

***A Sociology of Progressive Religious Groups
Why Liberal Religious Groups Cannot Get Together***

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Schisms are normally carried out by traditionalists or conversionists over what is called a "presenting issue". This is not the question here but the inability of liberal groups to get together.

Indeed liberals tend not to split off as groups, but they do move out as individuals. When Theophilus Lindsey rejected the 39 Articles of the Church of England and set up the first named Unitarian Church in 1774, he hoped for an exodus of Anglicans to join his new Arian based movement (he followed Samuel Clarke's Arian revision of the Book of Common Prayer). An exodus did not happen. The Arians stayed within the Church of England, and Essex Church as it was called became absorbed into the liberalising Presbyterian movement. Did not these Presbyterians split then, long before? Well, when the Presbyterians broke away from the Church of England they were fiercely Puritan and very trinitarian, with full confidence in the Bible alone to uphold Calvinist doctrine. So this too was an example of an evangelical breakaway. That they became liberal was an unintended consequence of the original Puritan intention, and they were later boosted by ideological liberals (who were also biblical literalists, reading a unitarian doctrine straight off the gospels as, indeed, the New Testament contains no doctrine of the Trinity, only its possibility).

So what is this about liberal groups and then not being able to be inclusive of one another? We first need to know what groups we are talking about, what they organise for and how they function.

The definition of these groups sometimes includes the term "radical", as with Sea of Faith - but the term "radical" gets used for the theological right as well as theological left. It then gets especially confusing when the term "radical" refers not only to postmodernists who follow Don Cupitt's nihilist textualism, but also those postmodernists who follow John Milbank's "radical orthodoxy" and promote the full orthodoxy as a premodern package in a postmodern setting. They are indeed regarded as suspect by the radical right. Without the use of a liberal qualifier the word radical is just confusing and meaningless - and the radical orthodox are not liberal (although they can be inclusive).

So we need a map of liberal groups, and a perspectives on the modernist and postmodernist aspect of all this too.

Well, of course, there is the liberal postmodern Sea of Faith, a group that includes Christians but is not defined as Christian. Although it has no creed or statement of membership, it does have a commitment towards religion being seen as a human creation. In general it rejects the division between the combination of collective basis of truth in objectivity and individualist basis of subjectivity. Objectivity and subjectivity collapse within postmodernism, so that truth becomes what you talk about and what you do - it is a standard of performance and what works. Thus it uses the term non-realism, a view of non-objective religious truth. Don Cupitt, however, has now abandoned non-realism, saying that his critics were "always right". According to *The Old Creed and The New* (2007) Don now believes in simple, straight talk; he calls such straight talk "autological", though he has not yet

declared for religious humanist realism or for the Buddhist view of transcendent realism. Buddhism, by the way, overlaps with postmodernism, but it is not postmodern and has no need of the philosophy. Postmodernism is a legacy of Western realism and its rejection; Buddhist realism was more transient in the first place, and Buddhism already has paradox built into it at the deepest level.

What do Sea of Faith groups do - they mainly discuss. They may read and discuss. They confer. There is an ambiguity towards carrying out worship, due to the differences of outlook between members. There is some creativity at conferences, but that is about it.

Then there is the Progressive Christianity Network. It is what it says: and it does want to retain a Christian identity with a progressive outlook. Its main British personality would be the Anglican priest Hugh Dawes, who has spoken at a past Sea of Faith Conference. The PCN is international. The PCN, like Sea of Faith, has individual members and set up local groups, and these exist in Maidenhead with Windsor, Newbury, Knutsford, Carlisle, Keswick [Contemporary Faith Group], Kendal, Sedbergh, Crediton, Nottingham, Gloucestershire, Hampshire, Hertfordshire, Tunbridge Wells, Blackburn with Darwen, Bolton with Leigh, Central London, Herne Hill, Mill Hill, Richmond, Ruislip, Manchester, Northamptonshire and Buckinghamshire, Tynedale (Hexham), Bath, Weston-super-Mare, Newcastle-under-Lyme with Stoke-on-Trent, Epsom & Leatherhead, Brighton, Hastings, Coventry & North West Midlands, Harrogate, Leeds, and also Sheffield.

