

# ENGAGEMENT: WHAT IT IS AND WHY IT MATTERS

Most of the world is not Christian. Despite two centuries of intensive evangelization, backed with all the resources that the first world has to offer, we find that the percentage of Christians is stubbornly fixed at 33 percent.<sup>1</sup> And, of course, this percentage includes plenty of Christians that other Christians would not recognize as such. Some conservative evangelicals, for example, are deeply suspicious of Roman Catholics and suspect that they will not be keeping their company at the eschaton. So for many Christians this percentage is smaller. Beyond the Christian “family,” we find other forms of organized religious affiliation. We still have significant numbers of Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, and Jews, as well as a robust proliferation of new religious movements. Other more secular ideologies some with a “spiritual” dimension, others wanting to challenge the power of religion, such as certain versions of feminism and the lingering effects of Marxism in some nationalist movements, have arisen. And there are localized “primitive” religions of numerous kinds. It is an obvious key theological question how Christians relate themselves to such diversity.

One misguided answer that continues to dominate much theological analysis insists that such diversity of perspectives should have no impact on Christianity, save perhaps to stress the imperative of even greater evangelization. Christianity is committed to the revelation of God in Christ documented in the Bible and shaped by the tradition of the church. The task of theology is to explicate the truth within the tradition, live out that truth within the church, and preach it to the world. Karl Barth, perhaps unfairly,<sup>2</sup> gets much of the credit for this understanding of the theological task. So Karl Barth explains that the position of theology thus:

Behind it, theology has Holy Scripture as witness to revelation, and its attestation in the earlier confessions and knowledge of the church. Before it, it

has the church and the activity of proclamation. Thus placed, theology can reveal, unfold and shape itself in dogmatics as a characteristic branch of knowledge.<sup>3</sup>

For Barth, knowledge is possible in theology by focusing the task of theology on the Bible within the church. He resolutely sets himself against any engagement with “secular” philosophy (and for secular philosophy also read any non-Christian religions) by explaining that “this is the classical point for the invasion of alien powers, the injection of metaphysical systems which are secretly in conflict with the Bible and the church.”<sup>4</sup>

This position is misguided (especially when grounded in a possible misunderstanding of Barth) for several reasons. First, it seems fairly clear that the cultural diversity of the creation is intended by God.<sup>5</sup> We believe in a God who is responsible for the vastness of space. A God who approximately 15 billion years ago, opted to create many potentially habitable planets, and allowed the diversity of life forms to emerge on earth. And as humanity emerged, a God who waited many thousands of years before revealing the truth of monotheism to Abraham. It seems an extraordinarily attenuated view of the cosmic God to insist that God’s activity is simply confined to the faith that emerged amongst the Hebrews some four thousand years ago and the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth and the development of the church in Europe. The God who cares for every sparrow that falls to the ground certainly cares for the lives of people in India, Africa, and Latin America. God was, presumably, at work in the lives of those who wrote the Upanishads or in the developing Native American rituals. To think otherwise is a fundamental denial of the God we worship as, in the state of modern knowledge, we must see God. It is not surprising that some “solve” the problem by refusing to accept modern cosmology and the like, on biblical grounds.

This position is also misguided for a second reason. The Christian Scriptures and tradition are clearly shaped by numerous non-Christian sources. The Bible was not written in a vacuum. It clearly spoke to the people living at the time: and it was clearly shaped by the narratives and traditions of the cultures from which the text emerged. The Christian tradition, inevitably, made rich use of non-Christian philosophy. As we shall see in chapter 2, Augustine of Hippo used Neoplatonism. In the thirteenth century Aquinas accessed the Islamic rediscovery of Aristotle and put it into imaginative conversation with the Platonism of the Augustinian tradition. And modern “critical” Christianity, harder to turn into a satisfactory synthesis, is a fruit of the Enlightenment. It is a distortion of the Christian

Scriptures and tradition to imagine that they come to us untouched by any other cultural influence or mode of thought. It is indefensible to insist that a tradition that has come to us shaped by non-Christian sources should now be fossilized. We are part of a living tradition: what Augustine of Hippo did in the past we need to do for the present. This theme will be developed at much greater length in chapter 2.

The third reason this position is bizarre is that its consequences are damaging. The world needs a positive relationship with diversity: in this sense Hans Küng is right when he states that there will be no peace among the nations without peace among religions.<sup>6</sup> To confine the engagement with other faith traditions to evangelization simply is not sufficient to bring about a stronger and more constructive set of relationships with other religions. However, this attitude to non-Christian sources (i.e., religious and secular sources) has other problematic effects. John Macquarrie speaks accurately of the “fragmentation of modern culture.” He writes:

We often hear it said that ours is a split culture, and nobody claims that this is a healthy state of affairs. The split is very obvious when we consider theology in relation to other disciplines, for often it seems to have lost touch with secular studies altogether and to have become compartmentalized and esoteric. We have, so to speak, a Sunday mentality and an everyday mentality. We may succeed in keeping them apart and in this way we prevent latent conflicts between them from flaring up, and this is done at the expense of restricting religion to a special and somewhat rarefied sector of life. To explore the borders between theology and other disciplines with a view not only to removing conflicts but, more positively, in the hope of gaining reciprocal illumination, is a task that cannot be avoided if we are dissatisfied with the fragmentation of life and culture.<sup>7</sup>

Macquarrie’s preoccupation, as was Barth’s, is the relationship of theology and philosophy. In Macquarrie’s case, it involved the attempt to restate the central themes of Christianity using the resources of existentialist philosophy. However, his point applies to the issue of cultural and religious diversity much more widely. The exploration of the borders between theology and other faiths also brings benefits: it removes conflicts; it might generate reciprocal illumination; and most important of all it helps us come to terms with the God-given diversity of creation, thereby healing that aspect of the fragmentation between our Sunday Christianity and our weekday awareness of enormous diversity.

