the theologian or local minister no longer carries the weight it once did. People now are not prepared to have things second-hand. So, however much I still remain committed to a learned ministry, we have to consider the possibility that a concentration on producing it may have been inadvertently contributing to the theological illiteracy of many of our church members.²²

DAVID R. PEEL

21 *Ibid.*

22 While promoting the “Vision4Life” process, John Campbell, my successor at Northern College, has been making the same point concerning the place of the Bible in the congregation. He talks about giving the Bible back to the people; I am concerned about re-envisaging theology as a central work of the community called church. The latter will not be achieved without the former.

REVIEW ARTICLE: LETTING GOD BE GOD

***Letting God be God. The Reformed Tradition.* By David Cornick. London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2008. Traditions of Christian Spirituality Series. Pp. 171. £9.85. ISBN-10 0-232-52722-9.**

It is becoming increasingly difficult to avoid spirituality. In view of the plethora of available retreats, quiet days and workshops, it might even be said that spirituality is big business. Certainly publishers great and small are being tempted to cash in on the phenomenon as they supply ever more tomes and tracts to feed the interests of those on the numerous well- and less-trodden spiritual “pathways”. There is evidence to suggest that while some enthusiasts thrive on the more glutinous passages in the medieval mystics, others give themselves to the under-energized chanting of words to waly-waly tunes that are alleged to have something to do with Celtic spirituality. Yet again, we find those who have taken an eastern turn. They may be seen walking, sockless, in

the chilliest of weather in (designer) sandals, brandishing little bells as they advance towards their gas-guzzling Chelsea tractors in which they transport their Tarquins and Jonquils a few hundred yards to school. Then there are those who find much inspiration in nature, interspersing their collecting of litter at beauty spots, which is highly commendable, with fairly frequent bouts of tree-hugging, which is more puzzling to the uninitiated. Finally, there is an evangelical spirituality the tentacles of which reach far and wide. Its cosy, sentimental unitarianism of the second person ("Jesus is my boyfriend") is, mercifully, frequently scuppered by the thumping drums (the volume of Gene Krupa minus the skill).

Lest the foregoing gentle teasing fail to convey my conviction that we should do well to approach some of what passes for spirituality with activated theological antennae, I resort to the stern denunciation of any spirituality that is self-serving, world-denying, doctrine-shunning, and mind-disengaging. Spirituality being the multi-faceted phenomenon that it is, I think that a case can be made for the recall of the term "piety", which does at least suggest an appropriate attitude before Another, rather than, for example, a quest to "find" myself. Genuine spirituality, I believe, concerns the head, heart, hands and feet, and when they have behaved themselves the Reformed have understood this very well.¹ Dr. David Cornick knows it very well, and that is why it is a pleasure to welcome this scholarly, accessible and, above all, *sensible* book.

Tackling first things first, Dr. Cornick discusses the terms "Reformed" and "spirituality". He notes the origins and diversity of the international Reformed family, and points to "the danger for the Christian theologian after Einstein ... that 'spirituality' might be cast adrift from its ethical and political moorings into a sphere of pure interiority". He adverts to the work of Rowan Williams, whom he reports as arguing that Calvinism and Lutheranism "are in essence about worldly spirituality in the sense that the division between 'sacred' and 'secular' has been broken down". This, I think, is a rather bald assertion, and a little discrimination is called for. While the whole cosmos, and not just the decent religious bits of it, is God's, we do need to recognize the biblical ambiguity of "world" and "worldly". Christians are called to be leaven in the (territorial) world, but separate from the (naughty) world; furthermore they are strangers here, heaven is their home. These ideas underlie the ecclesiology of a not insignificant strand of the Reformed family, as J. Guinness Rogers saw long ago: the "ideal Church is a body of spiritual men [and women] converted by the grace of God, and living by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. This is something radically different from a society of truth-seekers resolved to live up to their light and to wait in the hope that more light will come."² The bearing of this upon the sometimes loose talk we hear today about our all being on a

1 See further, Alan P. F. Sell, *Enlightenment, Ecumenism, Evangel. Theological Themes and Thinkers 1550-2000*, (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2005), ch. 8.

2 J. G. Rogers, *The Church Systems of England in the Nineteenth Century*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1881), 644.

journey is clear. Am I a seeker on a journey towards faith, or a saint on the journey of faith?

The first main chapter, "Who are the Reformed?", is a marvel of compression in which due place is accorded to humanism, the place of Scripture, simplicity, clarity, and to the educative role of the numerous confessions of faith. We meet the major founders of the Reformed tradition, and the important point is made that their intentions were catholic: they sought not to fragment, but to reform the one Church of Christ. The correct claim that "The heart of Calvin's theology and spirituality is the mystical union between Christ and the believer", may be news to those who always thought it was predestination. Diverse interpretations of this latter doctrine fuelled the debates between Arminius and Gomarus and their respective followers, and of this episode a balanced account is provided. We then touch down briefly on English soil; hop across the Atlantic to notice the "exciting and beautiful" synthesis of Calvinism, revivalism and Newtonian order offered by Jonathan Edwards; and thence back to Germany in order to doff our caps to Schleiermacher. Post-Enlightenment critiques of scholastic confessionalism and the Barthian response, the international expansion of Christianity through modern missionary movements, and the commitment to ecumenism are shown to be prominent influences upon the Reformed family to this day.

In his chapter on "A speaking God and a listening people", Dr. Cornick discusses Reformed worship. He refers to prayer, preaching (the brief reference to the Spirit's interpretative role is rounded out in the following chapter), and the sacraments, and he then jumps nimbly from Calvin to Walter Brueggemann. He does well not to overlook "the spirituality of the listener" (which, in my opinion, is nowhere more concisely summed up than in the answer to Question 160 of the *Westminster Larger Catechism*); and he properly distinguishes between conceived or free, and extempore prayer. George MacLeod and John Baillie are invoked as exemplary authors of prayers. There follow accounts of Calvin on prayer, and Calvin and others on the Lord's Prayer, the concluding ascription of which informs Reformed spirituality which is "captivated by the glory and the graciousness of God," which cannot be "snatched away" from the "Father". Predictable though the remark may be as coming from me, I cannot suppress the feeling that a passing reference to Church Meeting would have been appropriate in this chapter, for there the saints, as "a listening people", await God's guidance as to their mission – don't they?

Chapter three, on "A choosing God and a chosen people", opens with the first verse of George Matheson's paradox-replete hymn, "Make me a captive Lord/And then I shall be free." In this context Dr. Cornick introduces a sensitive discussion of predestination and election, the former of which, he reminds us, "is not a Reformed invention". Supralapsarianism and infralapsarianism pass before the reader's eyes, and we learn that Calvin "never intended [election] to become the lens through which the purposes of creation could be read". Rather, "In classical Reformed thought, election is a

celebration of the purposes of God, a delight in the love and mercy that received supreme expression in the cross of Christ” – all of which is underlined in Watts’s great hymn, “When I survey the wondrous cross.”

“A holy God and a worldly people” is the title of chapter four. The second commandment, iconoclasm, liturgical space and social and political space all come under review, and the contrasting approaches to the last of R. W. Dale, Reinhold Niebuhr and John de Gruchy are discussed. Reflections on art follow, and the chapter ends with remarks on liturgy in relation to architectural shape.

