

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The Necessity of God: Modern Theology and the Church's Witness

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## Abstract

The philosophical positing of the necessity of God implies that there is a responsibility placed upon the Church to remind all humankind of our contingency and to speak of God's presence especially in times of national and international crisis. Recent experience has exposed a certain silence from the Churches and notably from their leadership – notable examples would be the Covid-19 pandemic and the possible perils of continuing conflicts. How does theology prosper an appropriate sense of development and response to changes in culture – both through individuals and wider movements? How can it be made clear that theology is far from being an obsolete discipline in contemporary culture?

**Keywords:** atheism; contingency; George Tyrrell; modernism; necessity; public theology; social ethics; Thomas Hardy; Von Hügel

## Changing Landscapes

Very often, outlines of classical theism begin with a philosophical assertion of the necessity of God. In contrast to this, stands the contingency of humanity and, for that matter the whole of creation. It is a starting point not too far distant from Anselm's ontological argument for the existence of God, as he sets it out in his *Proslogion*. Effectively, that is, 'the necessity of God' is where theological discourse begins and since God's will is such that there should also be a 'created order', then all that follows from that is adventitious; it need not have been, but, in God's graciousness, creation 'ex nihilo' followed.

Throughout mediaeval times, and to a degree even after the onset of the enlightenment, these were the assumed assumptions and foundations on which society functioned. Herein lay the foundations of all the second-order assumptions that followed, whereby it was simply a fact of life that all that was needful would be provided through the grace of God – 'our creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life . . .' – as the *General Thanksgiving*, in the *Book of Common Prayer*, describes it. Thus, our nourishment, nurture and well-being all lay in the hands of the Creator – there was an assumed order of providence. This communal mindset, however, following both the enlightenment and radical shifts in society,

could no longer be taken for granted. It was perhaps the Agrarian and then Industrial Revolutions that were to prove most damaging to the old order.

Both these shifts began to distance society and individuals from the land, and therefore from the main sources of human nurture. Urbanization took its toll as did the ever-increasing industrialization and processing of foodstuffs. The radical nature of these changes has been highlighted in serendipitous ways. By the last quarter of the twentieth century, the fashion of establishing urban farms was born; young people in urban areas had no clear idea of the origins of so much of the food they ate; like as not they would not recognize ordinary farm animals – cows, pigs, even chickens. All they consumed appeared automatically on the shelves of supermarkets, or even more remarkably at countless fast-food outlets.

This stood, of course, in sharp contrast to the assumptions included in earlier liturgical settings. Once again, the Church of England's *Book of Common Prayer*, for example, assuming its final form in 1662 after the restoration of the Monarchy, includes prayers for *rain, for fair weather, for plenty, for deliverance from the Plague and other common Sickness*. In the twenty-first century, the shelves of the suppliers of grocery, and the dispensaries of pharmacies hardly indicate the origins of their products, nor do they assume that what they provide is underpinned by divine providence.

Therefore, it becomes clear that in a more sophisticated, urbanized, secular and often sceptical society, the responsibility for reminding individuals and society of the *necessity of God* lies with the churches, and is underpinned by the work of theologians. This requires of theology and theologians a proper apologetic, an engagement with science and modern thought, and a sophisticated 'public theology' addressing the moral challenges resulting from natural and moral evil. How has theology responded and how have the churches engaged with these challenges? Reflection on a selected few individuals and movements within society may illuminate the answer to these questions. So, we begin our exploration, with one individual and in this first case, a church leader from the mid-twentieth century.

### The Fate of Apologetics

Launcelot Fleming (1906–90) was successively Bishop of Portsmouth, then of Norwich, after which he was appointed Dean of Windsor. A man with a great breadth of interests, he had earlier been Dean of Trinity Hall, Cambridge and at the same time an Antarctic geologist and explorer. As both bishop, and later as dean in his work at Windsor, Fleming was remarkable in building bridges between the Church and wider society. His experience as a Cambridge don, as a scientist in the secular world with the British Antarctic Survey, and in his understanding of demographics when reviewing the parish system, ensured that Fleming would consistently bring the presence and significance of God into the public arena. Ask people of those parts of England which bishop they remember best and still some 50 years later, his name is the response of many. Just one specific example of his ability was his part in the establishment of the newly founded University of East Anglia, in the 1960s. Those involved were almost militantly secularist – religion was to play no part in this new foundation. Science continued to challenge theology. Through

Fleming's careful work, however, a chaplaincy was assured alongside a building on the campus with suitable facilities. Overall, he ensured that links with the Church would continue. It was in this spirit that a set of four annual lectures was established in the 1990s, dedicated to his memory. Organized by Norwich Cathedral and the University of East Anglia jointly, it always included at least one lecture with a theological bias.

The first set of lectures was titled *Seeing Ourselves: Who Are the Interpreters of our Society?*<sup>1</sup> Four choices were offered – theologians, historians, scientists and the media. John Habgood (a distinguished scientist and theologian and later Archbishop of York) fulfilled the first role, and following him came a distinguished historian, a noted philosopher of science and, finally, Libby Purves, a well-known journalist with both the BBC and the London *Times*.