This book is advocating an alternative vision of the theological enterprise. It is one that makes “engagement” the key term. Now at this point

many suggest that this is a “liberal” alternative to the conservative vision of Karl Barth outlined above. But, as just hinted, it is wholly traditional for the Christian tradition constantly to seek to make itself intelligible by entering into dialogue with contemporary forms of thoughts. However, before developing this point further, it is necessary for me to clarify precisely what is meant here by the term engagement.

## 1 Engagement as a “Changing” Encounter

Post-Wittgenstein, we have an appropriate sense of the problems involved in offering definitions. The dynamic nature of language often means that usage provides a better guide to meaning than the dictionary’s sometimes fossilized attempt to provide an all-embracing description applicable to every use of the word.<sup>8</sup> So, the word “engagement” is used in a variety of ways. Some we can exclude: the decision of a couple to get married, or an appointment, for example of a professional person with a client, are both irrelevant for our purposes. However, “an engagement in war” or a statement like “the children were engaged by the film” carries connotations that I am interested in developing.

“Engagement” has affinities with “involvement,” “participation,” “being engrossed,” and “being committed.” It may carry a sense of “opposition” (e.g., an engagement in war is hardly friendly) or “constructive change” (e.g., the children watching the film). So the attachments may carry a wide range of attitudes. It involves both positive participation and at the same time observation. A theology of engagement involves the following: **it is an encounter that subsequently shapes the theology itself.**

The word “shapes” is deliberately vague. The crucial point is that, as against Karl Barth, theology is not determined primarily and exclusively by the church and Bible. A “theology of engagement” sees theology as shaped, consciously and appropriately, perhaps inevitably, by non-Christian sources. However, the encounter may or may not be a positive one. A positive encounter, where Christian theology can appropriate an insight from another tradition, is good. But sometimes this will not be the case. In much the same way as a country engaged in war is shaped by the encounter, so theology might find itself shaped by the encounter with certain trends that are very antagonistic to theology and be modified by a kind of recoil, a negative reaction. The shape of such a theology might be in opposition to the previous trend. The encounter could also be “observational”: the wary observation of a disagreement between two

traditions might well shape subsequent Christian theology. So, for example, if certain forms of Islam were to engage with modern secular feminism, then the result might well provide illumination for the comparable engagement between conservative forms of Christianity and feminism.

Used in these senses, the term “engagement” overlaps with other terms such as “dialogue” or “conversation.” David Tracy, primarily in the context of the interpretation of texts, describes “conversation” thus:

It is a game where we learn to give in to the movement required by questions worth exploring. The movement in conversation is questioning itself. . . . A conversation is a rare phenomenon, even for Socrates. It is not a confrontation. It is not a debate. It is not an exam. It is questioning itself. It is a willingness to follow the question wherever it may go. It is dia-logue.<sup>9</sup>

For Tracy, conversation, which is understood as involving questioning, is supplemented by “argument.” So Tracy explains:

As any of us become more conscious of other interpretations, we become more aware of the occasional need to interrupt the conversation. Argument may be necessary. Argument is not synonymous with conversation. . . . Rather, argument is a vital moment within conversation that occasionally is needed if the conversation itself is to move forward.<sup>10</sup>

The advantage of the term “engagement” is that it embraces both these elements, conversation and argument. The term does not commit us in advance to the precise form of engagement involved, but leaves it to develop as appropriate.

The related term “dialogue” itself has a variety of meanings. For David Lochhead, it simply describes, in this context, one form of approach to religious diversity, while for Leonard Swidler it is more positive and includes an expectation that it will bring about changes in the participants. In Lochhead’s thoughtful and engaging book, *The Dialogical Imperative*, he writes that “the concept of dialogue . . . is rich enough not only to support a theology of interfaith relations, but to support a theology of mission as well. The word ‘dialogue’ names the fundamental attitude with which the church is called to encounter the world. It follows that there is no need to move “beyond dialogue”. In this sense, dialogue is an end in itself.”<sup>11</sup> The focus for Lochhead is on the attitude prior to the dialogue itself, while for Swidler the dialogue has a potential to bring about change. Swidler makes the point thus:

Dialogue is conversation between two or more persons with differing views, the primary purpose of which is for each participant to learn from the other so that he or she can change and grow – of course, both partners will also want to share their understanding with their partner. Minimally, the very fact that I learn that my dialogue partner believes “this” rather than “that” changes my attitude towards her; and a change in my attitude is a significant change, and growth, in me. We enter into dialogue, therefore, primarily so that we can learn, change and grow, not so that we can force change on the other.<sup>12</sup>

Although Swidler is primarily preoccupied with individual Christians encountering individual adherents of other faith traditions, the sense that dialogue brings about change is helpful in wider contexts. The concept of “engagement” operating in this book, then, is closer to Swidler than to Lochhead. It is transformative of the current theological understanding.

Having outlined the meaning of “engagement,” it is now necessary to firmly distance this account from a usage found in the work of those sympathetic to a version of “postliberal” Christian Ethics. There are many possible examples, of whom I select two, Stanley Hauerwas and Michael Banner. Despite their having a theology that is manifestly preoccupied with the story of the church and largely confined to explicating its witness, they both resent the charge that they are not interested in “engagement.” However, I suspect they would both be happy to acknowledge that they are not interested in “engagement” as defined in this chapter. And the difference between us is illuminating.

Hauerwas has an extended discussion of this question at the start of *Christian Existence Today*.<sup>13</sup> Gustafson had accused Hauerwas of “sectarianism,” suggesting the following explanation for the latter’s theology: in an increasingly secular and pluralist age, the temptation for the church is to resort to some form of sectarianism. In its quest for a clear identity and distinctive beliefs, this sectarianism protects the church from the secular attack. For Gustafson, the steps in Hauerwas’s position are as follows: there is a move from philosophical fideism (Wittgenstein’s influence on Lindbeck is given the blame here), to theological fideism (the corollary of such a philosophy that stresses the distinctiveness of theology apart from all other subjects), then to a sociological tribalism (the distinctive narrative of the church needs to be articulated), which culminates in an impoverished and narrowly focused ethic.