The PCN constitution does not allow other groups and church congregations to join

it as groups. Such is the very point of this talk. It is for individuals to form groups. People come from different denominations and none, and the PCN then allies itself with other groups. The groups study books, but there is a "worship life" possible where the sharing of bread and wine in Jesus' name can be carried out and this is understood to be a representation of an ancient vision of God's feast. The ritual is for all peoples as followers of the life and teachings of Jesus. So this has potential to be a church in action, but would not so far intend to be a denomination itself. They may relate this understanding back into their churches.

The Modern Churchpeople's Union also has local groups, though not as many as the PCN. These add to individual membership. Groups are found in Aberystwyth, Bradford, London, Midlands, Portsmouth & Guildford, North West, Oxford and, again, Sheffield. The MCU is a pressure group mainly directed at the Church of England but also other denominations. It draws from Broad Church Anglicanism, the latitudinarians (a Cambridge based historically liberal grouping) and Anglican Arians. It is largely modernist in heritage, but would not reject the postmodern. What do these groups do: well they grumble and complain, discuss, write, confer, holds worship, and backs some people in church elections and would like a sense of strategy.

Two historically established liberal groups that are full denominations are the Unitarian and Free Christian Churches, and the Society of Friends. Both are bipolar between a religious humanism and universalism and pluralism at one pole to a conserving liberal Christianity at the other pole. Conserving liberal Christianity sounds like a contradiction. It is, in some senses, postliberal, in that it understands

the success of its aims by the maintenance of Christian practices and appearances, so that for example the Unitarian Church continues to look, sound and appear like a regular church, with hymns, Lord' s Prayer, other prayers, and sermon, all of which projects the worship of God and the central importance of Jesus, even if theology has continued to move on. It is about appearances, respectability, expectations and performance. The General Assembly of the Unitarian and Free Christian Churches even has the Object that includes the intention to uphold the liberal Christian tradition. However, Unitarian churches are congregationalist in polity, because historically they were unable to establish Presbyterian structures and later on, when they could have done so, they did not. Perhaps the impact for Quakers in worship is less critical, because Quaker ritual is fixed, but the Quaker conserving side does include use of the Bible in spontaneous comments during the worship, and impacts on Quaker writings and essential reference points and further on ecumenical associations. Both Unitairans and Quakers share a history of evolving into their present bipolarities. Incidentally, US Quakers are more evangelical than UK Quakers, and, quite the opposite, US Unitarian Universalists are more progressive than UK Unitarians. US Unitarian Universalists have a stronger internal set of identified groups, with humanists, Easterns and neo-Pagans along with the conserving Christians. Once again it is conservatives who have have split off - there is the American Unitarian Association, of former UUA Christians who retain a doctrinal closeness to the writings of William Ellery Channing.

Another important group, especially given the ongoing Anglican troubles, is the Metropolitan Community Church. This is a gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender friendly independent Church, indeed it focuses upon these communities. It actually

delivers the full, orthodox (with a small o) liturgy, and follows the Apostles and Nicene Creeds, but is quite tolerant of different views and cannot be extreme liturgically because it welcomes many who have been damaged by and escaped a wide variety of intolerant Christian churches. So its liberalism is about inclusivity and is people based, and it also promotes liberation theology - that is social with spiritual transformation. It claims 42,000 members in over 250 congregations across 24 countries. It was founded in 1968 in America by an ex-Pentecostal clergyman called Troy Perry. Congregations elect pastors and both of these elect Elders who form an Episcopal function. A large majority of Elders are women - 70%. In this country its centres are Bath, Birmingham, Bournemouth, Brighton, London, North London, South London, Manchester, Newcastle and Torbay (this one meets in the Unitarian church in Torquay). Some of these are struggling - Portsmouth closed, and Newcastle is finding the going tough, for example.