In the concluding chapter, “A loving God and a catholic people”, we meet John Williamson Nevin who, together with Philip Schaff, developed the Mercersburg theology with its emphasis upon catholicity, the Church as an organism, and the sacraments (and with its unfortunate declaration that the Church is a continuation of the Incarnation – a matter here passed over³). George MacLeod of the Iona Community, and Brother Roger of Taizé and Grandchamp represent those who have drawn upon a wide range of resources in developing their spiritualities. We are informed that “The Church, for the Reformed, is defined not in terms of doctrine or structure, but of the activity of God in Word and sacraments” – hence the Reformed ability to recognize “the ministries, sacraments, and memberships of other churches”. We need to unpack this claim. In the first place, to say that God is active in Word and sacraments is to articulate a rather important doctrine. Secondly, if, as we have earlier learned, the Church comprises those united by grace to Christ (mystical union) and called (election) into fellowship with one another – to use the shorthand: visible saints – structure of some sort is inevitable. Thirdly, the Reformed recognise the ministries, sacraments and memberships of others because they are already one in Christ with them, and their catholicity forbids sectarian division from them.

It will have become apparent that there are many good things in this book. Dr. Cornick has served his own tradition and others well. He has a pleasant way with words, as when he says that “If the first manifestation of Reformed spirituality was iconoclasm, its midwife was humanism”; or again, “Bullinger was graciously reticent before the ambiguity of Scripture, refusing to make neat hospital corners out of the ragged edges of the sheets of the story of salvation”. For the most part he writes with care. Thus, for example, he says that in Calvin’s high doctrine of the Church “the union between the believer and Christ is *given expression* in baptism” – that is, it is not *effected by* baptism. When quoting from older writings there is, in my judgment, no need to follow the generic “man/men” with [*sic*]; it smacks of toadying to radical feminists (or of thanking God that we are not like other men [*sic*]!), who actually know perfectly well what those writers meant when they, as children of their time, innocently followed the linguistic convention of their day. (What is it that we in our time do not see? We do not know, but we may be sure that our successors will proclaim it from the housetops or on the internet). On one

3 See further, Alan P. F. Sell, *Testimony and Tradition*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), ch. 8.

occasion Dr. Cornick waxes impatient. With reference to inner-Reformed divisions he writes, "The causes of division range from the weighty and majestic like the spiritual independence of the body of Christ, to the absurd like the use of musical instruments in church". The fact is that some sincere Reformed folk disagree with the use of musical instruments in church, and a minority of them write substantial pamphlets against the practice. I suspect that we shall not win hearts and minds if we begin by dismissing positions unpalatable to ourselves as absurd. Dr. Cornick more than redeems himself when, against any who would fashionably denounce all missionaries as stooges of imperialistic states, he declares that "The legacy of the missionary movement is ambiguous, yet at its best the Reformed mission was acutely aware of the radical challenge of the Gospel to the structures of colonialism", in evidence of which he cites John Philip and others in the nineteenth century who fought for native rights, and those in the twentieth century who set their faces against apartheid.

I turn briefly to three more technical observations. First, in connection with Calvin's understanding of our knowledge of God, we should do well to hold together observations that Dr. Cornick makes in two different places. On p. 33 he says that Calvin "is insistent that human beings cannot know God. God cannot be encompassed by human reason..." The latter assertion correctly captures Calvin's thought and that of the Reformed tradition at large (and not only that tradition); but the former sentence is corrected on p. 101 where Calvin is accurately said to teach that "Knowledge of God is both planted in the human mind and written into the structure of creation." As a result of the noetic effects of sin, human beings suppress the knowledge of God that they have (cf. Romans 1: 19-21) or, as Dr. Cornick puts it, "the human mind is blinded." Secondly, it is sad to find that Schleiermacher's epitaph is, "the *eminence grise* behind the development of twentieth-century liberal theology". This does not take the measure of his achievement, a significant part of which was to show the "cultured despisers" of religion that the demonstrations sought by those who advanced the failed theistic arguments did not capture the heart of genuine religion. Finally, Dr. Cornick thinks that debates over predestination can appear "arcane and absurd. We 'do' theology and spirituality very differently . . . Thanks to Barth, we also understand election christologically" – and, it might be added, confusingly – "Very few modern confessions refer to predestination . . .". I fear that some modern confessions are innocent of a number of important doctrines; but as to predestination, why may we not recover the good news in it? It is the joyous recognition of the fact that we did not get to where we are under our own steam, but that God had an eternal purpose for us. Of course, to bring out this Gospel we shall have to unscramble predestination from philosophical determinism – an intriguing, but not an impossible, task.⁴

This stimulating book prompted me to doodle with the idea of a further

4 See further, Alan P. F. Sell, *Enlightenment, Ecumenism, Evangel*, 325-338.

chapter which might be entitled, Cornick fashion, "A challenging God and a disciplined people." In such a chapter one would adumbrate the Spirit's resources for the life of discipleship. Furthermore, because the saints are also sinners, one would advert to that Gospel discipline, the objectives of which are the glory of God, the integrity of the Church and the restoration of the wayward; and would discuss church discipline in relation to baptism, the reception of members and the "godly walk" in general. Notwithstanding the fact that they have on occasion badly bungled it, to such corporate spirituality the Reformed have traditionally paid more than lip service, and it is not inconceivable that the rediscovery of it, where that is required, would reinvigorate our mission.

The book is furnished with notes and a wide-ranging bibliography, but would there were an index. Its publisher would perform a signal service if an accompanying anthology of Reformed spirituality not otherwise readily available were to be commissioned.

ALAN P. F. SELL

BOOKS RECEIVED

The Westminster Confession of Faith and the Cessation of Special Revelation: The Majority Puritan Viewpoint on Whether Extra-Biblical Prophecy is Still Possible. By Garnet Howard Milne. Milton Keynes: Paternoster 2007. Studies in Christian History and Thought. £24.99. Pp. xx + 334. ISBN 978-1-84227-521-4.

Puritan Spirituality: The Fear of God in the Affective Theology of George Swinnock. By J. Stephen Yuille. Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2007. Studies in Christian History and Thought. £19.99. Pp. xx + 242. ISBN 978-1-84227-562-7.

Holiness: The Soul of Quakerism: An Historical Analysis of the Theology of Holiness in the Quaker Tradition. By Carole Dale Spence. Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2007. Studies in Christian History and Thought. £24.99. Pp. xvii + 319. ISBN 978-1-84227-439-2.

A History of Christianity in Asia: Volume II, 1500-1900. By Samuel Hugh Moffett. New York: Orbis Books 2005 (paperback edition). £19.99. Pp. xxvi + 742. ISBN 978-1-57075-701-3.

Readers interested in reviewing one of the above volumes should contact the Reviews Editor. Contact details are on the back cover of the *Journal*.

REVIEWS

***John Owen: Reformed Catholic, Renaissance Man.* By Carl R. Trueman. Burlington VT and Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007. Great Theologians Series. Hb £50.00; Pb £16.99. Pp. viii + 132. Hb ISBN 978-0-7546-1469; Pb ISBN 978-0-7546-1470-8.**

After what feels like a long period of neglect, there seems currently to be a growing interest in the Puritans, both in their devotion and in their theological understanding. Of the Puritans there was none greater than John Owen, and he left a substantial corpus of writings which subsequent generations have tried to analyse and understand. Carl R. Trueman is one of the world's leading Puritan scholars with a particular interest in Owen's work and he does more than justice to his subject in this short volume. Through comprehensive discussion and insightful analysis, the author carefully amasses sufficient evidence to demonstrate that Owen deserves to be included in this series among the "great theologians".