Following that first set of Fleming Lectures, a number of those attending commented that the four speakers had been placed in exactly the right order. The argument was that up to mediaeval times, and indeed until the Enlightenment, the Church and effectively Christian theological assumptions, had been virtually the sole fashioner and interpreter of European culture. Of course, in every nation, the Church occupied a key place within the fabric of the state and its polity, and so formed an essential arm of the establishment. Indeed, some historians, and certainly those influenced by Marxism, would argue that the power of the Church was the key factor in the process of achieving social control.

The emergence of the critical historical method in the eighteenth century offered the first serious challenge to that earlier theological hegemony. One could now better see through to the scaffolding that had placed the theologian in such a powerful position both intellectually and politically; historians were now key interpreters. Then, third, the nineteenth century saw the birth of modern science, offering another set of interpreters and challenging the earlier theological interpretation from a quite different direction. Ultimately, and now within our own culture, the media have undoubtedly become the key interpreters and indeed opinion formers. Still more recently, the social media have outpaced all others in their ability to help form mass opinion, offering almost instant interpretation of trends and current events. Of course, allowing this brief summary to stand alone as an account, would offer a far too simplistic analysis but, like all the best caricatures, it contains significant signposts to the emerging reality.

Nonetheless, *despite* this succession of interpreters (and each of them contributes something to the process), in the *first* quarter of the twentieth century in England, Parliament still 'engaged with theology'; the debate centring on what later became known as the 'Deposited' Prayer Book of 1928 is perhaps the most vivid example; both houses were well attended and the debate was intense. By the 1960s, however, it would have been hard to credit that this had been the case barely some 30 years or so earlier. Harold Wilson, Prime Minister in 1964–70 and 1974–76 – and, *despite* his continuing background and practice as a Congregationalist layman – would, more

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<sup>1</sup>Later, these lectures were published, as were the following three sets of lectures, which also aimed to bring God into public life. *Seeing Ourselves: Interpreting Modern Society* (ed. Stephen Platten; Norwich: Canterbury Press, 1998); later volumes were: *The Retreat of the State* (ed. Stephen Platten; Norwich: Canterbury Press, 1998); *Ink and Spirit* (ed. Stephen Platten; Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2000); *Open Government* (ed. Stephen Platten; Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2003).

than once, refer to arcane and labyrinthine arguments within politics as ‘theological’; the term was certainly not meant to be complimentary.

Nevertheless, none of this inhibited the offering of contributions from within the churches. Indeed, what we now designate ‘public theology’ thrived. Almost certainly the most influential figure in this realm was the American theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr. Niebuhr, the son of a German émigré Lutheran pastor, had a profound influence on US politics from the 1930s onwards.<sup>2</sup> His *Moral Man and Immoral Society*<sup>3</sup> set the scene for an approach to moral theology that he titled *Christian Realism*. Niebuhr had a significant impact on American politics, influencing John Kennedy and other liberal American voices, with Barak Obama still claiming his influence later and into the twenty-first century.<sup>4</sup>

On the other side of the Atlantic, in the first part of the twentieth century, William Temple, later Archbishop of Canterbury, developed an approach not dissimilar to that of Niebuhr – indeed the two of them met on more than one occasion to discuss these issues. Temple developed what he called *middle axioms* to relate first-order ethical principles to the specific moral problems that society faced; he had a direct impact on social policy in Britain, notably in the establishment of health and welfare reforms. He was a key member of the Beveridge committee whose recommendations were implemented by the Attlee government from 1945 onwards; indeed, it was Temple who coined the phrase ‘Welfare State’. Concurrent with Temple, George Bell, Bishop of Chichester 1929–58, intervened in the House of Lords on both national and international issues and, specifically, on government defence policy during the Second World War.

Church leaders in Britain have continued to comment critically on social ethical issues. Archbishop Robert Runcie commissioned *Faith in the City*, the controversial report on ‘urban priority areas’ (as they became known) provoking strong reactions from critics on the right, but almost certainly prompting the government of the time to take action, following a number of serious riots in several major English cities. Projects for the renewal of poorer urban areas were initiated.

Nuclear weapons have also provoked contributions from church leaders. Prominent church leaders including the Roman Catholic Monsignor Bruce Kent, and John Austin Baker, the late Church of England Bishop of Salisbury, condemned the production and use of nuclear weapons. Bishop Richard Harries (Lord Harries of Pentregarth) has also written widely on this subject and taken a rather different multilateral approach. Archbishops of Canterbury have continued to intervene and comment on various conflicts – Michael Ramsey on Rhodesia, Robert Runcie on the Falklands and Rowan Williams on the second Gulf War.

On other issues, the churches’ reflection on ‘natural crises’ appears to have dimmed. Rowan Williams, when Archbishop of Wales wrote a penetrating theological commentary on 9/11,<sup>5</sup> having attended a conference very nearby, as the

<sup>2</sup>For a more detailed analysis of this see Richard Harries and Stephen Platten (eds.), *Reinhold Niebuhr and Contemporary Politics: God and Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

<sup>3</sup>Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1932).

<sup>4</sup>Most notably more recently through a later book, Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952, 2008).