To the charge of philosophical fideism, Hauerwas responds by insisting that he holds that “Christian theology has a stake in a qualified epistemological realism,”<sup>14</sup> and that the church’s “worship of God requires it to

be open to continual ‘reality checks.’”<sup>15</sup> So Hauerwas is conceding that he is critical of “foundationalism”; however, he wants to insist that a form of realism survives and that it is self-critical. Later in Hauerwas’s work, his philosophical framework is clarified. His enthusiasm for Radical Orthodoxy and the theological realism of John Milbank enables him to insist that the Christian tradition is both a metanarrative which is true although it is not to be evaluated by the rationality of liberal modernity.<sup>16</sup> (Just in passing, it is important to clarify the epistemological assumptions that makes engagement possible. This I will do later in this chapter. Suffice to note at this point the “engagement” advocated in this book depends upon a version of critical realism.)

Concentrating for now on Hauerwas, to the cluster of criticisms in relation to “tribalism” and the “lack of engagement”: he insists that he is committed to “engaging critically other perspectives as well as remaining open to the challenge of other perspectives.”<sup>17</sup> Hauerwas defines the core issue in the following way:

The core issue is how the church can provide the interpretative categories to help Christians better understand the positive and negative aspects of their societies and guide their subsequent selective participation.<sup>18</sup>

For Hauerwas, this means that the “engagement” process starts with the church being clear about its interpretative categories for understanding society. This includes understanding the church as an alternative political community and recovering the sense of the integrity of the church. Thus equipped, the church can embark on engagement. From this perspective, Hauerwas believes he is very committed to engagement. He wonders how the term “sectarian” can be applied to him, when the following is taken seriously:

[T]he fact that I have written about why and how Christians should support as well as serve the medical and legal professions, Christian relations with Judaism, how we might think about justice, as well as an analysis of the moral debate concerning nuclear war seems to have no effect on those who are convinced I am a “withdrawn” sectarian.<sup>19</sup>

The difference with the account of “engagement” being commended in this book and Hauerwas’s account is that my model insists that engagement with non-Christian sources can and should actually shape the church’s interpretative categories for understanding itself. It is not that our

theology is determined and then we are in a position to engage, but that our understanding of God and God's relations with the world can itself be shaped by the engagement with non-Christian sources. For Hauerwas, the engagement is a form of "location." The church, having arrived at a clear self-understanding, is in a position to participate selectively: in other words, the church, secure in its own position, is able to affirm certain aspects of modern society and challenge others. It has the task of clarifying the appropriate relations with other movements within modernity. In other words it is an engagement that amounts to judgment. This I suggest is closer to "locating" rather than "engaging".

This interpretation of Hauerwas is confirmed when we turn to the work of one of his disciples in the United Kingdom, Michael Banner. Banner in his book, *Christian Ethics and Contemporary Moral Problems*, uses an overtly Barthian framework to shape his theology. He complains, in response to reviewers who thought otherwise, that his theology is deeply interested in building connections with non-Christian sources. So he claims that his critics (in this case Bishop Richard Harries of Oxford and Dr. Alan Suggate) are wrong when they suppose that it is not:

Contra the Bishop I do engage in dialogue with non-Christian traditions (and specifically enjoin it) and contra Dr. Suggate, nothing I say forbids the practice. In the book of essays to which they refer there are countless places where I acknowledge debts to thinkers of all sorts, some of whom consciously reject the Christian tradition, perhaps chief amongst them Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. Indeed far from avoiding such dialogue I would contend that those amongst my colleagues (O'Donovan and Hauerwas) whose work I most admire as most thoroughly and consistently and properly theological, make a point, as I do, of dealing with a range of thinkers far more diverse and weighty than those who appear in the work of writers belonging to what Dr. Suggate stipulates to be "the mainstream Anglican tradition."<sup>20</sup>

What Banner actually offers in his book, however, is an "engagement" that really means location. Nietzsche is cited as a witness to a form of "Christianity which speaks from its unfounded givenness and not from supposed point of contact"<sup>21</sup>; and Marx and Engels provide an intellectual strand of thought partly responsible for "the transformation of children into 'simple articles of commerce' and a further step in the dissolution of the family."<sup>22</sup> His theology is not changed or shaped by this encounter. Instead one takes a position and to advance that position one then searches for similarities with and argument strategies from non-Christian traditions. So to take his



own illustration of the type of engagement that he commends he offers the following: “A theologian who is concerned to maintain the tradition of Christian teaching in relation to abortion may profitably compare the work of philosophers in addressing questions associated on the one hand with the beginning of human life, and on the other hand with the environment.”<sup>23</sup> The result, explains Banner, is that we arrive “at an apologetic strategy to maintain traditional teaching on the subject of abortion in the face of contemporary dissent . . .”<sup>24</sup>

As with Hauerwas, the meaning of “engagement” operating here is, in practice, simply “location,” as his work shows. The theology is not shaped by the encounter with secular thought: instead, Banner simply defines his version of the Christian tradition by locating himself in relation to these thinkers. The task of location, although a worthy and necessary enterprise, should not be referred to as engagement. Engagement entails a theology open to being shaped and changed by the encounter.

## 2 Assumptions of Engagement

Having explained what “engagement” is, it is now necessary to identify some of the assumptions that are underpinning this account. The first assumption is that “engagement” across traditions is possible and that this depends on a version of “critical realism.” The second assumption, which is linked to the first, is that the category “theism” is a useful tool to facilitate engagement between religious traditions. The third is that engagement both with the past and across religious traditions can build usefully on certain discoveries of modernity, such as a critical study of Scripture. I shall now expound and, briefly, defend these three assumptions underpinning this account of engagement.

