



Farmington Papers

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MODERN THEOLOGY 1

Surprising a Hunger

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In his poem *Church Going*, Philip Larkin describes his frequent practice during country bicycle-rides of stopping to spend a few moments inside some church as he passes by. When he is quite sure, he says, that there is nothing going on inside, he enters and savours the atmosphere of the silent and ancient building, gives the architecture a cursory glance, signs the visitors' book and as he leaves he wonders who - long after the church has become a museum or fallen into ruin - will be 'the last, the very last to seek this place for what it was....' Larkin ends his poem by suggesting that this final visitor might be someone like himself, his 'representative', 'bored' and 'uninformed', yet strangely drawn to such a place because:

*'A serious house on serious earth it is,
In whose blent air all our compulsions meet,
Are recognised and robed as destinies.'*

Larkin typifies those many people today who are ill at ease with institutional religion, but having abandoned a tradition with which they were once in touch, are often sharply aware of a gap which remains unfilled. But the loss is not felt as total, for an intuitive sense of what religion is basically on about remains persistently present, because, as

Larkin says, 'that much never can be obsolete'. Such people are often untouched emotionally and intellectually by the conventional practices and expressions of Christianity, but can still be deeply affected by echoes of the original impulses and the universal spiritual needs in which all genuine religion is rooted.

Such vague yearnings may seem scarcely worth bothering about by the churches in the present crisis of increasing secularisation, when strong expressions of faith and commitment are at a premium. But such intimations in fact need very careful nurturing - especially in this secular age. Larkin's representatives, coming as they do at what may turn out to be the tail-end of a long religious tradition, are in danger of becoming a very rare species as their breeding-ground disappears. Many young versions of them can still be found in our sixth forms. Can their Religious Education do anything to make these potential Larkin representatives less uninformed - and perhaps even less bored - when they come to their church visits (or even churchgoing?) in the future?

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The purpose of this paper is to launch a series of Farmington Papers addressed specifically to this kind of audience. I hope that it will stimulate some responses and suggestions from readers - in particular from teachers of RE in sixth forms. But I shall first give my own view of the situation which I seek to address - this is necessarily highly subjective but I hope that at least the main features in the scene will be generally recognisable. The sixthformers whom I primarily have in mind are those who are studying A levels and are likely to go on to university education. Throughout this paper, when I refer to sixthformers, it is this group and their non-specialist or 'general' education which I have in mind.

I start with the broad assumption that sixthformers in general display neither a very positive nor a very negative attitude to traditional and institutional religion, for it simply does not figure high enough upon the agenda of things which demand their special attention. Few can be surprised at this; the secularising effects of modern life have long been with us, but they have been particularly powerful over the past 30 years or so. It is important, by the way, to distinguish this general secularising tendency from specific problems of belief arising out of the so-called Science v Religion debate; this will doubtless remain a theme to be dealt with in each succeeding generation, but it is an intellectual exercise where the idea of God is still at least up for discussion; for many, the problem disappears once it has been satisfactorily dealt with. But modernity is always with us, as part of the ambience in which we all live. Modernity does not necessarily produce secularity but no one, whether adult or sixth former, who is actively engaged in a modern society can avoid having their thoughts, actions and general consciousness influenced by it - and this of course includes their attitude to religion.

Christian institutions have responded to the challenge of secularisation in a variety of ways. One response has been to emphasise

the tradition with heightened conviction - this may be one reason for the growth of the evangelical churches, with their highly-committed membership, strong sense of group-identity, and unanimity on doctrine. Such homogeneous congregations tend to perceive themselves as being in some sense 'separate' from society at large, and derive strength from this. This development is often reflected on a small-scale in those schools where there is a strong Christian Union or similar committed Christian group within - but 'separate' from - the school community as a whole.

But the future Larkins are not to be found here. They know that such things are not for them; they remain suspicious of the overtly evangelical approach and are put off by the confidently enthusiastic style which often accompanies it. Some may become for a time more or less committed members of their parish church, but most will soon join the vast majority who have no allegiance to any religious group. But I share Larkin's belief that traces of a basic religious awareness stubbornly persist, and at times of crisis in individual or national life are strong enough to draw the most apparently unchurched people to a religious service or ceremony - perhaps thus enabling them to make at least a gesture of defiance against mere nihilism not all that different from the increasingly common impulse which leads people to amass flowers on the spot where someone has suffered a violent death, or to stand in silence in football grounds.

This residue of religious awareness is not something to be patronised, although it may have inevitably to remain on the very fringes of consciousness of the vast majority as a kind of gut or folk religion. But my claim is that in the case of many sixthformers, this gut awareness is capable of being developed into something far more informed and more articulate, and therefore needs careful nurturing.

These bored and uninformed potential Larkins deserve an appropriate intellectual diet. It is a waste of time to try to win their

allegiance in any conventionally committed sense, or to educate them in the hope that they will one day sit happily with traditional doctrine. For they will never be conviction-believers who will feel at ease as members of a large group where a premium is set on unanimity of belief, and where deviation from the majority view is seen as disloyalty or 'unsoundness'. That is not their way. For this is the area from which come the sceptical, and the more or less noisy questioners and critics of Christianity - perhaps the modern-day 'cultured despisers of religion' whose predecessors Schleiermacher addressed in 1799 - but here are found also the quieter temperaments - the cautious, the uncertain, the wavering and the sensitive, including those who are put off by stridency and over-certainty.