The book begins by placing Owen in his historical context; it offers an account of his conversion to Puritanism in 1642 and draws on a vast amount of sources to demonstrate Owen's place among his contemporaries. Dr Trueman's knowledge of the sources is thorough and his treatment lucid and interesting; he is a master of the complexities of the seventeenth-century mindset and his clear exposition of the intricacies of doctrinal controversy is a delight to read. Chapter 2 discusses Owen's Trinitarianism. The author arrives at the conclusion that Owen provided no unique contribution to our understanding of the doctrine of God. Indeed, he merely articulated and sought to defend the orthodox Reformed view. Chapter 3 discusses Owen's Christology, where the person and work of Christ are expounded with reference to the overarching commitment to Covenant theology which both informed and shaped Owen's thinking. Chapter 4 discusses the doctrine of justification, which Dr Trueman highlights (following Luther) as "the article by which the church stands or falls". Here we are introduced to Owen's belief in the imputation of Christ's active and passive righteousness to the believer, actively fulfilling the law and passively accepting death on the cross in demonstrating an absolute obedience to God the Father. This, it can be seen, was highly influential in the formulating of the Savoy Declaration of 1658 (in the drafting of which Owen was heavily involved).

What emerges is a picture of the Puritan theologian as working in continuity with the Catholic tradition, inspired by Reformation principles, and thoroughly immersed in the discoveries of Renaissance Europe. His theology was not original; he did not seek to be novel. Instead he sought to defend the Christian faith "once delivered to the saints" and thus to draw on scripture and the church's exegetical tradition in his own exposition of the gospel. In other words, while Owen was undoubtedly a Puritan (admittedly, according to the author, as problematic a term as it is helpful), the context from which he

formulated his thinking was European and Reformed. It is this conclusion that leads Dr Trueman to describe Owen as a "Reformed Catholic" and "Renaissance Man".

The discussion encompasses an evaluation of Owen's apologia for Reformed Christian orthodoxy against the heresies of Socinianism and Arminianism as well as the weaknesses of "papism". It includes pneumatological, political and eschatological perspectives, and the evidence and the argument are presented in a scholarly but readable prose which brings Owen to life both as a Puritan pastor and as a major theological thinker. What is perhaps most significant is the reminder that theology, whether at an expositional level or at the cutting edge, is always an inherently *pastoral* task. As the author notes: "the issues at stake when it came to the doctrine of God had profound pastoral implications; and the Arminian and Socinian proposals were not simply intellectually disastrous; they were also disastrous for the economy of salvation, and thus for Christian pastoral practice, and for the experience and aspirations of the ordinary believer as well".

What made Owen stand out, of course, were his ecclesiology and his Nonconformity. These are the very aspects which, in his own lifetime, were obscured by events beyond his control. As Dr Trueman notes: "By 1674 . . . Owen was politically marginalized; the ecclesiology which he had advocated was broken and being written out of the history books like an embarrassing mistake; and the theological tradition of which he was a part was about to be overwhelmed by . . . enlightened reasonableness . . .". Yet Owen's rediscovery is to be welcomed. Not only was he able to discuss the most abstruse metaphysics in a clear and authoritative way; not only did he bring to bear European scholarship of the day on his understanding of the faith; but he also recognised that the true task of the theologian was to do this in and for the church. The final words of the book make the point as effectively as any: "Many may disagree with the details of theology; but surely none can disagree that his theological aspirations should be those of every Christian theologian . . . no one should dispute his right to be taken seriously as one of early modern England's most articulate and thoughtful theological voices". Such claims cannot go untested, but they should not be unheeded.

As an introduction to Owen's life and thought as well as his place within the wider corpus of Reformed and Reformation thinking, this book is unlikely to be surpassed; it is well researched, it is well written and it is well worth reading.

ROBERT POPE

***Trinitarian Spirituality: John Owen and the Doctrine of God in Western Devotion.* By Brian Kay. Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2007. Studies in Christian History and Thought. £19.99. Pp. xiv +214. ISBN 978-1-84227-408-8.**

Although rightly located at the heart of Christian teaching and belief – indeed it could be argued that it is what makes theological claims specifically *Christian* – the Trinity is a complex doctrine, not easily adhered to, not easily kept at the core of Christian practice, but easily (though often unwittingly) substituted with tritheism or modalism. In other words, Trinitarianism is not always obvious in the church’s devotional life, apart from the odd reference in benediction, when it is frequently obscured by poor attempts to be gender-inclusive. It is the belief that Christian worship, in practice, is modalist or binitarian (or even unitarian) that inspires this study and Dr Kay looks to the work of the seventeenth-century Puritan John Owen, as providing one source that secures Trinitarian language and theology in the worship of the church. As such the book is a contribution to the scholarly literature on Owen, but its focus is not merely historical. Instead the work looks to Owen as the inspiration to solve what the author perceives to be a more contemporary problem (or at least a problem which has plagued the church probably throughout its history, certainly from the sixteenth century, and definitely one that has yet to arrive at an adequate resolution). In a careful and intricate discussion, the author demonstrates, at least in his primary thesis, that history, and historical theology, is important in seeking to construct a relevant but apostolic theology in the twenty-first century. Perhaps this should not surprise us when we consider J. I. Packer’s (contentious) claim contained in the foreword that Owen was a “Puritan colossus and perhaps the best theologian England ever produced.”

Central to the book’s argument is the relationship of the doctrine of God to “spirituality”, understood here as Christian devotion, prayer to, meditation and worship of God. This devotion, argues the author, must be based on “the external controls of true revelation”. The Doctrine of the Trinity as representative of this external revelation is chosen largely (he says) because forms of the doctrine have remained fairly constant and consistent over 1500 years. Using Owen, Dr Kay seeks to argue that “a robust use of the doctrine of the Trinity is able to shape a quality of spiritual response to God that is not otherwise possible”. Owen argued that each of the hypostases takes on a separate functional role in salvation history. The crucial point concerns whether this approach enables a Trinitarian devotion (“spirituality” would have been a meaningless word to the Puritans and, for many, it remains so today) or in fact results in the espousal of a tritheism or a modalism and thus an abandonment of orthodoxy.

After an illuminating introduction, Dr Kay discusses (in chapter 2) how it is that a chasm has emerged between theology and spirituality in the modern world. Though cursory, this chapter is not without interest not least because of the identification of a movement in contemporary theology, largely associated

with Karl Barth and Karl Rahner, which seeks to return theology's interest to the Doctrine of God and specifically to an understanding of the Trinity. Chapter 3 goes into great detail in demonstrating that a Trinitarian Spirituality has to retain a connection with the classic doctrinal expositions of the Trinity while also paying attention to human responses to the Trinitarian God. This, as the author argues, establishes criteria for a theologically informed, Trinitarian spirituality. Chapter 4 examines historical models for Trinitarian spirituality. Early Quakerism is discussed because of its sense of the immediacy of God, while Medieval mysticism is also considered for similar reasons. Owen's work is, finally, examined as a representative of late Puritanism, although it must be said that it is not entirely clear how truly representative he was, given that the author emphasises Owen's own call to the Christian to nurture different relationships with the different Persons of the Godhead. In a comprehensive, wide-ranging and comparative study, Dr Kay concludes that the Puritans are misunderstood as having advocated cold rationalism and a morbid introspection. Instead, with the Reformers, the Puritans based much of their devotional literature truly on the experience of God's grace. Chapter 5 goes on to test the author's thesis by looking at how the discussion of Trinitarian theology has implications for devotion. The final chapter offers some analytical points in conclusion regarding Owen's construction of a truly Trinitarian spirituality and whether or not he departed from orthodoxy in order to endorse actual heresy.