The first assumption is that engagement across traditions is possible. John Milbank, for example, thinks that engagement is very difficult. Different traditions have different ways of thinking; and it is the illusion of the modern liberal project to imagine that we can compare and decide between traditions. For Milbank, arguments that appeal across traditions are impossible. He explains that part of his project is:

the detachment of virtue from dialectics. There is for me no method, no mode of argument that charts as smoothly past the Scylla of foundationalism and the Charybdis of difference. Nor do I find it possible to defend the notion of “traditioned reason” in general, outside my attachment to a

tradition which grounds this idea in the belief in the historical guidance of the Holy Spirit.<sup>25</sup>

Milbank insists that the only option is a reason grounded in a tradition, which for Christianity entails a commitment to the providential action of God's Holy Spirit in the church.

One of Milbank's targets in this section of his *Theology and Social Theory* is Alasdair MacIntyre. Contra Milbank, my view is that MacIntyre's proposal does succeed in holding together, on the one hand, a recognition that we are all grounded in traditions and, on the other, the possibility of engaging with contrasting traditions. And it is worth summarizing MacIntyre's argument for these two propositions.

In MacIntyre's *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, he suggests that one explanation for the emergence of traditions is the task of "making sense of the world." Within the histories of the pre-Enlightenment traditions, MacIntyre believes the principles of tradition-constituted inquiry are expressed. For example, Aquinas did not have a belief in neutral vantage points transcending the various conflicting traditions surrounding us, but he still managed to make certain "rational" judgments. In Aquinas, as we shall see in chapter 3, there are two conflicting traditions that are engaged in debate and ultimately synthesized. Aquinas harmonizes an Aristotelian structure with an Augustinian psychology. Using this as one example, MacIntyre's entire book is a study of the principles of engagement between traditions within a historical and cultural framework. The question is: how is this possible?

Initially, argues MacIntyre, traditions are founded within a community. A tradition can be said to begin when particular beliefs, institutions, and practices are articulated by certain people and/or in certain texts. In such a community authority will be conferred on these texts and voices. In discussing these texts, procedures for inquiry will be established. A rationality will develop. Problems for the community arise for any of the following reasons: one, when there are different and incompatible interpretations; two, when incoherences and inadequacies are identified; and three, when there is a confrontation with different systems.<sup>26</sup> When these problems arise, the community faces "an epistemological crisis".<sup>27</sup> The term "epistemological crisis" describes a state where the traditional modes of inquiry are generating problems which the tradition lacks the resources to solve. Such a crisis itself generates the need for an imaginative conceptual innovation,<sup>28</sup> which gives rise to new beliefs that can be compared and contrasted with the older and less adequate beliefs. Such a

comparison obviously requires a standard. Here MacIntyre outlines a variation on the correspondence theory of truth.<sup>29</sup> Ultimately, such traditions are trying to explain reality in as comprehensive a way as possible. Truth is ultimately achieved when the beliefs correspond with reality.

A tradition is successfully maintained if it can be shown that any proposed modification in belief and outlook can be demonstrated to stand in continuity with the rest of the tradition. It is possible that during an epistemological crisis, arising as a result of a conflict with another tradition, the adherents may decide that the new tradition is more appropriate than the earlier one. This is crucial. MacIntyre believes that it is possible for one tradition when engaging another, to find that the other has better conceptual tools to understand human life and activity. A tradition can founder. Although there is no neutral rationality to appeal to, the adherents of an existing tradition can come to find a different tradition's rationality more plausible. A judgment has been made between the two traditions. MacIntyre suggests that the developments leading to the science of Newton and Galileo might be of this type.<sup>30</sup>

So, for MacIntyre, engagement is possible by living in one tradition, entering into the life and narrative of another tradition. And then once one sees the world from the vantage point of both traditions, one can decide which tradition has the better resources to make sense of the complexity of the world. Granted this can be difficult (translation is imprecise and concepts in one culture are not necessarily found in another), it is, nevertheless, possible. The assumption of the "engagement" model in this book is that all traditions (all narratives, if you prefer) are in the business of making sense of the complexity of the world. The tools of coherence (the degree to which a narrative is internally consistent) and explanatory power (the degree to which a narrative explains various positive and negative features of the world) do provide means to determine which narratives are better than others. This is not to deny the complexity of traditions (all traditions divide into numerous other traditions) and often strands within one religion may have more in common with strands within another religion than they do with some of their own coreligionists. But despite these complexities, the critical realist instinct that "it is possible to describe the world in better and worse ways," is the necessary precondition for the model of engagement advocated in this book.

The second assumption is that the category of "theism" is helpful when comparing different religious traditions. Although this is moving beyond MacIntyre, it is compatible with the MacIntyrian mode of engagement outlined above. As a Trinitarian Christian living within the Christian

narrative, I am persuaded that it is of importance to think of God as triune. However, when I enter into the narrative of say a Muslim, although the concept of the Trinity is not available in that tradition, the concept of God is. And it is possible for the Christian to recognize the following similarities. First, both Christians and Muslims believe that a secular naturalist is wrong to believe that the order of the universe is explicable in terms that deny the transcendent. And the God language is used in by both traditions as the mechanism of opposing secularism. Second, both Christians and Muslims affirm the reality of one God, which in both cases is forced upon us by our sense that worship of a plurality of ultimate beings is incoherent. And, of course, the church worked extremely hard to affirm the oneness of God, even though we believe in the Trinity. Third, both Christians and Muslims share a history that recognizes the central revelatory role of Judaism. In, at least, these three ways, the category of “theism” is a way in which Christians can engage with Islam as well as other religious traditions.