<sup>5</sup>Rowan Williams, *Writing in the Dust* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2002).

attack unfolded and the aeroplanes hit the World Trade Centre. Later, then as Archbishop of Canterbury, he wrote an equally searing reflection on the tragic tsunami of December 2004.<sup>6</sup> He was reported as saying that this had unsettled his belief in God. The truth was more subtle and far deeper. He wrote: “The question: “How can you believe in a God who permits suffering on this scale?” is therefore very much around at the moment, and it would be surprising if it weren’t – indeed it would be wrong if it weren’t. The traditional answers will only get us so far.’ Williams then notes those arguments in summary. After this, he continues:

Sometimes a secular moralist may say in contemporary debate: ‘Nature is wasteful of life; we can’t hold to absolute views of the value of every human organism.’ That is not an option for the believer. That is why for the believer the uniqueness of every sufferer in a disaster such as the present one is so especially harrowing. There are no ‘spare’ lives.<sup>7</sup>

Since then, the world has been exposed to further profound crises – the Covid-19 pandemic is perhaps the most cosmic and colossal of all, but the war between Russia and Ukraine offers powerful challenges.

Rather shockingly in Britain, at least, there has been no intervention of a theological nature at any depth. On the Covid pandemic, for example, the response was again more hand-wringing about what clergy had done wrong. Instead of confidently reflecting on suffering, hope and practical Christian responses, bishops and archbishops castigated clergy, at a most vulnerable moment for them, for failing to do as instructed. Indeed, church doors were to be firmly closed with even clergy being forbidden to enter.

But what stands behind this? Do we have nothing to say – should theology be termed obsolete? Is theology an arcane exercise – interesting for those fascinated by such labyrinthine thinking, as the late Prime Minister, Harold Wilson’s use of such images implied?

This has, however, not been the end of the story. Roman Catholic social ethics, from Leo XIII’s *Rerum Novarum*, the development of the concept of the Common Good, and all that has followed since, has offered a consistent and constructive theological critique on any number of issues within society. Nevertheless, within the Roman Catholic Church, all has not been plain sailing. There has always been the existence of a gap, a distancing, and on occasion, even a ‘stand-off’ between theologians and the magisterium. Moral theologians have frequently encountered this and sometimes their licence to teach has been withdrawn. Their response to questions raised by modern science and changing attitudes to sexual ethics has not been ‘received’ by the hierarchy.

Of course, authority patterns vary sharply between churches, and within Anglicanism, the looser structure has allowed for such tensions to appear less severe. There has even been a sense of the hierarchy ignoring the most radical expressions within theology and thus avoiding the dangers of demonizing them. It is, however, not a long distance from such a laissez-faire approach to the tendency to downplay

<sup>6</sup>Rowan Williams, *Sunday Telegraph*, 2 January 2005.

<sup>7</sup>Williams, *Sunday Telegraph*.

or ignore both the tradition, and contemporary theological study and research within the academy. This danger was highlighted recently in the introduction to a set of essays relating to probably the most outstanding Anglican theologian of the twentieth century, Austin Farrer. As the editors introduce the essays, they note with some acerbity:

this book amply illustrates Farrer as exceptional in combining his memorably incisive preaching in the university with lasting contributions to the study of the New Testament, philosophical theology, and theology and literature. But would he be able to do so today? Does the Church of England still care to educate clergy of such scriptural and theological acuity. Conversely, do university departments of theology and religion any longer retain the ability to recognise and value their subject's reciprocal relationship to the core historic convictions held by living communities of faith?<sup>8</sup>

Later, they reflect: 'A sense of panic in response to the secular has rapidly debased the Church's idea of mission amid widespread gasping for the supposedly clean air of management and leadership . . . Theology, by contrast – the skilful, patient and public articulation of the love of God with the mind – seems non-essential and even counterproductive to that new currency of "mission".<sup>9</sup>

This shift has seemed to be particularly sudden, but it may be that the roots of this theological discontent have far deeper roots, in the manner in which the Church as an institution has responded to the challenges of critical history, science and the media with which we began.

Maybe the beginnings of an answer to this lie in what feels like both a widening gap between theologians and the Church hierarchy, and also through an increasing introversion within the churches. The second of these two tendencies may well be the result of a growing insecurity on the Church's part, as Christianity in the developed world feels itself becoming more marginal to society as a whole. Churches look more inward than ever, and somehow ignore the capacity for theology to engage both with moral and social issues, but equally, and more profoundly still, to reflect upon the human condition and our relationship with our Creator and Redeemer. Such crises are hardly new and most notably since the advent of enlightenment thinking.

The three powerful movements of thought, focused upon in the aforementioned Fleming Lectures, have each taken their toll. Critical history, which included the use of documents from the past, could be seemingly corrosive of a former impregnable tradition – truths now no longer appeared eternal, heroic intellectual figures were toppled from their plinths.<sup>10</sup> Philosophers too have pointed to this fracture, and none more influentially, perhaps, than Alasdair MacIntyre in his landmark analysis, *After Virtue*. MacIntyre refers to the Aristotelian tradition and the sense in which

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<sup>8</sup>Markus Bockmuehl and Stephen Platten (eds.), *Austin Farrer: Oxford Warden, Scholar, Preacher* (London: SCM Press, 2020), p. 3.