While the distribution of particular tasks to the different divine hypostases has been rejected within orthodox Trinitarianism, Dr Kay concludes that Owen remained firmly within the tradition that saw human relationships with God as primarily being with the Father, through the Son by the power of the Holy Spirit. While it comes as a relief that the author confirms Owen's orthodoxy, the argument may leave the reader with more questions than answers. Lucidly written, this remains a difficult work simply because it concentrates heavily on doctrinal discussion. This is never something that is easily debated, though it must be said that the diligent reader will certainly reap rewards from the work providing there is a willingness to make an effort. For apart from a (very welcome) exposition of the work of a theologian who tends to be forgotten in any discussion of the English theological tradition, as well as by the descendants of the ecclesiological system he did so much to nurture, it also raises a far more crucial question to Christian witness in the present. If we are serious about Trinitarianism, should we not make more of an effort to be thoroughly Trinitarian in our devotion? In the words of Richard Lints, printed on the back cover, this book is "a thoughtful and persistent attempt to explicate the connection between confessing a Trinitarian God and actually living as if it mattered." As a result it can be commended to those interested in the history of the Reformed and Dissenting traditions in England, those interested in Christian Doctrine and those concerned with the expression of Christian faith in the twenty-first century.

ROBERT POPE

***Brave Community: The Digger Movement in the English Revolution.* By John Gurney. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2007. £55.00. Pp. xiv + 236, ISBN 978-0-7190-6102-8.**

When Billy Bragg opened his set at the 2007 Greenbelt Festival with Leon Rosselson's anthem "The World Turned Upside Down", it was a powerful reminder that the legacy of the tiny Digger movement of 1649 is still strong more than three-and-a-half centuries after its demise. Though accorded only a footnote in most general histories of the seventeenth century, the Diggers continue to fascinate academics, thinkers and activists alike. Their conviction that the earth was created a "common treasury for all" still resonates among the dispossessed and disempowered, while their commitment to make their vision a reality, in the face of sustained hostility and hardship, serves as a model of faith-in-action in the best tradition of non-violent action.

Unlike the other radical movements of their time, the Diggers had only one leader and theorist, the Wigan-born sometime cloth merchant Gerrard Winstanley; and because his writings form the bulk of the Digger corpus and the main contemporary source of our knowledge of the movement's ideas and development, he has been the focus of Digger studies hitherto. What John Gurney does in this book is take a wider view of the Digger movement in Surrey and beyond, drawing on his own original, painstaking research and challenging many assumptions about its composition, connections and impact.

The result is an absolutely fascinating study, even (or perhaps especially) for those who consider themselves already well acquainted with the Diggers and their project. Gurney's attention to detail is second to none, and the way that he has followed up leads and filled in gaps means that he has given us as full a picture as we can hope for of his subject. He has also, in the process, nailed several myths about the Diggers, not least the suggestion that most were not connected to the area in which they operated and attracted hostility mostly from locals upset about "outsiders" invading their common land. Some of his research has already appeared in print, but to have everything together in one coherent narrative is a hugely welcome addition to Winstanley scholarship, and Gurney has left us massively in his debt.

The detail this book supplies about Winstanley himself also makes for gripping reading. As Gurney rightly says, much recent scholarship has focused on the Diggers' writing and thinking, leaving his career and intellectual development relatively untouched. Gurney puts his investigative skills to good use as he pieces together Winstanley's life, and if the Digger remains an ultimately enigmatic and unfathomable figure, he is now just that bit more rounded and complete. Gurney revisits key questions surrounding Winstanley's life – why he moved to London and then Surrey, the consequences of his marriages, what influenced his thinking, what he did after the Digging – and gets us rethinking what we thought we knew about the man. And lest it be thought Gurney's interest is limited to the minutiae of Winstanley's life, his ideas, including his theology, also get a critical examination in this book.

For a work based on so much primary research, *Brave Community* is immensely readable. "Wears its learning light" may be a well-worn phrase among reviewers but it is an appropriate one here. The footnotes are generous and helpful, and while the absence of a bibliography is disappointing, one can encounter in the notes virtually every article and book produced on Winstanley and the Diggers in the last hundred years. Gurney's obvious affection for his subject is another appealing feature, though there is nothing hagiographic in his treatment of any of the Diggers, including their leader.

We have had impressions of Winstanley in film, in song, in drama and in fiction. In April 1999 we even saw a re-enactment of the original occupation of St George's Hill, exactly 350 years after the event. Now we have the nearest thing we shall get to a biography, perhaps even the definitive work for a generation or more. This is not to say there is nothing more to be known about Winstanley, or the whole Digging experiment, but given the range of resources Gurney has used and the thoroughness with which he has mined them, one is inclined to think that anything further will be uncovered by serendipity (as, indeed, some previous evidence has been).

With a critical edition of Winstanley's writings due to appear shortly we may be set for a revival of interest in "Digger studies". If Winstanley and his followers will in future get more than the "footnote treatment" they currently enjoy from historians, it will be in no small part due to this book.

ANDREW BRADSTOCK

Transatlantic Revivalism: Popular Evangelicalism in Britain and America, 1790-1865. By Richard Carwardine. Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2006. *Studies in Evangelical History and Thought*. Pp. xviii + 249. £19.99. ISBN 13: 978-1-84227-373-9.

Paternoster are to be warmly congratulated on reprinting Richard Carwardine's important work on evangelical revivalism in their "Studies in Evangelical History and Thought" series almost thirty years after its first publication. *Transatlantic Revivalism* has long been difficult to get hold of, particularly outside of university libraries, but historians of evangelicalism, and protestant Christianity more generally, now have this important work available in an attractive, and even more importantly, affordable format. It is to be hoped that this will make the book more easily accessible to the general reader also.

It is to Carwardine's credit that *Transatlantic Revivalism* has stood the test of time so well. It is still one of the first ports of call for anyone wanting to understand popular Protestantism in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries; but its significance also lies in its impact on a subsequent generation of historians who were inspired to explore some of its main themes in greater detail, and the way in which it set the parameters for much of the subsequent historical debate on the nature of religious revivalism.

First, it was one of the first works of professional historical scholarship to take religious revivals seriously on their own terms. E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963) had cast a long shadow over interpretations of popular Protestantism, particularly its Methodist variety. Shunning a narrowly political interpretation of revivalism, Carwardine attempts to understand the religious dynamic at the heart of revivalism, investing the rituals of popular Protestantism with significance because they met tangible religious needs rather than resorting to more reductionistic interpretations. His interpretation contrasts sharply with John Kent's *Holding the Fort* (1978) which appeared in the same year, and which adopted a dismissive, even cynical, attitude to revivalism characterising it as at once anti-modern, anti-intellectual and anti-climactic.

Carwardine's analysis also explores the internal dynamic of revivalism. He charts important changes in the meaning of revivalism, citing the crucial influence of Charles Finney, whose *Lectures on Revivals*, first published in 1835, had an enormous impact and lay behind the 1859 revival in Britain and the United States. Finneyite ideas, which stressed that the application of certain techniques could almost guarantee the outbreak of a revival, altered the way in which evangelicals thought about and planned for revivals of religion. Despite a spirited rear-guard action from more conservative Calvinist elements within American evangelicalism, Finney's understanding of revivals became widely accepted; it is the story of this revolution in thinking and practice that lies at the heart of this book. Carwardine's thesis has been largely borne out by subsequent work, although recent studies of George Whitefield by Harry Stout

and Frank Lambert, highlighting his use of marketing and dramatic techniques to promote his revivals, should warn against too sharp a division between eighteenth- and nineteenth-century conceptions of religious revivals. In addition, some of the recent work by David Bebbington has developed Carwardine's approach and shown that the close study of individual revivals can reveal how competing theories of revival often came into collision within a relatively small geographical area.