Furthermore it is the fact that Christians are both theists as well as Trinitarians that makes natural theology possible. The conviction that knowledge of God’s existence is possible, by virtue of the idea that all people are created in the image of God, outside the community of church depends upon the intelligibility of the category of theism. It would seem then the idea that Christians can think of themselves as theists and that the doctrine of the Trinity is a development of our core belief in God should not be contentious and can be an important way to progress engagement with other religious traditions.

Yet it is contentious. Bruce Marshall, building on George Lindbeck’s *The Nature of Doctrine*, wants to argue that “a genuinely theological account of truth and epistemic justification needs to be robustly Trinitarian. It ought to subject whatever ideas it may find useful to the formative discipline of the Christian community’s convictions about the triune God.”<sup>31</sup> Marshall goes on to argue that the ritual practice of the church is the key to understanding the core commitments of the Christian community and that this practice is firmly Trinitarian. Given this, all engagement, even the concept of “truth” that we assume in our discourse, should be shaped by the Trinity.

The key difficulty with this, which I will develop further in my concluding chapter, is how the Christian then tells the story of our past. Judaism does not describe itself as Trinitarian, even allowing for the enthusiasm in parts of the Hebrew Bible for such ideas as “wisdom.” If the Trinity becomes the control on the grammar of our theological discourse,

then it is difficult to see how the Hebrew Bible contributes to the Christian self-understanding, without overt anachronism. The problem with this stress on Christian distinctness will result in a distortion of our history and a potential distortion with our contemporary relations with other traditions.

This is not to say that the Trinity is not vitally important. In chapter 3, a Trinitarian structure to engagement will be suggested. I am a Trinitarian Christian who believes that the doctrine illuminates much that is true about God, it is just that I do not see the Trinitarian discourse as excluding the theistic one.

The final assumption that I want to identify at this stage in the book is the commitment to the achievements of modernity. I am assuming that the engagement with the Christian past is helped with some of the tools of modernity. Discrimination is, of course, essential. We should be discriminating about which aspects of the past we want to continue to affirm in the present; and we should be discriminating about which aspects of the present that we want to shape our interpretations of the past. For example, what this might mean in practice is that we have to admit that the relatively modern feminist discovery of the evil of patriarchy should make us affirm feminism and revisit our past searching for the strands that affirm feminism and criticizing those strands that do not. Feminism, as we shall see in chapter 6, is an insight of modernity that should be used to shape our reading of the past.

In addition, amongst the tools that are used to make sense of the past are our modern historical sensitivity and the critical tools for the study of Scripture.<sup>32</sup> The task of attempting to determine “precisely what happened” is both modern and simultaneously very difficult. Yet we should affirm the project and inevitably it will change our understanding of the past. Unlike say the book of Chronicles in the Hebrew Scriptures, where the story of the past is told for the purposes of illuminating the moral dilemmas of the present, the task of the modern historian is to attempt to understand the past on its own terms.

Along with this distinctive historical sensitivity, we have a set of critical tools for the study of Scripture. The Bible is a text that invites critical study. The synoptic problem is not an invention of the modern era. Any careful reader of the text finds the first three gospels have considerable material in common, which is then treated in significantly different ways. The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7) and the Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6) are both similar and yet different. Now this has, of course, always been recognized. However, the explanations and debates in modern

New Testament scholarship, which recognize different interests at work in the organization and use of the material, are persuasive. Any plausible account of inspiration of Scripture needs to accommodate the picture of the nature of the text emerging from New Testament scholarship. We should still recognize the inspired nature of the experience underpinning the text and its authority in respect to the story of Jesus, but we must also recognize the human interests at work in shaping the text.

It is beyond the scope of this book to defend these three assumptions in detail. I shall, however, return to the second assumption at the end of the book. At this stage, I simply state these assumptions so that the following defense of engagement and the case studies that follow are intelligible to the reader.

### 3 Why it matters

Having explained what “engagement” is and named the assumptions underpinning this account, it is now necessary to outline why it matters. The key to the argument that follows is that “engagement” matters because it opens up a necessary option for the churches, as well as one thoroughly customary in the Christian tradition. Instead of insisting that “liberal” openness is at odds with the Christian tradition that we have inherited, I shall maintain that is not the case. Once that is recognized, it will be clear that a theology of engagement, entailing openness, should characterize the thought and practice of the church today. In practice, it may turn out to be an important way of redefining the somewhat sterile battle between “liberals” and “conservatives.”

The great fault line running down the mainline churches is this “conservative” and “liberal” divide. It splits allegiances and determines the “tribes” that grapple for control of the senior appointments and the policies of the churches. Increasingly, the actual arguments of theologians are not examined, simply the consequences or outcomes of the arguments. No one is interested in the coherence or merits of the position taken by a writer, but only whether or not, he or she is pro or anti, for example, the ordination of women? Or, to take an even more contemporary question, is the theologian pro or anti the ordination of practicing gays and lesbians?

The precise issues that determine which tribe one belongs to at any one time depend very much on the moment. Tony Higton in the United

Kingdom suggested three issues that divide liberals and conservatives: the attitude to homosexuality, the attitude to interfaith worship, and the attitude to the credal faith. For Higton, this was the line in the sand: the point at which Biblical Christians must take a stand. What is interesting about Higton's list is that it doesn't include the ordination of women, although plenty of conservative Anglo-Catholics and indeed Evangelicals like Higton himself would insist that it is a "first order" issue. For my purposes, I shall define a "conservative," more widely, as a person who insists on fidelity to the Scriptures and tradition, which in practice involves accepting the historic creeds and continuing to believe them today. A "liberal" by contrast insists on adapting the tradition in the light of new insights, some of them derived from non-Christian sources, which in the case of Western Christianity must involve learning from the broad achievement of European thought, namely the Enlightenment and its numerous more recent effects.