<sup>9</sup>Bockmuehl and Platten, *Austin Farrer*, p. 3.

<sup>10</sup>See, for example, A.O. Dyson, *The Immortality of the Past* (London: SCM Press, 1974); J.H. Plumb, *The Death of the Past* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969).

philosophical discourse effectively used this as a common language throughout the centuries. Following the enlightenment, each successive philosophical foray effectively sought to enter a combative debate with each previous position, thus losing any clear sense of continuity within the Western philosophical tradition.<sup>11</sup>

The debate between science and Christian belief stretches back, at the very least, to the nineteenth century with Darwin's *The Origin of the Species* and Huxley's famous debate with Samuel Wilberforce, although as far back as the sixteenth century, the Church's response to Galileo pointed toward the shape of things to come. This debate continued into the twentieth century, albeit in a more scholarly manner. The discrediting of the logical positivists of the 1930s has led generally to more intelligent debate on the relationship between science and Christianity, or indeed religion more widely. More recently still, however, the advent of the so-called 'new atheism' has prompted further controversy

Finally, then, we have manifestly arrived at the 'era of the media'. Here, all aspects of modern society have been affected by the power of every branch of the media acting as an interpreter of the human condition. This shift has not had an impact on religion alone. The publication of daily newspapers goes back as far as the late eighteenth century, but the arrival of tabloids in the twentieth century moved the process further on. Alongside this came the emergence of radio and television.<sup>12</sup>

More recently still, has been the birth of the worldwide web. From that has been spawned what is now known as the realm of the 'social media'; Popes, archbishops and presidents tweet to order. Although much of the commentary issuing from each aspect of the media varies enormously in depth and clarity, nonetheless each has an increasingly powerful impact upon our world. The media are no respecters of traditional bases of authority, or international boundaries.

## Modernism's Response

How has the Church and how have theologians responded, and why has the Church and her leadership become silent in response to both the moral and natural evils of recent times – silent, that is, apart from tweeting uncritical approval to fashionable opinions? To survey 200 years of history is impossible in this brief essay, so instead we shall focus on one or two key moments, asking again: How should the Church and theologians respond?

In the course of the last century, there have been sporadic moments of crisis in the various churches where there have been attempts to respond to changing times. Interestingly enough, in glancing at one of the most perilous episodes, the starting point is not a theologian or indeed a paid-up churchman, but one of the great literary figures of the period, Thomas Hardy O.M. In his 'apology' which effectively acts as a preface to one of his late collections of poetry, Hardy writes ominously of his fears: 'we seemed threatened with a new Dark Age'. But he then utters his hope that a progressive religious movement might do something to counteract what he sees as the crumbling of our society and culture:

<sup>11</sup>Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (London: Duckworth, 1981) and later editions.

<sup>12</sup>The year 2022, for example, saw the centenary of the foundation of the then embryonic British Broadcasting Corporation.

Since the historic and august hierarchy of Rome some generation ago lost its chance of being the religion of the future by doing otherwise and throwing over the little band of New Catholics who were making a struggle for continuity by applying the principle of evolution to their own faith, joining hands with modern science, and outflanking the hesitating English instinct towards liturgical restatement (a flank march which I at the time quite expected to witness, with the gathering of many millions of waiting agnostics into its fold); since then, one may ask, what other purely English establishment than the Church of England, of sufficient dignity and footing, with sufficient strength of old association, such scope for transmutability, such architectural spell, is left in this country to keep the shreds of morality together?<sup>13</sup>

This extract from Hardy is fascinating for a number of reasons. First of all, he is often cited as a classical example of a growing number of individuals from the worlds of science, philosophy, literature and other realms of culture who had apparently embraced agnosticism or even straightforward atheism – many modern biographies assume this.<sup>14</sup> In this extract, Hardy refers to agnostics with whom presumably he shares more than a little sympathy.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, he clearly sees the continuing importance of the Church and its potential impact on the social and moral life of society. Second, this reference issues from a source that is neither that of the Church/churches, nor from the theological academy. Already here, then, there is a feeling within society of the impact of the declining influence of Christianity.

Hardy's intervention is interesting too in defining the place from which he begins. It is the fate of the Catholic Modernists, a 'fin de siècle' movement straddling the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. So here his appeal is direct to pure theology rather than applied theology or simply religious opinions.

The Modernists were not a 'movement' in the sense of one integrated party working together; rather they were a scattering of distinguished theological writers spread across north-west Europe with some of the key figures based in France and some in the British Isles. Hardy recognized the significance of their work in both biblical studies and interpretation, and in the development of doctrinal theology. In some ways, they picked up similar strains of thought to those explored by John Henry Newman half a century earlier,<sup>16</sup> although they should not be seen as lineal successors to the whole or part of his argument.<sup>17</sup>

In the light of the developments we have encountered earlier, relating to post-Enlightenment thought, the various Modernists were responding either directly to

<sup>13</sup>Thomas Hardy, *Late Lyrics and Earlier* (London: Macmillan, 1922), pp. xvi-xvii.