Transatlantic Revivalism has also made a contribution to the context in which revivalism is now studied. As its title makes clear, Carwardine adopted an Atlantic perspective to his work; he interpreted the international evangelical community as to all intents and purposes an homogenised regional unit, with influences and ideas criss-crossing the Atlantic Ocean. Recent developments in Atlantic history, championed by Bernard Bailyn, have stressed the resonance of this kind of trans-Atlantic cultural exchange. Much subsequent work on the history of Evangelicalism, not just revivalism, has followed Carwardine's lead by adopting a trans-Atlantic approach. Fuelled by the volumes edited by Mark Noll, David Bebbington and George Rawlyk in the early 1990s, evangelicalism can no longer be treated within hermetically sealed national or denominational religious communities. Inter-Varsity Press's new multi-volume series, "A History of Evangelicalism" amply bears out the continuing relevance of this approach.

It is for these reasons that Carwardine's work remains stimulating reading for anybody interested in the history of evangelical religion and popular religion in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It is to be hoped that this new edition will in turn inspire another generation of historians of evangelical religion to ask searching questions about the nature and significance of religious revivalism.

DAVID CERJ JONES

***The Sunday School Movement: Studies in the Growth and Decline of Sunday Schools.* Edited by Stephen Orchard and John H. Y. Briggs. Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2007. Studies in Christian History and Thought. Pp. xx + 169. £19.99 ISBN 978-1-84227-363-0.**

Only one per cent of the children who once comprised the Sunday Schools of Britain ever came through to membership of the Church. So it is said, soberingly for those who gave a lifetime of service to this important parachurch activity. This book, however, clearly explains why that is so, as well as telling so much more of the growth and decline of the Sunday School.

The book owes its origin to the Association of Denominational Historical Societies and Cognate Libraries who, in turn, gave active support to a conference held at Westminster College, Cambridge, in 2004, organised to celebrate the bicentenary of the foundation of the National Sunday School Union. Nine papers delivered at that conference, together with an introductory chapter by Dr Stephen Orchard, the book's co-editor, form the substance of the book. I would have found it helpful to have been told more about the contributors than the meagre details given in the list at the beginning of the book. Evidently they have detailed knowledge of their particular aspect of the subject, but it would have been interesting as well as illuminating to know more about their experience of the phenomenon upon which they set out to comment. Their choice of subject is, perhaps inevitably, idiosyncratic, though each paper illuminates its own aspect of the general theme.

Stephen Orchard reminds us that the Sunday School movement, in the minds of Robert Raikes and others who founded it and others who sustained it throughout the nineteenth century, set out as a mission enterprise, primarily to cater for poor and ill-educated children in the community. Its aim was thus always different from that of the denominational catechetical class which sought to nurture the children of Christian families in the Christian Faith. With the passing of the 1870 Education Act and the provision of state education for the masses, its primary role became steadily less relevant and, at the same time, a nurturing role, for which it was institutionally ill-equipped, came to be expected of it.

Grayson Ditchfield describes the development of the Sunday School movement within Rational Dissent – that is, within the Unitarian and Free Christian Churches.

John H. Y. Briggs, the book's co-editor, presents a paper on the Baptist contribution to the movement in the nineteenth century, showing how the schools were increasingly expected to act as a converting agency among children. Here, and in other chapters of the book, attention is drawn to the frequent tensions between the organisers of Sunday Schools and ministers in the churches.

Faith Bowers describes in meticulous detail the work of a family of business men, the Benhams, members of Bloomsbury Baptist Church in London, and their deep commitment to the development of the Sunday School movement,

reminding us of the immense commitment of lay people of this calibre in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in all denominations and in the emerging work of the National Sunday School Union.

Clyde Binfield has an intriguing chapter that perhaps only he could write, on the views and attitudes of P. T. Forsyth to children in the church – not a feature of this great Edwardian Congregational theologian's ministry of which one had hitherto heard – or perhaps expected to hear. He focuses particularly upon children's addresses delivered by Forsyth in his pastorates in Yorkshire, London, Manchester and Cambridge.

Hugh McLeod writes about the English Sunday School and sport in the years 1869-1939, pointing out the great deal of attention, often controversial, paid to this aspect of Sunday School life in that period.

Jack Priestley offers a chapter on the significant involvement of George Hamilton Archibald, the Canadian founder of Westhill College, Birmingham, and George Cadbury, the Quaker chocolate king – another reminder of the tremendous contribution made by wealthy industrialists and business-men to this movement.

Geoff Robson and Doreen Rosman look around them at where the Sunday School movement has all but disappeared to in the twenty-first century and look ahead to where its insights and experience might be applied in this totally different social environment.

Thus it will be seen that this fascinating field has been thoroughly researched and attractively presented. Having had a professional interest in Christian Education in the Church over many years, I enjoyed this book very much indeed. It is, in fact, a useful development of Philip Cliff's monumental history of the Sunday School Movement 1780-1980, published in 1986 by the National Christian Education Council and, for a thorough study of the subject, should be read alongside that book. It might seem churlish to ask for more, but I was surprised not to find chapters on two aspects of the subject: one on the rise and development of the Family Church Movement initiated by H. A. Hamilton within the Congregational Churches in the mid-twentieth century and its rapid spread among most of the Free Churches; the other on the Welsh Sunday School scene, significantly different from the English situation.

The book is well presented and helpfully indexed. As David Thompson says on the cover, "Social and religious historians will gain much from this book". So too will all who take the Christian Education of young people seriously in today's challenging climate.

C. KEITH FORECAST

***Dissent and the Gothic Revival: Papers from a Study Day at Union Chapel, Islington.* Edited by Bridget Cherry. London: The Chapels Society, 2007. £15 (+ £2.50 p + p). ISBN 13:978-0-9545061-1-7. Available from Dr C. J. Skidmore, 31 Melrose Avenue, Reading, RG6 7BN.**

Five lectures at a Victorian Society Study Day at Union Chapel appear here as five essays about the Victorian Chapel. Whilst they celebrate the 200th anniversary of Union Chapel's original foundation, and two essays are about the second, present, Chapel, the scope of the book is broader, and indeed reaches beyond architecture. Bridget Cherry's hope is that the book will offer "a better understanding of the role of the Victorian chapel in all its aspects [and] lead to a greater appreciation of the fabrics of the buildings we have inherited." Its primary role, of course, is as a place of worship. All the writers happily remember this.

The core essay is the third, by Christopher Wakeling, the present President of the Chapels Society, who teaches architectural history in the University of Keele. He offers, with a plethora of illustrations and plans, a survey of religious building from the eighteenth century onwards. He draws attention to the influence of Pugin, particularly on the Unitarians, but suggests that the paper on Ecclesiastical Architecture in the *Congregational Year Book* of 1847, probably by John Blackburn, was the seminal influence for Nonconformity with its commendation of Gothic for flexibility and economy, and its rejection of interior design suitable more for sacerdotal than congregational worship. Frederick Jobson influenced Methodist building in a similar direction. Even so, other styles flourished and, perhaps perversely, the illustrations of classical, hexagonal, octagonal and Romanesque chapels are the ones the eyes dwell on. Wakeling's reach includes European Protestant church architecture and he notes that the importance of English nonconformist buildings was recognized in German academic circles as early as 1893. He attributes this in part to the writings of James Cubitt, Union Chapel's architect.