The argument of the rest of this chapter is that both "liberals" and "conservatives" are mistaken. They share a key assumption: both assume that there is a "changeless" tradition that we must either affirm or modify/reject. As suggested earlier, this key assumption is mistaken. If Christians really are committed to the "tradition" then that commitment will involve a recognition that it is a dynamic entity that learnt from non-Christian sources and contemporary culture to modify the Christian understanding of the truth of God's relations with the world. In other words, the paradox is that to be a traditional Christian, one has to be open and liberal!

To develop this argument we shall start with two examples (one liberal, one conservative) which, mistakenly, interpret the tradition as an entity that one must accept or reject. To demonstrate that this is a problem for the mainline churches, both examples are Anglicans. The first is the famous American Bishop, John Selby Spong; the second is the prolific English theologian, Dr. Alister McGrath.<sup>33</sup>

Generally seen as an extreme case, Spong is, in one sense, an easy target. So let me start by distancing myself from some of the polemic he has attracted. He may be thought admirable for the courage and energy with which he has spoken out for a liberal agenda. In addition, he has managed to connect with those, to use his phrase, "living in exile" – those who, while willing and well disposed, find belief difficult in a modern scientific culture. One might say that, in the current situation, if Spong did not exist, it would be necessary to invent him. The church should always be

big enough to welcome the Spong perspective, and one has been glad to give him public support.<sup>34</sup> Yet, all the same, I find Spong's view of the tradition deeply problematic.

It is worth reminding my readers that Spong is clearly deeply committed to faith. He describes himself thus, "I am what I would call a God-intoxicated human being."<sup>35</sup> Yet the way in which Christian experience has been documented in the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed, argues Spong, is no longer an option. He writes, "The words . . . were fashioned inside a worldview that no longer exists. Indeed, it is quite alien to the world in which I live."<sup>36</sup> And later "credal language came out of another time. It reflects assumptions that this generation can no longer make."<sup>37</sup> Scattered throughout his work, one finds three reasons for the impossibility of affirming credal language. The first is the displacement of a pre-modern cosmology by our modern scientific worldview. Much like Bultmann before him, he makes much of the breakdown in the three-tier universe and the sheer vastness of space. Second, he finds much of the tradition morally suspect. This is not simply in terms of the traditional prohibitions (e.g., on sexual questions), but also in doctrine, especially aspects of the traditional doctrine of God. In *Why Christianity must Change or Die*, he explains that he finds the language of "Father Almighty" deeply offensive.<sup>38</sup> Third, he believes that it is wrong to privilege the "expertise" of the church Fathers. The triumph of orthodoxy, insists Spong, is simply the triumph of power. So he writes, "To be called an orthodox Christian does not mean that one's point of view is right. It only means that this point of view won out in the ancient debate."<sup>39</sup>

Most of the time, Spong rejects the past. So to explain his use of the image of "exile," he explains that "I live in a state of exile from the pre-suppositions of my own religious past. I am exiled from the literal understandings that shaped the creed at its creation."<sup>40</sup> Sometimes, however, he uses a different image: he wants to rework the tradition. So he writes, "I believe that we Christians must inevitably revisit Chalcedon and once again do the hard work of rethinking and redefining the Christian experience for our time and in words and concepts appropriate to our world."<sup>41</sup> What he means by this is that there is a core "Jesus experience" that he wants to recapture in new and modern terminology:

I enter this process because I can neither dismiss this Christ nor live comfortably with the way he has been traditionally interpreted. I am not prepared to conclude that the traditional ways of interpreting Jesus have exhausted the possibilities. I can with no great difficulty set aside those



interpretations, but I cannot set aside the Christ experience, which created the necessity for those theistic interpretations of yesterday. I still find the power of Christ compelling.<sup>42</sup>

So for Spong our past is a big problem. It was shaped in a premodern world, making assumptions that are often false and even offensive. Yet at the heart of it all is a “Jesus/Christ experience” that he wants to recover. To do this he needs to discard the Bible and the tradition apart from their bearing on this “Jesus experience” as he perceives it.

Now this is very unfair to the tradition, at times it creates needless difficulties for Spong. For example, on the idea of God, he first explains how a three-tier universe gave birth to the picture of God as the highly anthropomorphic parent who constantly interferes with his creation, and then writes:

These ideas of God were firmly set and universally believed, and they formed the essence of the faith of Christians for the first sixteen hundred years or so of their history. The language of the Christian creeds took form in this period of time. But when the modern age began to dawn, a new understanding of the shape of the universe began to grow and God’s place as the heavenly director of human affairs began to totter.<sup>43</sup>

This “theistic” God, Spong wants us to reject. So in his discussion of Michael Goulder (the New Testament scholar turned nonaggressive atheist), he asks what sort of God Goulder has rejected. “The answer seems overwhelmingly obvious. He has rejected the idea of God defined as a supernatural person who invades life periodically to accomplish the divine will. This deity is an intensely human figure who does grandiose and expanded, but nonetheless, human things. This is a God clearly defined in what we might call the language of theism.”<sup>44</sup>

Anyone vaguely acquainted with the work of, say, St. Augustine of Hippo and St. Thomas Aquinas knows that this is false. To anticipate a more sustained discussion, which will occur in chapters 2 and 3, we find in Aquinas an understanding of God that describes God as a necessary being. Now the concept of a necessary being is extremely complex and a matter of considerable scholarly debate but at the very least it involves a type of existence utterly unrelated to mere “contingent” human existence: God is nondependent and exists in all possible worlds. In addition, for Aquinas this God is changeless (mainly because any change, he argued, would bring about either improvement – which is impossible because God

is already perfect – or a deterioration – which is equally impossible because God would then cease to be perfect). Moreover, if God is changeless, then God must be timeless. Link this in with the doctrine of divine “simplicity,” and you have a God completely unlike any human. There are real difficulties with this account of God, but Spong’s anxiety about anthropomorphism is not one of them.