<sup>14</sup>Cf., for example, Claire Tomalin, *Thomas Hardy: The Time Torn Man* (London: Penguin, 2012).

<sup>15</sup>The complexities of Hardy's religious position are discussed in some detail in Stephen Platten, 'They Know Earth Secrets: Hardy's Tortured Vocation', *Religion and Literature*, 45.3 (2014), pp. 59-79.

<sup>16</sup>John Henry Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (repr.; Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1974 [1845]), and also *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Ascent* (repr.; Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992 [1850]).

<sup>17</sup>Alec Vidler explores just this point in his *The Modernist Movement in the Roman Church* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014 [1934]). See especially Chapter 7.



the challenges presented, or indeed by what they saw as previous inadequate responses to these challenges.<sup>18</sup> Probably the three most important contributors were the Anglo-Irish Jesuit priest and theologian, George Tyrrell; the French priest and theologian, Alfred Loisy; and third, Baron Friedrich von Hügel, an Austrian layman, theologian and mystic who lived the majority of his life in Britain. A glance at each of these will give some feel for the reactions of this disparate but impressive group and at the reactions provoked negatively and positively, both at the time and later.

George Tyrrell,<sup>19</sup> born in Dublin in 1861, was brought up within the Church of Ireland. He was attracted by Catholicism and first attempted to satisfy this by attending one of the two Dublin 'high churches'. There, he encountered Robert Dolling, a layman working in Dublin, who was later ordained into the Church of England, adopting a particularly exotic form of Anglo-Catholicism. Setting up an open house in London, Tyrrell was attracted albeit briefly. Dolling later became something of a legend with his ministry at St Agatha's, Landport on the edge of the Royal Naval dockyard in Portsmouth; he was largely practical and liturgical in his energies and had none of the intellectual searching that drove Tyrrell (alongside his attraction to the mystical side of Catholic observance).

Tyrrell was not impressed by Anglo-Catholicism but instead, reading of the Society of Jesus, he swiftly converted to Roman Catholicism and entered the Jesuit novitiate in 1880. As time passed, so he began to publish – as a Roman Catholic, an activity fraught with danger at that time, especially if one's work was to become increasingly speculative as his did.

Tyrrell first became what Alec Vidler<sup>20</sup> describes as a 'mediatorial liberal'. As his quest continued, however, Tyrrell increasingly saw the extent to which Catholic theology had fallen behind the advance of modern knowledge, and so failed to search for what he understood to be religious truth. His shift to Modernism came with an article in the *Weekly Register*, challenging the contemporary understanding of everlasting damnation. He continued to publish. His 1899 article received an imprimatur, and even his 1903 *Lex Orandi* paper was authorized by the magisterium. He developed an approach that remains popular in Anglicanism and Orthodox theology, *Lex orandi, lex credendi* – that which is prayed, and is the foundation of worship, is the basis for sound theology. Until now, many saw Tyrrell's approach as standing within the tradition of Newman. Maud Petre, Tyrrell's lifelong friend and supporter confirmed this at the time.

But his 1907 *Through Scylla and Charybdis: or the Old Theology and the New*, caused the final rupture with the Society of Jesus; he was expelled from the Society on account of doctrinal errors. Suffice to say that his later writings were sufficient to lead to his excommunication in 1908. Much of his work intended to produce a critical alternative to German 'Liberal Protestant' theology. Perhaps his most

<sup>18</sup>For a broad discussion of the theological themes explored by the Modernists, see Gabriel Daly, *Transcendence and Immanence* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980).

<sup>19</sup>For a complete life of Tyrrell, see Nicholas Sagovsky, *On God's Side: A Life of George Tyrrell* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

<sup>20</sup>Vidler, *The Modernist Movement*, p. 149. In his *A Variety of Catholic Modernist* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), pp. 129ff, Vidler points to Tyrrell's influence on the Anglican Modernist, Alfred Lilley.

famous and oft-quoted utterance issued from exactly this. So, of Adolf von Harnack's work, he wrote bitinglly: 'The Christ that Harnack sees, looking back through nineteen centuries of Catholic darkness, is only the reflection of a Liberal Protestant face, seen at the bottom of a deep well.'<sup>21</sup> Tyrrell died, at the age of 48, in 1909, a broken man. Refused a Catholic burial, he was interred in the Anglican churchyard at Storrington in Sussex. His companion, Maud Petre, tried to restore his reputation, but she too was treated with increasing suspicion and eventually, and ironically, was buried alongside Tyrrell in the same churchyard.

Alfred Loisy was born in 1857 and died in 1940. Loisy's instincts as a priest were also in the liberal direction. Early on, he was a disciple of Louis Duchesne, although later Duchesne moved away from his liberal tendencies. Appointed in 1890 as Professor of Holy Scripture at the *Institut Catholique*, Loisy's commitment was to the Roman Catholic Church properly accepting the implications of modern critical methods. His work on the canons of the Old and New Testament caused no reaction. His next move, however, was to examine a critical exegesis of the early chapters of Genesis when the dust began to fly. Loisy was dismissed from the chair he held.