There follows an essay by Chris Pond, a local historian, drawing mainly on examples in Essex, on the building and organization of the Victorian Sunday School. He makes the interesting point that the local birth-rate could prompt Sunday School building ahead of a chapel. The familiar scheme, found in a grand way in Union Chapel, for an assembly area, with class-rooms leading off it, was an American import. Then Derek Watson, a retired church organist, writes on music in Baptist and Congregational chapels from 1820. Watson is particularly good on forms of musical accompaniment in chapels before the organ, which are now beyond memory (apart from the enthusiasts who sing and play in West Gallery choirs). We are still, however, indebted to the Victorians for their revival of many pre-Reformation tunes and he lists these with Victorian compositions. New styles of singing in the period, including Henry Allon's psalmody, and the influence of his organist, Henry Gauntlett, on the supply of chants and chapel anthems, are noted.

Union Chapel thus crops up in all the essays. But the first two are devoted

to it. Anthony Richardson, the retiring architect, describes the structure, much of the detail only revealed in recent renovations. He refers to the unexpected choice of James Cubitt as architect, and the building sub-committee's weekly monitoring of progress, when crucial aesthetic decisions were taken on the hoof. Wood, stone, marble and brick were the best. The organ, a Willis, was not to be shown off, but concealed behind an iron grill – the cover illustration of the book. All 1350 seats were to have a clear view of the pulpit. They did, and the acoustics proved to be perfect, but coats had to be worn in winter. As the illustrations show, it was and remains a cathedral of Nonconformity.

Clyde Binfield's account of the people who built Union Chapel captures the ethos and spirit of High Victorian Congregationalism, but he begins by reminding us that the first chapel (1806) was the one that gave meaning to "Union". Its members were Anglican and Dissenting evangelicals with ministers of both sorts, and using the Prayer Book. By the rebuilding, however, in 1875/6 the Anglicans had moved down the road to the very low St Mary's and Henry Allon was on his own, the Prayer Book, and indeed Watts's "whims", no longer used. There are two photographs of hirsute deacons, solid, respectable, worthy, with Vineys, Spicers and Glovers among the better known names, and there are two maps suggesting that the development of Canonbury and Highbury was the source of the membership of roughly 700 and a Sunday School of 2500. With Harcourt and Islington Chapels a quarter mile in each direction, and half-a-dozen other Congregational chapels within easy reach, we are reminded of an unrecognizable past, whose disappearance is as remarkable as the phenomenon itself. "Union's people," says Binfield, "are not just dead, they have vanished."

Binfield is at home of course among Union's members and their connections. H. H. Asquith had been a Union boy, his mother an attender and his guardians, her brothers, the Willanses, were members. It was natural that he should open a Union Grand Bazaar when Prime Minister (and to Binfield as natural that a Betjemann should organize it). Gladstone, a friend of Allon's, missed the stone-laying but was at the opening. Lesser names teem in the text, but it is Binfield's touching portrait of Henry Allon which stays in the mind. The present Union Chapel was his concept and it remains his memorial.

JOHN HANDBY THOMPSON

***The 1851 Religious Census of Northamptonshire.* Edited by Graham S. Ward. Northamptonshire Record Society, 2007. Pp. viii + 266. £9.50. ISBN 0 901275 65 4.**

In recent years various local Record Societies have been publishing the original returns of the 1851 Census of Religious Worship, usually with an Introduction and appropriate maps and tables. The work of transcribing the returns for Northamptonshire was done by four members of an adult education class tutored by Victor Hatley at the University Centre, Northampton, and the results have been edited by Graham Ward. Most readers will be more interested in the returns than the introduction. Because these are set out in the form of continuous prose paragraphs for each place of worship, even though there is a guide to the different kinds of returns sought from Anglicans, Nonconformists and certain other groups such as Quakers, it is not easy to grasp at a quick glance, which questions have been answered. In particular the figures, which usually attract most interest, do not instantly stand out from the prose setting. On the other hand there is a good set of footnotes to indicate the individuals who filled in the returns, identified from the usual sources such as local directories, biographies and other articles on local history. No source is given for the information about Church of England clergy, but it is probably the *Diocesan Calendar* or the *Clergy List*. The *Baptist Handbook*, the *Congregational Year Book*, the *Minutes of the Wesleyan and Primitive Methodist Conferences* etc. do not appear to have been consulted. The tables and maps are rather disappointing. Tables are only given for the county as a whole; there is no distinction by registration district, and no hint of any difference between the registration county and the historic county, which is often a problem. The maps are based on parish boundaries, and shaded according to the index of attendance; thus it is not possible to get any sense of rivers, roads, railways or other elements in the historical geography of Northamptonshire, which may have influenced the distribution of Nonconformity. Because the index of attendance, i.e. the total number of attendances at any time of day as a percentage of the total population, is the only measure used for the maps, and indeed for most of the analytical discussion, the possibility of reflection on other aspects of the statistics is precluded. Thus the introductory analysis is disappointing, and not comparable with that produced in some other counties by scholars like Michael Watts and Clive Field. Nonconformist historians will not be surprised to discover that Baptists were the strongest group in Northamptonshire, followed closely by Wesleyans, with the Independents not too far behind in third place. There is also a list of missing returns and a useful comparison between the unofficial census of 1881 and that of 1851 from the *Northampton Mercury* for 12 November 1881 in an Appendix, together with letters commenting on these figures from the *Northamptonshire Echo* for 19 November.

***Friends of Religious Equality: Nonconformist Politics in Mid-Victorian England.* By Timothy Larsen. Milton Keynes: Paternoster, (New edition, 2007). Studies in Christian History and Thought. Pp. xii + 300. £24.99. ISBN 978-1-84227-402-6.**

The main focus of this excellent book, recently reissued as part of the Paternoster Press series "Studies in Christian History and Thought", is the political theories and policies of Congregationalists and Baptists in the mid-Victorian period, from 1847 to 1867. Larsen refers to these as Dissenters to distinguish them from other prominent Nonconformist denominations in this period, especially the Unitarians and the Wesleyan Methodists.

The central principle, as the title of the book implies, is religious equality, which for mid-Victorian Dissenters meant, most importantly, the removal of all civil disabilities from non-Anglicans throughout the United Kingdom and the disestablishment of the Anglican Church in England, Wales and Ireland. In one important sense, though, the title of the book may mislead some in our multi-cultural age. The mid-Victorian Dissenters did not believe that all religions were equal with regard to their truth claims. On the contrary, they believed passionately that non-Christian religions were false, and even that some Christian churches, most notably the Unitarians and Roman Catholics, were in grave error, if not heretical. It was not religions that were equal but human beings, and one of the most important ways in which this equality was to be protected was through the defence of freedom of thought and conscience, even of those with whom one profoundly disagreed.

This attitude was summed up in the Dissenters' claim that tolerance of non-Anglicans by the British state – which had in large measure been granted by the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts in 1828 – was insufficient. Toleration implied at best a paternalistic willingness by the state to allow Dissenters the freedom to disagree with the beliefs of the Established church. What was really required was that the state should withdraw from making any judgements and laying down any guidelines as to what religious opinions people held. In terms borrowed from the policies and practice of the United States, from which the Dissenters drew inspiration and encouragement, the state should be neutral in matters of religion, seeking to guarantee complete equality before the law to all people. Nor was this belief in religious equality restricted to Christians. Dissenters gave unequivocal support to Jewish emancipation, a move firmly resisted by many in the Anglican establishment – including the bishops in the House of Lords who regularly voted against permitting Jews to be elected to Parliament. Even more radical was their belief in the religious equality of Hindus and Moslems in the British Empire and their willingness to support in principle the right of Hindus and Moslems to sit in Parliament.