A real curiosity is the Liberal Catholic Church. The Rt. Rev. James Ingall Wedgwood (1883 - 1951) (of the pottery family) was its founding bishop. He was an Anglican priest, resigned when he became a theosophist, was ordained even as a theosophist into the Old Catholic Church, was then consecrated a bishop and later on started the LCC to incorporate theosophy. Later in 1941 there was a schism so that the Liberal Catholic Church in the United States. (called the Liberal Catholic Church International in the rest of the world) made the place of theosophy optional among its clergy, whilst the The Liberal Catholic Church, Province of the United States of America (called the Liberal Catholic Church elsewhere), maintained theosophy such as belief in reincarnation and vegetarianism. The less liberal Liberal Catholic Church has since come to blows in 2003 between national Churches over

the ordination of women - some countries having a lay order alternative for women's ordination. The LCCI, the more liberal Church, ordained women from 2004. Even before this, in Britain in April 2003 Professor Elizabeth Stuart was elected as bishop of the LCCI. She has since split from her connection with The Open Episcopal Church, daughter Church of The Reformed Liberal Catholic Church (Old Catholic), and is now the Archbishop of the the Liberal Catholic Church International in Great Britain. The LCCI has emphasised ritual, mysticism and the sacraments, combined with intellectual liberty, freedom of belief and respect for individual conscience. It strongly rejects biblical literalism, but it is a trinitarian Church. The Nicene and Apostles' Creeds are recognised. It tends to spiritualise the material not gnostic as such - and people are eternal before birth as well as after death. All religions of the world draw upon the one source.

LCCI now has a wider association. Let's go back a bit. In 1907 a Joseph Morgan Lloyd Thomas, influenced by Unitarian rationalist Rev. L. P. Jacks and congregationalist Rev. W. S. Orchard, and the New Theology of modernist R. J. Campbell, published a pamphlet called A Free Catholic Church, and established a sacraments without creeds Free Catholic movement. When the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches formed in 1928, he left and his church, Birmingham New Meeting, would not join the renewed denomination and he became a Free Catholic Priest, still ministering in Birmingham until 1932 (New Meeting did later join the GA). Lloyd Thomas compiled A Free Church Book of Common Prayer (1929), with its contents including the Nicene Creed, Psalms and canticles and a certain James Martineau's prayers - I'll mention him later. Detached from Unitarianism the liberal Catholic group went nowhere, and some participants went off

to Roman Catholicism.

Now there is some relevance today in mentioning Lloyd Thomas, because he seems to have almost a saintly reputation among a group that was until recently based in south London. With three ministers it was first called the British Liberal Free Church, then the Society of the Divine Spirit in 1999. The Society of Free Christians was also formed in 1999 as a ministerial organisation to assist this Society of the Divine Spirit. What then happened was a number of name changes, but then one minister left to become a Unitarian minister, and the other two were then consecrated by Archbishop Illtyd Thomas using the Liberal Catholic rite of 1967, and subsequently also consecrated but sub conditione using the Roman Catholic rite by Archbishop Phillip Kemp of the Independent Catholic Alliance in November 2006. Apparently they hear that Roman Catholicism recognises their bishops' orders as valid, if presumably irregular, whereas, of course, Anglican orders are completely invalid! The ministerial support body now divided, so that the Catholic consecrated side became the Religious Society of St. Simon, and the others became the Society for Humanistic Potential. The Independent Old Catholic Church of the Utrecht Succession, as they now called themselves, became the Liberal Catholic Rite from the beginning of 2007. This is a group that at its core actually wants to continue to be small and does not wish to proselytise. The two bishops carry on with a weekly community Mass in a private oratory in north London. They have decided on congregationalism as specifically liberal, which is consistent with Unitarians.