Indeed when Spong arrives at his definition of God, he admits there are affinities with Thomism. This surprising disclosure occurs when he suggests an image of God beyond theism and uses Paul Tillich to do so. He writes, “Paul Tillich . . . suggested that we must abandon the external height images in which the theistic God has historically been perceived and replace them with internal depth images of a deity who is not apart from us but who is the very core and ground of all that is.”<sup>45</sup> We then find the following footnote:

Regius Professor of Divinity at Oxford Dr. Keith Ward has made the point (in conversation) that these Tillichian concepts can be found substantially in the writings of Thomas Aquinas. He emphasizes that in the world of academic theology, even the supposedly modern concepts have been around for quite a while.<sup>46</sup>

Quite so, Bishop Spong. This supposedly highly anthropomorphic tradition already has the account of God that Spong wants to commend. The problem that worried him so much is already solved by the tradition he has rejected. Spong’s problem is that he rejects a Christian past that doesn’t exist, at least at the level of major theological traditions. If it existed (and exists) at other levels, that is another matter and takes us into realms that are not here our immediate concern.

Let us now turn to the conservatives and see if they fair any better. McGrath, like Spong, is well known; unlike Spong, however, he sets out his position with much more care and precision. McGrath has only had one overt discussion of Spong: he has condemned the latter’s tendency to offer a speculation, one view among others, as the assured result of New Testament scholarship.<sup>47</sup> It is a charge Spong probably ought to concede. For my purposes, however, McGrath is important for two reasons. First, he locates himself firmly in the tradition of contemporary Anglican conservative evangelicals. As author of James Packer’s biography, he is proud of his association with this doyen of evangelicals. Second, he has an impressive corpus of writing in which he defends his evangelical credentials with care and sophistication.

He is careful in all his work to distinguish fundamentalism from evangelicalism. He is critical of opponents (e.g., James Barr and Michael Ramsey) who fail to do so. He insists that biblically, theologically, and sociologically they differ. Biblically, evangelicals accept the principle of biblical criticism, though they may apply it in a conservative way theologically, fundamentalists tend to have a narrower set of doctrinal commitments; and sociologically, evangelicals are much more sympathetic to social action and left-leaning politics generally whereas fundamentalists are often much less concerned with such matters.<sup>48</sup> He suggests that evangelical identity can be grouped around six (which later became four) fundamental convictions. These are:

- 1 the supreme authority of Scripture as a source of knowledge of God, and a guide to Christian living;
- 2 the majesty of Jesus Christ, both as Incarnate God and Lord, and as the saviour of sinful humanity;
- 3 the lordship of the Holy Spirit;
- 4 the need for personal conversion;
- 5 the priority of evangelism for both individual Christians and the church as a whole;
- 6 the importance of the Christian community for spiritual nourishment, fellowship and growth.<sup>49</sup>

It is noteworthy that this list excludes certain prominent features of American evangelicalism (for example, dispensationalism<sup>50</sup>) and admits that evangelicalism needs to be (in the jargon) a broad church. He provides the example of the Eucharist: “Thus, in the case of the ‘real presence’ question, three major views achieved wide influence within the Reformation by 1560: Luther’s view, that the bread is literally to be identified with the body of Christ; Calvin’s view, that the bread is an efficacious symbol of the presence of Christ, effecting what it signified; Zwingli’s view, that the bread merely symbolizes Christ in his absence. All of these view can be justified on the basis of Scripture.”<sup>51</sup> In a case like this, McGrath argues that it is important for evangelicals to permit diversity of viewpoint and to accept that where Scripture is not completely clear it is a case of a secondary issue on which Christian people can disagree.

Much of his work is preoccupied with the perception of evangelicalism in the academy. He is proud of its “counter-cultural” intuitions. Where liberalism is constantly wanting to make faith accessible to modern culture, evangelicalism is determined to challenge that culture. He cites with

approval Karl Barth's involvement in the "Barmen Declaration" as an example of fidelity to the biblical interpretation of Christ which made any compromise with the Nazi Aryan Jesus impossible.<sup>52</sup> Unlike liberalism, insists McGrath, evangelicalism knows that secularism, the assumptions of "the world," is an enemy that needs fighting not a friend that needs accommodating.

Importantly for my purposes, McGrath insists that evangelicalism is mainstream. Partly no doubt this is a "political" device: he wants to define the norm of Christianity in terms of evangelicalism. (I suspect most Roman Catholics, especially, would find such a claim problematic!) It is at this point that we discover a monolithic past which we are required to affirm:

Evangelicalism is historic Christianity. Its beliefs correspond to the central doctrines of the Christian churches down the ages, including the two most important doctrines of the patristic period: the doctrine of the "two natures," human and divine, of Jesus Christ, and the doctrine of the Trinity. In its vigorous defence of the biblical foundations, theological legitimacy and spiritual relevance of these doctrines, evangelicalism has shown itself to have every right to claim to be a standard-bearer of historic orthodox Christianity in the modern period.<sup>53</sup>

And elsewhere he co-writes with John Wenham, that the key to this historic Christianity is the commitment to Scripture:

Scripture is, for evangelicals, the central legitimating resource of Christian faith and theology, the clearest window through which the face of Christ may be seen. In seeing Scripture as the inspired, authoritative and trustworthy word of God, evangelicals are reiterating the common faith of the Christian church, not inventing something new.<sup>54</sup>

In one sense this demonstrates my point. McGrath, as a representative of conservative Christianity, operates with one particular monolithic understanding of the Christian past that we are simply required to affirm. However, McGrath is too good an historian to make this mistake quite so crudely. He returns to the very simple question – what is it to affirm our doctrinal position?