These radical views explain why Dissenters held more liberal views on such matters as Sabbath observance and prohibition than many Anglicans who shared similar theological views. The key difference was that Nonconformists

elevated equality before the law and the absence of state interference in people's religious beliefs and practice to a fundamental political principle. Yet, as Larsen shows, although the Dissenters had well developed political principles which could be stated and defended in their own terms they were not divorced from their theological roots. He illustrates this point by reference to Joseph Sturge, who maintained that "his political creed was based upon the Scriptural injunction, 'Whatever ye would that men should do unto you, do ye so unto them.'" "That text alone," Larsen points out, "if taken seriously, as indeed it was [by very many Dissenters], could lead a man to seek to abolish slavery, unjust Corn Laws and religious discrimination. The golden rule embodied the spirit of the principle of religious equality for militant Dissenters . . .".

Larsen has provided an illuminating case study of how an important group of Christian churches strove to develop political principles which complemented their theological beliefs but which could be persuasive to those of different theological opinions, or of none. Not the least of the many strengths of this book is that it reminds us that although the mid-Victorian Dissenters lived in a cultural milieu very different from ours, their passionate commitment to equality and justice is still both relevant and challenging today.

DAVID SULLIVAN

***Who They Were in the Reformed Churches of England and Wales, 1901-2000.* Edited by Clyde Binfield and John Taylor. Donington: Shaun Tyas for the United Reformed Church History Society, 2007. Pp. xii + 254. £19.95. ISBN 978-1900289-825. Available (post free) from Shaun Tyas/Paul Watkins Publishing, 1 High Street, Donington, Lincolnshire, PE11 4TA.**

This invaluable collection of biographical studies of significant figures in the denominations now combined as the United Reformed Church actually extends more widely. It contains entries not only for the Churches of Christ, the Welsh Independents, the Congregationalists and the Presbyterians, but also for the Congregational Federation (Reginald Cleaves), the Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion (Gilbert Kirby) and the Evangelical Fellowship of Congregational Churches (Alan Tovey). Geographically, the coverage is also admirably broad, incorporating missionaries such as Joseph Wing whose contribution was overwhelmingly to the land to which they were sent (he became the courageous general secretary of the United Congregational Church of South Africa from 1967 to 1987). Its chronological range is ample too. Several individuals whose main achievements took place in the nineteenth century are included. D. W. Simon, for instance, principal successively of the

Congregational colleges in Birmingham, Edinburgh and Yorkshire from 1869 onwards, receives treatment of his whole career. At the other end of the scale a few living contemporaries find a place. This extensive time-span creates its own problems. Quite a number of others who are essentially Victorian figures (for example, W. H. Wills, the Bristol cigarette manufacturer) lived on into the twentieth century and yet are not noticed. Again, the coverage of personalities remaining alive at the time of publication, perhaps unavoidably, tends to the bland. Perhaps a little shaving at both ends might have benefited the volume, especially since certain figures with undeniable twentieth-century significance do not find a place. Joseph Compton-Rickett, chairman of the Congregational Union in 1907 and author of *Congregationalism and Modern Life* (1915), is not there; nor is Albert Spicer, treasurer of LMS down to 1910 and of Mansfield College down to 1921, though in the introduction we are promised articles on the Spicers and other families in future issues of this *Journal*. But the task of selecting subjects and corraling entries must have been immense, and it has been carried through with a remarkable degree of success. The rate of disappointment at not finding hoped-for entries will be much lower than for the twentieth-century section of the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

Readers, even those immersed in the traditions covered by the volume, will discover a great deal. Few will know about Harold Moody, the black president from 1931 of the League of Coloured Peoples and from 1936 of Christian Endeavour. Many will have supposed, like this reviewer, that the artist Frank Salisbury always remained a Methodist, but he turns out to have been a member of Lyndhurst Road Congregational Church, Hampstead, and later of the City Temple. Here will be found model all-round appraisals, like that by Alan Sell of Howard Stanley, the general secretary of the Congregational Union who instigated the shift towards the foundation of the Congregational Church in 1966, and fascinating details, like the information that Thomas Lewis, principal of Memorial College, Brecon, was notable for motor accidents. The judgements in which many of the articles abound are immensely stimulating. It is claimed that perhaps the most important sentence in twentieth-century theology is P. T. Forsyth's dictum that "The atonement did not procure grace, it flowed from grace", and Robertson Nicoll, the waspish Presbyterian editor of the *British Weekly*, is superbly characterised in the comment that he "despised failure". The entries by Clyde Binfield are invariably a treat. They always (though this quality is not consistently displayed elsewhere) illuminate the formation of his subjects and they include inimitable phraseology. "His energetically mature youthfulness" we are told of the theologian J. S. Whale, "and slight frame suggested nervous strength". Again J. L. A. Paton, who became high master of Manchester Grammar School, was an "open-air cold bath sort of man". There is immense wealth here.

It is a boon that every article begins with a summary of positions held, though denominational allegiance is omitted and so sometimes a reader unfamiliar with the traditions covered by the volume will not realise the body to which any particular subject belonged. It could be objected that in a book

professedly about leaders of the denominations there should be no place for such figures as Lord Beaverbrook, Lord Reith or Harold Wilson, but it has to be confessed that they add an extra dimension to the collection. Apart from being a uniquely useful work of reference, the book provides material for reflection on the trajectory of twentieth-century Christianity. Three particular points struck this reader. One was the role of Mansfield College, Oxford, creating serious theological engagement at a high level. Repeatedly entries record attendance at the college for those who went on to give leadership. That is true not just of those who attained eminence as scholars: Leslie Tizard, for example, was best known for his pastoral guidance, whether by mouth or pen. Nor is it just true of the broader minded: Colin Gunton fostered something of a conservative turn in mainstream British theology. Mansfield College, it is plain, fulfilled the ambitions of its first principal, A. M. Fairbairn, for injecting intellectual professionalism into the ministry. A second point was the mutual indebtedness of the Student Christian Movement and the churches of the Reformed traditions. Thus Malcolm Spencer, successively Theological Colleges Secretary, Assistant General Secretary and Social Services Secretary of the SCM, was hugely influential in its formative phase. Conversely Lesslie Newbigin, Presbyterian and bishop, was moulded by the movement. The trajectories of the SCM and the eventual constituencies of the United Reformed Church were closely bound together. Thirdly, the ecumenical endeavours of the twentieth century, whose chief institutional outcome was the URC, were equally entwined with the denominations flowing into it. This denouement was partly a result of involvement in the SCM, as the case of Bishop Newbigin illustrates. Again, William Robinson, the weightiest Churches of Christ theologian, was the first chairman of the Faith and Order Department of the British Council of Churches. Joseph Wing was known as "Mr Unity". Major impetus for ecumenical ventures came from people whose careers are recorded in this volume. So this book not only reveals the biographies of a host of fascinating individuals, but it also illuminates some of the main ecclesiastical developments of the twentieth century.