This broke on the eve of the publication of Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Providentissimus Deus*, specifically aimed at quashing the work of 'rationalists and higher critics'. Leo, on account of his social ethical writings, is often seen as the herald of a form of enlightened liberalism but, at heart, he was a conservative theological traditionalist. Pius X, Leo's successor was firmer still, and supported by his Cardinal Secretary of State, Merry del Val, issued a further encyclical. Loisy was excommunicated and, thereafter, wrote as a secular intellectual, whereas Tyrrell had remained a Catholic.

Finally, Baron Friedrich von Hügel, a layman, fell well outside the immediate authority structures relating to teaching. Nonetheless, von Hügel trod far more carefully, even though his views were very close to those of Loisy. He was never formally condemned.

The ultimate fate of the Roman Catholic Modernists was tragic. Pius X promulgated the encyclical *Pascendi Dominici gregis* in 1907, accompanying it with a syllabus, *Lamentabili sane exitu*, later referred to as the 'Syllabus of Errors', aimed specifically at condemning the teaching of Modernist errors. Bishops were directed to establish councils to hunt errors down and suppressed them. Finally, in 1910, a *moto proprio*, *Antistitum*, followed, requiring all clergy, pastors, confessors, preachers, religious superiors and professors to take the oath against Modernism, which remained in force until as late as 1967.

Here, then, was the setting for Hardy's regrets over the possible shifts of the Roman Catholic Church and its influence on societal morals and, indeed, his hopes for a more prophetic stance from the 'Established' Church of England. As we have seen, theologians from outside the Roman Catholic Church were also engaging with similar issues – Alec Vidler, an Anglican with a strong commitment to Christian social teaching, wrote two excellent analytical volumes very largely focusing on the Catholic Modernists. From the 1920s there were Anglicans who wore a Modernist badge, but it was a very different form of modernism, with strong Erastian tones,

<sup>21</sup>George Tyrrell, *Christianity at the Crossroads* (London: Longman, Green and Co., 1910), p. 44.

which effectively formed an extension to the 'Broad Church' or 'Latitudinarians', reaching back to Thomas Arnold in the mid-nineteenth century.

Hardy was not the only literary figure to engage with the Catholic Modernists. Later in the mid-twentieth century, the Roman Catholic writer, Antonia White, was an interesting case in point. In her published collection of letters to a friend, whom she pseudonymously called Peter,<sup>22</sup> she outlines her rather tortuous return to the Roman Catholic Church, and so to the Christian faith. Her reconversion was by no means simple and, as she argues it out with 'Peter', who clearly had his own agenda, one of her constant companions in the book is George Tyrrell who had died some 30 years before White's correspondence began. In a separate appendix she offers a brief biography of Tyrrell.<sup>23</sup> Early on, she notes:

When I was a little girl, I remember hearing him mentioned as a brilliant but wicked man who had set himself up against the authority of the Church. I used to spend all my summer holidays near Storrington and I remember standing by his grave in the Protestant Cemetery [the Anglican Parish Churchyard] and feeling a shock of horror and pity.<sup>24</sup>

She is intrigued by Peter's responses and vows to read Tyrrell herself. Later, she also frequently mentions von Hügel whom she admires both for his faith and for the intelligence of his writing. Having received various of Tyrrell's writings from Peter, including some of his letters, she noted then:

For one day I was completely obsessed by him. What a wonderful man he was and what an admirable writer. I am so glad you loved him . . . It is an amazing life, tragic and triumphant and inevitable as a Greek tragedy. I understand so well both this terror of committing oneself; and terror of not committing oneself; the almost intolerable tension between the need for sincerity and the need for faith. Von Hügel, that great rock-bottomed old genius, solved the problem but Tyrrell with that extreme temperament, never could; always trying himself too hard and yet not quite having the courage to break the habit.<sup>25</sup>

This is clearly unfair to Tyrrell who could hardly be condemned for lack of courage but instead was concerned always and in all things to live with integrity. Von Hügel was far more prepared to be a 'trimmer'.

### The Need for the Necessity of God

Here then, we encounter two Roman Catholics in correspondence, later in the twentieth century, both ultimately certain of the 'necessity of God', but also of the crucial nature of a defensible theology. A concern for a proper understanding of the nature of belief and of clear theological foundations was, however, not a

<sup>22</sup> Antonia White, *The Hound and the Falcon* (London: Longmans Green and Co., 1965).

<sup>23</sup> White, *The Hound and the Falcon*, pp. 166-67.

<sup>24</sup> White, *The Hound and the Falcon*, p. 2.

<sup>25</sup> White, *The Hound and the Falcon*, p. 80.

monopoly held only by Roman Catholics, In 1922, within the Church of England, the Archbishops of Canterbury and York commissioned a report that was eventually published in 1938 under the title *Doctrine in the Church of England*.<sup>26</sup> The report was originally occasioned by controversy over liturgical practice and especially in relation to divergence of theological understanding between Evangelicals and Anglo-Catholics. The report was, however, far more comprehensive in its conclusions. It set out a basis for belief rooted in a pluralistic view of the church. This allowed latitude within certain limits, limits described by the nature of the tradition reaching back to Patristic times and the first four Patristic Oecumenical Councils of the Church, alongside the worship and historic formularies of the Church of England.