A large number of our ablest sixthformers can be found among them, including many of those who will eventually go on to occupy the most influential positions in society. One could perhaps include them among those whom the Empress Helena in Evelyn Waugh's novel had in mind when she prayed for herself and those who do not come easily to a 'simple belief' but '*.... who have a tedious journey to make to the truth, who are confused with knowledge and speculation.... and who stand in danger by reason of their talents.*'

Most teachers of RE can recall such examples among sixth-formers of today, where in spite of a lack of interest in traditional Christianity, there is a willingness to entertain notions of a divine power or a spiritual dimension - an awareness far more promising than the atheism which was so prevalent among sixthformers in the 1960s. But although the free expression of views may be encouraged in the classroom, the impression is often conveyed that those who cannot subscribe to certain basic minimum beliefs (for instance about the nature and role of Jesus, or about the Resurrection) cannot claim to have full 'Christian faith' and must remain outsiders to some extent.

In his book *The Heretical Imperative*, Peter Berger suggests that religious traditions have three possible approaches when dealing with modernity and secularisation; they can either (a) reaffirm and re-emphasise the authority of their tradition - the '*deductive*' option or (b) secularise the tradition - the '*reductive*' option or (c) uncover and retrieve the experience which is embodied in the tradition - the '*inductive*' option. He considers that the 'inductive' approach is the only viable one, admitting that he is here in the line of Schleiermacher and of the tradition of reinterpretation which originated with the so-called Liberal-Protestant theologians.

My main suggestion in this paper is that we should encourage and stimulate the thinking of our most able sixthformers by giving them some acquaintance with the leading exponents of this inductive and empirical approach, who seek to reinterpret the original Christian experience through a critical and non-dogmatic approach to the tradition. At present hardly any of this development is permitted (let alone encouraged) even to trickle down to the ordinary lay believer. Very few ordained clergy venture to refer to radical reinterpretations of doctrine when laymen are around - except somewhat dismissively. But all those of us who are in the know (i.e. almost anyone who has made a formal study of theology, even if only at a very modest level) are aware of how widely the theological views of the clergy - whether academic or parochial - are affected by radical reinterpretations, and how wide is the spectrum of belief among them on pretty well all the major doctrines. Yet most of this is treated as 'sensitive' and not for the public domain - let alone for non-specialists in the classroom.

The result is that there is a huge gap in the theological competence of the vast majority of otherwise highly-educated and well-informed lay people. When some theological or moral matter becomes a leading news item, the lack of even a modest degree of

sophistication in this area becomes painfully apparent. Extremes of viewpoint - as well as convictions seemingly held unexamined since Sunday School days - dominate the discussions, whilst our best minds retreat to the safe havens of those who 'lack all conviction'.

A particularly damaging result of this kind of public argument is that hundreds of our ablest sixthformers become even more firmly convinced that 'faith' is after all (as they had always suspected) a matter of believing 'six impossible things before breakfast'. Yet their minds can be creatively kindled even by just being let in on the exciting quest being carried on by those who seek to reinterpret Christian doctrine.

The programme which I suggest would therefore be based upon a critical approach to theology and scripture; it would seek to give sixthformers some idea of the radical and liberal developments in theology over the past 150 years, and following Peter Berger's hint I would suggest Schleiermacher and his inductive approach 'from below' as a theological starting-point. It would also seek to reveal the kind of theological and scriptural problems dealt with by the leading theologians of today and of the recent past, and would emphatically *not* seek to 'protect' sixthformers from the more extreme radical theological views - including those of non-realist theologians such as Cupitt.

Such material would not be included in any merely confrontational spirit, but simply because such controversies can be a stimulus to able sixthformers, and it is vital that they should have at least a passing acquaintance with ideas which they may have to face in the future.

The series of Farmington Papers mentioned at the outset would deal with relevant themes or with particular theologians, and would be addressed primarily to teachers as a source of ideas and background knowledge for their classroom work. It would be understood that this would have to fit within the straitjacket of the average General Studies

programme which might allow, perhaps, two periods per week for one term. This might mean that Schleiermacher, for example, might have to be 'done' in a 40-minute period but even this can be enough to give a useful outline. A desirable additional resource would be the availability of linked background material for both class and teacher.

I suggest the following as a summary of the aims of this programme:

- to give sixthformers an outline of the ways in which Christian thinkers of the modern age have attempted - and are attempting - to uncover the original religious experience which lies behind traditional Christian doctrine, language and scriptural interpretation

- to provide them with some of the intellectual tools for developing their religious ideas - especially with regard to such concepts as (a) the supernatural or transcendent and (b) the spirit or the spiritual

- to explore and examine ways of holding on to basic religious ideas, and the mysteries of the transcendent and the spiritual, within a highly secularised society without loss of intellectual integrity

- to help towards forming an intelligent laity which regards Christianity not only as a tradition but also as a progressive enterprise.

I believe, with some evidence from experience, that there would be a substantial interest among lively-minded sixthformers for this kind of course. I share Larkin's feeling that '*someone will forever be surprising a hunger in himself to be more serious....*' but I hope that when this is experienced by future generations they will have livelier places to which they may gravitate with their hunger than the abandoned graveyards which Larkin sadly foresaw.