In his impressive Bampton lectures *The Genesis of Doctrine*, he formulates an answer that is both sophisticated and interesting. Much of it is an attack on the Enlightenment problems with doctrine and authority. He

identifies three arguments constructed by the Enlightenment against the traditional corpus of doctrine:

- 1 Doctrinal formulations are to be regarded as historically conditioned, perhaps appropriate to their own period, but of questionable modern relevance. While historical criticism is an appropriate tool for the evaluation and correction of doctrine formulations, history is incapable of disclosing rational truth.
- 2 The truths of reason are autonomous, and may be ascertained without any appeal to history in general, or any specified component in particular (such as the history of Jesus of Nazareth).
- 3 The past can only be known in a fragmentary, relative and corrigible manner; it is never anything more than, to anticipate Kierkegaard's luminous phrase, "approximation knowledge."<sup>55</sup>

He then provides the following response. First, the arguments used to justify these positions as held by Enlightenment thinkers are poor. McGrath makes a good case against any strong historical relativism. He demonstrates the ways in which "tradition" can legitimately be "handed over." Second, he proposes four theses that describe the role of doctrine:

- 1 doctrine functions as a social demarcation;
- 2 doctrine is generated by, and subsequently interprets the Christian narrative;
- 3 doctrine interprets experience;
- 4 doctrine makes truth claims.<sup>56</sup>

Third, McGrath insists that the "pre-event" of Jesus as conveyed in Scripture is a control on our understanding of legitimate development. This theme is important for him: he believes it is a distinctive emphasis of evangelicalism and therefore makes him suspicious of the community emphasis of much postliberalism. By this he means that the truth claim that Jesus the historical person was God is not simply an insight of the "community" of the church but the prior event creating the community of the church. To this point I shall return.

Despite McGrath's insistence that he is disinclined to get into any particular theory or justification of Scripture, this is what he now needs. He admits as much when elsewhere he chides the post-liberals for their lack of clarity on this point:

The specific criticism which evangelicalism directs against postliberalism at this point is the following: the prioritization of Scripture is not adequately grounded at the theological level. In effect, the priority of Scripture is defended on grounds which appear to be cultural, historical or contractual. The role of the Qur'an within Islam could be justified on similar grounds. The normative role of Scripture within the Christian community is unquestionably Christian (just as the normative role of the Qur'an within Islam is Islamic); but is it right? For the evangelical, truth claims cannot be eroded at this juncture. Scripture has authority, not because of what the Christian community has chosen to make of it, but because of what it is, and what it conveys.<sup>57</sup>

Scripture becomes a control on tradition, even though both tradition and the community are technically prior to the text (in that the earliest church was around before the earliest epistles were written and a long time before the New Testament canon was determined). For McGrath, the problem of history is ultimately solved by a high view of Scripture – a perfectly coherent position but one which is difficult to justify, which is probably why he is disinclined to do so. For McGrath, our situation is this: there is a Christ-experience in Scripture which the church has been forced to explain repeatedly in history. That continuity is the givenness that we all must live with. He is of course committed to holding that the great patristic doctrines (of the Trinity and the Person of Christ) are necessarily and correctly deduced from the New Testament where others find them less than wholly explicit.

We arrive then at a control and a sense of givenness that in fact replicates in its own way the error of Spong. He wants our Christian past to be primarily deductions from Scripture. This is our revelation that we then must explicate throughout the ages. When he talks about “tradition,” he defines it as “the history of discipleship – of reading, interpreting and wrestling with Scripture. Tradition is a willingness to read Scripture, taking into account the ways in which it has been read in the past.”<sup>58</sup> The creative achievement of the tradition and the imaginative use of non-Christian sources and philosophy have disappeared behind a text-driven picture of our past, which may not be easy to justify, and in any case is open to the judgment of historical inquiry: it can be verified or falsified.

It is at this point that it is necessary to construct an alternative way of understanding the past and therefore thinking about Christian identity. McGrath's picture of liberalism is a good place to begin. For McGrath, liberalism is the erosion of core beliefs intended to make Christianity more acceptable in the modern age. It operates with a post-Enlightenment view

of rationality and secular assumptions about the nature of the world. It is true that English liberalism, which reached its nadir in *The Myth of God Incarnate* (1977), and perhaps the work of Bishop Spong, tend to operate with these assumptions. But the style of liberalism that I want to defend in this book is much more orthodox than either. It is willing to learn from a range of non-Christian sources, including of course the Enlightenment.

The Enlightenment and its' child, secularism, have taught the church much that is true about God's relations to the world. The new (or orthodox) liberalism that I am seeking to defend wants to supplement the Enlightenment with a whole range of additional sources from which we can learn about God. This liberalism is in this sense Catholic: it is committed to natural theology and to learning of God from creation. Liberalism in this sense is Anglican – leaning on Scripture, tradition, and reason, or, as developed by John Macquarrie, on the six factors that in his view shape the character of Christian thinking – Scripture, Tradition, Reason, Experience, Culture, and Revelation.

McGrath anticipates this view of liberalism when he writes:

Indeed, academic integrity was widely seen as the exclusive prerogative of liberal writers, who encouraged the view that a concern for the intellectual climate in which Christianity finds itself at any moment is a unique, or even a defining, feature of liberalism. Yet Thomas Aquinas took seriously the Aristotelianism of the thirteenth-century University of Paris in writing both his *Summa contra Gentiles* and *Summa Theologiae*. I have yet to find Aquinas described as a liberal for that reason! . . . In short: there is nothing distinctively “liberal” about being academically serious and culturally informed.<sup>59</sup>

Naturally McGrath is right to insist that “intellectual” engagement is not in itself a liberal version (and he correctly cites Alvin Plantinga as modern example of a serious intellect), but he is wrong not to see that using non-Christian sources as a central part of your theological methodology is a feature of a liberal methodology that differs radically from his own biblicism.

A major hero of the new liberalism is Augustine, one of the greatest shapers of our tradition who used a methodology which was, on our present understanding, distinctively liberal. It is to this that we turn in the next chapter.