In the 1960s, there arose further ferment in a period when there were significant challenges more generally to Western Christian culture. Undoubtedly theologically, and within the wider Church, the most remarkable aspect of this earthquake in culture and values came with the establishment of the Second Vatican Council by Pope John XXIII, thereafter presided over by Pope Paul VI. The impact of this needs no general description, but perhaps the widest impact potentially came with *Gaudium et Spes*, the Constitution of the Church within the world. Now, once again, the importance of Christianity's engagement with society came to the fore.

Elsewhere, the impact of these cultural challenges was still more extreme, with the advent of 'Death of God theology' in the USA and the polarized reactions to Bishop John Robinson's *Honest to God*<sup>27</sup> in Britain. The response to Robinson's book has been well rehearsed, including the Archbishop of Canterbury, Michael Ramsey's immediate negative response and then his more considered reaction later on. Suffice to say that the book was less radical than much of the publicity at the time implied. Effectively it brought together three theologians who were already household names in the realm of theology, Rudolph Bultmann, Paul Tillich and Dietrich Bonhöffer. What it did indicate very sharply, however, was the distance between the professionals – notably clergy and academics, and both devout laity and the more general public.

In the longer run, there were positive developments. Many reactions both within and outside the Church (and sometimes well-known individuals in public life) revealed a relief that what had been feared as half-way to unbelief had been common currency in the academy for some time. Instead of a compromised faith, the debate which followed allowed many to move to more reasoned faith

We shall cite just one fascinating example. This was the response of Christopher Milne, son of the poet/dramatist, and creator of the stories about Christopher Robin and Pooh Bear. In three autobiographical pieces, Milne talks of both his father's and then his own religious background. So, in the earliest of these reflections, he writes:

If you had talked to my father about his religious beliefs (and if he had been prepared to discuss them) you might have concluded he was a Humanist. But of course he would have rejected the label as he would have objected to any

<sup>26</sup>*Doctrine in the Church of England: The 1938 Report of the Commission on Christian Doctrine Appointed by the Archbishops of Canterbury and York in 1922* (London: SPCK, 1938).

<sup>27</sup>John Robinson, *Honest to God* (London: SCM Press, 1963).

label that seemed to put him among a class of people all thinking alike. He might have preferred to be described as an agnostic since this was purely a negative definition, describing what he was not.<sup>28</sup>

Then later, he asks: 'When is a young person old enough to make up his mind for himself? My father waited until I was twenty-four.'<sup>29</sup>

By this time Christopher was a soldier in the Italian campaign and his father sent him parcels of books. 'In one of them there were two in the Thinker's Library series: Renan's *Life of Jesus* and Winwood Reade's *The Martyrdom of Man*.' For Reade, 'There was no God. God had not created Man in His own image. It was the other way round: Man had created God. And Man was all there was. But that was enough.'<sup>30</sup>

Interestingly enough, his father had allowed him freedom to make up his own mind, but as a father he had, ironically, still made up his mind for his son sufficiently not to have him christened. Ultimately, he had persuaded him with these carefully chosen parcels of books, and oddly enough at a time when his son was in great danger, and less than secure.

In the last of his three autobiographical reflections, however, we see a slightly different picture. Reade had remained something of a 'Bible' (although as a young man Christopher Milne had lived happily in the context of religious belief, despite his parents and perhaps on account of school and his nannie) but then, much later, his local community persuaded him to look outside these confines too:

It was arranged by our local church that a series of monthly discussion groups would be held in various private houses throughout the parish. Fellow Christians would meet and talk about Christianity. One of these was, however rather different. Host and hostesses, wanting a more lively discussion, welcomed all comers; and since they were friends of us they welcomed us.<sup>31</sup>

This happened concurrently with the publication of *Honest to God*, which Milne sold in his bookshop in Dartmouth in Devon. The book was read by the members of the group, and the furore generated by the book in society at large found its way into the local group prompting excited discussion. Milne notes:

to my enormous surprise, I found myself defending a bishop against the jibes of a curate. For Robinson's God, far removed from the God of traditional belief, was little different from what – if I needed one – would have been my own.<sup>32</sup>

Alongside Robinson's book, Milne also then read John Macmurray's *Reason and Emotion*.<sup>33</sup> It was not a new book, but it brought fresh insights to Milne. Although he

<sup>28</sup>Christopher Milne, *The Enchanted Places* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), p. 156.

<sup>29</sup>Milne, *The Enchanted Places*, p. 157.

<sup>30</sup>Milne, *The Enchanted Places*, pp. 157-58.

<sup>31</sup>Christopher Milne, *The Hollow on the Hill* (London: Methuen, 1982), p. 30.

<sup>32</sup>Milne, *The Hollow on the Hill*, p. 31.