D. W. BEBBINGTON

***Carpe Diem: Or, A Historian Sets out His Stall.* Speech given by Clyde Binfield on the occasion of the Centenary Dinner of Trinity Church, Sutton, 17 May 2008. Sutton: Trinity Church, 2008. Pp. 20. £2.00. Available from Revd Martin Camroux, 35 Arundel Road, Cheam, Surrey, SM2 6EU (cheques payable to “Trinity, Sutton”).**

I am at something of a loss to decide what to make of this booklet. First delivered as an after-dinner speech at the centenary of the Methodist/United Reformed Church in Sutton, Surrey, it covers an immense amount of ground, in much detail, in the course of its fifteen pages – so much so, that I wonder whether its first hearers might have been at something of a loss too. To read it is stimulating and enriching; to hear it might have been something of an athletic exercise. Starting from the local context in Sutton, it moves through nineteenth- and -twentieth century Free Church architecture, ecclesiology and theology, stops off briefly at places as diverse as Cheam, Epsom, Sheffield and Saltaire, takes in characters as different as Max Clifford, Liam Byrne, Rowan Williams, Charles Dickens, Wilkie Collins, Charles Darwin, J. S. Mill, Stephen Orchard (not named, but recognisable) – and Boris Johnson and his four children (named) Cassia Peaches, Milo Arthur, Lara Lettice, and Theodore Apollo. Have I whetted your appetite? If so, and if you read this characteristically racy, even eccentric speech, at its heart you will find the speaker’s main thesis: that History can help, illuminate and be fun – if we “carpe diem”. All credit to the church in Sutton (and probably to its minister) for inviting him to lecture on this unique occasion. All credit to the speaker for turning what could have been a mutually congratulatory, even nostalgic occasion, into one of interest, challenge, and fun.

C. KEITH FORECAST

***Reinventing English Evangelicalism, 1966-2001: A Theological and Sociological Study.* By Rob Warner. Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2007. Studies in Evangelical History and Thought. Pp. xx + 284. £19.99. ISBN 978-1-84227-570-2.**

Forty years ago scholarly and analytical literature about evangelicalism and its half-sister fundamentalism in the English-speaking world was very limited – and almost non-existent outside North America – but since then the trickle has become a torrent on both sides of the Atlantic and threatens to overwhelm anyone foolhardy enough to test the waters. And so Dr Rob Warner of the University of Wales Lampeter is to be commended for his brave decision to take the plunge in this study of evangelicalism in England during the last third of the twentieth century.

In his foreword Professor David Bebbington, the doyen of historians of the British evangelical movement and one of the editors of the series in which this monograph appears, sets out Warner's basic thesis: a movement which was unitary until 1966 thereafter goes in two directions and becomes increasingly polarised as a consequence of the very public disagreement between Martyn Lloyd-Jones and John Stott at the Evangelical Alliance's National Assembly of Evangelicals. On the one hand there are the conversionist-activists, on the other the biblicist-crucicentrics. This terminology is actually based on the "Bebbington quadrilateral", his widely accepted definition of evangelicalism as a movement with four enduring characteristics.

Warner's own background was as a participant within and latterly a more critical observer of the Evangelical Alliance (EA), Spring Harvest, and Alpha, three leading examples of conversionist-activist entrepreneurial endeavour. Following the appointment of Clive Calver as General Director of the EA in 1982 both the EA and Spring Harvest enjoyed remarkable and interrelated growth for about fifteen years until the bubble of inflated and unrealistic expectations (what Warner aptly calls "Hyper-Calverism") burst. Whether the widespread popularity of the Alpha courses since the early 1990s will end in the same way remains to be seen. Warner has much valuable data and comment on all this, and it represents probably the most satisfactory section of the book. Its worth might have been enhanced by a comparison with more conservative forms of pan-evangelicalism, such as the British Evangelical Council, Word Alive ("the thinking person's Spring Harvest"), and the Christianity Explored course.

When he turns to examine the competing biblicist-crucicentric axis he is much less sure-footed or empathetic. If the conversionist-activists are sometimes tinged with charismatic influences, the biblicists are often tainted by Calvinism and fundamentalism (though he fails to define either term, which is especially unfortunate in the case of the controversial and controverted F-word). Warner claims that before the Lloyd-Jones – Stott split there was a Calvinistic hegemony among English evangelicals, but after 1966 some biblicists on the right moved towards unreconstructed fundamentalism, making

such doctrines as inerrancy and penal substitution the litmus test for authentic evangelicalism, while others took a more progressive stance, embracing and advocating a generous and inclusive orthodoxy.

There are several difficulties with this interpretation. In the forty or so years before 1966, English evangelicals were predominantly pietistic and anti-intellectual and the convinced Calvinists were largely confined to relatively few Anglican low churchmen and Strict and Particular Baptists. Furthermore there was a significant liberal evangelical movement, particularly in the Church of England, whose origins can be traced back to the late nineteenth-century challenges to conservative theology from German higher criticism, Darwinian evolution, and Freudian psychology. Unfortunately liberal evangelicalism has not been the subject of much scholarly analysis and Warner virtually ignores it. And yet there may be far more continuity between this liberalism, much of it latent and implicit in third-level theological education, and the post-1966 progressive evangelicals than has been generally recognised.

It is a pity that F. F. Bruce is nowhere mentioned in this book. He represents an interesting pioneering example of an evangelical biblical scholar who utilised a liberal critical methodology to reach almost invariably conservative conclusions. While Warner refers to James Barr's attempt to tar all evangelicals with the fundamentalist brush in his 1977 polemic, he fails to mention that Barr makes a notable exception in the case of Bruce, his colleague at Manchester. The Inter-Varsity Fellowship/Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship, portrayed as increasingly hardline-exclusivist by Warner, yet continued to accommodate scholars as diverse as N. T. Wright, Michael Green, Don Carson, and I. Howard Marshall during this period. The archetypically evangelical Keswick Convention moved in a more Reformed direction from its Second Blessing pietism at precisely the time when Warner claims the Calvinistic hegemony was shattered. The recent troubles at Wycliffe Hall, Oxford, described by Warner as evidence of "the expansive certainties and oppositional mindset of calvinistic-exclusivism" display in fact the usual mixture of personality clashes and ecclesiastical politics under the cover of professedly high-minded theological principle. Even Warner's *bête-noire*, the redoubtable Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones, was not a fully-fledged five-point Calvinist, showed notable sympathy towards the emerging charismatic movement, and remained an accredited minister in the most liberal of the Trinitarian Presbyterian denominations in these islands. His erstwhile running-mate, the Anglican evangelical theologian J. I. Packer, combines a strong advocacy of the inerrancy of Scripture and the penal substitutionary theory of the atonement with a leading role in Catholics and Evangelicals Together, a movement not just for dialogue but for co-belligerency. Time and again evangelical leaders and organisations show themselves to be complex and contradictory phenomena which refuse to be constrained by conceptual frameworks and which defy neat categorisation.

Dr Warner lectures in the sociology of religion, and I confess that at times I felt in imminent danger of being submerged in a sea of specialist jargon, as in

the following rather ironic example: "Within his somewhat opaque diction, Thiselton appears to agree with Gadamer, for whom meaning always exceeds authorial intent, that there is no presuppositionless interpretation and meaning is always open, incomplete and can only be determined in an open, iterative process, within which textual understanding is always creative and not merely reproductive". The proofreading is generally of a high standard throughout the book, though the section headed "Ecstasy and Illusion" commencing on page 82 appears to have strayed from page 73. The index is inadequate: the page references are quite often incorrect, and phrases and terms are indexed rather than concepts, while abbreviations of organisations which appear in the text are not always spelt out in either the index or the list of abbreviations. However, the bibliography of approximately 800 items (chiefly books, with few periodical articles or pamphlets) is very comprehensive and impressive evidence of a determination to master the complexities of modern evangelicalism in England.

Dr Warner may have bitten off more than anyone can stomach or chew in his ambitious survey of what sometimes seems like 57 varieties of contemporary evangelicalism in all its contrariness. Nevertheless this study is provocative and stimulating and should encourage other scholars to examine the past roots, present condition, and future prospects of evangelical Christianity in Britain and Ireland.

STEPHEN GREGORY