<sup>33</sup>John Macmurray, *Reason and Emotion* (London: Faber, 1995 [1936]).

never returned to an orthodox Christian faith, nonetheless this set of experiences radically changed his world view. Towards the end of *The Hollow on the Hill*, he writes:

So, while the Christian dreams of a Second Coming and the Humanist dreams of a Perfect Man, I dream of a new religion, a religion which sees man as the Guardian of the World, the Lord and Protector of all life.<sup>34</sup>

Finally, at the very end of the book he notes:

Such a religion will need its Bible, a Bible in which, to the Old and New Testament already familiar to us, has been added a third testament: the Testament of Beauty. An impossible dream? No, not impossible. For what has happened once can surely happen again.<sup>35</sup>

Here, then, we have encountered a sensitive soul, upon whom religion would have a significant impact late in his life, an impact clearly prompted by theologians and by the Church publicly demonstrating how theology retains a vital importance and, set within orthodox Christianity reminds us of the 'necessity of God'. This, of course, simply illustrates the impact on a single individual, but certainly the 1960s, which produced its own fair share of exotic and outlandish ideas, was also a time of positive, public intellectual engagement with the necessity of God.

Some twenty years later, when the Church of England's General Synod debated a report on nuclear weapons<sup>36</sup> the entire session of the Synod was televised live, on one of the main national television channels. This example brings us that much closer to the present day.

There has continued to be engagement both officially and unofficially between the churches, theologians and public life. More recently, the Covid pandemic has been described as the most serious international crisis since the Second World War. Surprisingly, the churches were strangely silent in offering any profound response to the crisis, despite the obvious challenges its impact might have had on attitudes to providence and the problem of evil. Harold Wilson's use of the term *theology* in relation to over-esoteric political points was, of course, far from being a compliment, but there are now significant strands within the *churches* that seem to reflect a similar attitude to the study of theology.

The present increasing instability in many Western democracies and the trivialization that has accompanied this are key challenges to which the churches and theologians can respond. Pope Francis gave a good example of how this might be effected in his encyclical on the environment, *Laudato si'*.<sup>37</sup>

What exactly then has promoted this theological malaise? Perhaps the beginning of answer lies in the manner of appointment of senior clergy. Fairly recently there was an attempt to identify three or four serving Anglican bishops in Australia, the USA and Britain, who would be capable of reviewing a recent New Testament commentary. In

<sup>34</sup>Milne, *The Hollow on the Hill*, p. 153.

<sup>35</sup>Milne, *The Hollow on the Hill*, p. 154.

<sup>36</sup>*The Church and the Bomb* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1982).

<sup>37</sup>Pope Francis, *Laudati si'*, 2015.

each of the three provinces it was effectively impossible to identify anyone with a suitably qualified academic background. Of course, it would be easy to argue that although there was no New Testament scholar on the bishops' benches there were experts in other branches of theology. The answer to this further question also drew almost a complete blank, except perhaps for just a handful toward the higher age range amongst bishops. The selection processes now operating seem either to exclude those with an academic pedigree or even to see it as a disabling factor. Hence then, there is a paucity of church leaders with sufficient theological confidence to offer public statements on crucial human issues. Tweeting and Instagram are not suitable media for conveying subtle and profound theological comment.

A further worrying tendency amongst all the churches, as the fear of decline assails them, is an increasing drift towards concern with reordering their own internal organization, or equally to be obsessive in relation to issues that, within wider society, are approached with greater sympathy; same-sex relationships are a case in point.

Allied to this is a shift in a quite different direction in the appointing of bishops and, certainly within the Church of England. Indeed, it is there even in the selection of candidates for the priesthood; the former academic criteria have disappeared; they seemed, it was argued, to smack of elitism. There is a tendency instead toward a box-ticking exercise, which is set against a background of managerial training and leadership potential (defined in specious terms). A 'passion' for mission is also seen to be a qualification, but once again either speciously undefined, or defined simply in terms of achieved church growth in previous posts. Some of these ills were alluded to earlier in this essay in the quotation from the introduction to a collection of academic essays.<sup>38</sup>

If, however, the Christian faith is seen increasingly to be the prey for sceptics, then there is a still greater need for the Christian churches to make plain and cogent the faith that is in them. If a Prime Minister, some 50 years ago could use the term 'theology' in a deprecating manner with regard to politics, it is infinitely worse for a similar attitude to prevail within the leadership of contemporary churches. Is there really a feeling that theology, as previously understood, has become obsolete? It appears now to be seen too widely as a positive distraction from the main task. But in a society that all too easily slips into the trivial, with some worrying signs of a civilization in decline, the necessity of God needs to be reclaimed by the Church and her theologians.

Might the recent establishment of the Church of England's *Centre for Cultural Witness*,<sup>39</sup> at Lambeth Palace Library be one straw in the wind for a renewed engagement of an apologetic nature? Might it offer both a spur and a resource for church leaders once again to respond to Hardy's call, now almost a century ago? Might it also stimulate key lay voices to demonstrate the impact of Christianity – as with Thomas Hardy, Christopher Milne and Antonia White, all mentioned above, and an unnumbered host of distinguished figures from the past, remembering Dorothy Sayers, T.S. Eliot and so many others?

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<sup>38</sup>See n. 8.

<sup>39</sup>Bishop of Kensington to Lead New Centre for Cultural Witness', 16 February 2022, <https://churchofengland.org/media-and-news/press-releases/bishop-kensington-lead-new-centre-cultural-witness>.  
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