This, I have to say, is the nearest we get to splits and schisms in liberalism as seen elsewhere - but it is at the formation stage again. Like other liberal groups, they just

want to stay themselves! They extend friendship to other Liberal Catholics, but will not formally join them. However, it is quite clear that they are close to the Liberal Catholic Church International - and their congregationalist independence is under constant review. As a result one of the bishops has organised the Independent Liberal Catholic Fellowship for meetings and worship. This started in 2007. The ILCF is a connecting and linking body, and through it the ministry is open to gay and straight, and all these Liberal Catholics bless same sex and mixed sex partnerships. It is claimed that the worldwide Independent Catholic movement numbers eight million; the Independent Liberal Catholic Fellowship contains about two thousand members. Dr Michael Walsh of the Church of England in Chichester has joined, and there are members also in Suffolk, London, Liverpool, Edinburgh, Florida, Texas, Mexico, Nigeria, Netherlands, Slovenia and South Africa. Personally I warm to this odd group, as I have warmed to Lloyd Thomas and Martineau: I think they have real potential. They turn no one away and are completely non-dogmatic - they have "a desire to turn the concept of the ' broad church' into reality, seeking strength in our diversity." Groups and ministries can join the fellowship, if not the Liberal Rite itself. Both Liberal Rite bishops John Kersey and Andrew Linley are members of the Sophia Circle, who are apostolic succession bishops but who hold esoteric beliefs. Incidentally, the Presiding Bishop in Canada, has decided to withdraw from the ICLF in order to enter full Buddhist/ Taoist ministry, and this will be provided on the third floor of his church.

There are some other such groups that spring up from nowhere. Hessle, near Hull, is the base of the Arian Catholic Church - but let' s not get troubled over that. It is a one man invention that recruits via the Internet and seems to have got up to some

shennanigans in York Minster with all its recruited clergy in 2006 consecrating himself as the new Arian Archbishop of York. It may be something in the water of the River Humber, but we also have two orthodox schisms from Anglicanism based around the Barton-on-Humber to Barrow-on-Humber area, where I live, one of whom has since gone to the USA and the other who is a local pain in the neck and was even excommunicated from his own creation. Websites seem to spawn one-person denominations.

Indeed some older liberal churches have declined to nothing, and mention should be made of the Ethical Churches. I have myself used liturgical elements from Liverpool Ethical Church. This Church took Anglican liturgical content and stripped it of the supernatural. Its minister was called a Lecturer. Like the Labour Churches, they have not survived. The nearest similar institution is Conway Hall in London, but it would not call itself religious.

So what else is there? Of course there is the Reformed and Liberal Congregations in Judaism. The term liberal cannot usually be applied to Western Buddhist groups, though obviously Western culture is important to them. The Hindu group Brahmo Samaj is part of Hindu modernism, drawing on its own traditions in the Vedas and Upanishads, impacting on interfaith scene. There are interfaith groups, some of which seem to have developed lives of their own, and one of which is the International Association for Religious Freedom as well as the more general World Congress of Faiths (that is not liberal but attracts liberals).

However, there are individual churches in so-called mainstream denominations that

can be called liberal. A primary example is St James, Piccadilly, in London, but there are quite a number, and one near here [Bradford] is All Hallows at Leeds - an inclusive, gay-friendly, theologically-intelligent, Anglican Church. Putney Church is an example of a liberal church on an inclusive model. A local church like Central United Reformed Church in Bath calls itself liberal. They all do tend to work on their own, however, and rarely link up with other liberal churches as such. Incidentally the Anglican church I attend, in Barton-upon-Humber, is mixed, including a chap who identifies with Don Cupitt and has investigated the Unitarians, but who remains solidly Anglican, and there are a number of theologically aware members along with him.

Then there are those denominations themselves that are historically mainstream but have developed a liberal bias, and these would include in the United States the United Church of Christ, whose equivalent in the UK is the United Reformed Church, which started with the merger of the Presbyterian Church of England (actually a Scottish import) and Congregationalist churches, some of which were liberal, in 1972. Absorbing the Churches of Christ in 1981 took it into central Scotland and merging with the Scottish Congregational Church in 2000 spread it about further. Every ecumenical merger has a traditionalisms-undermining effect and therefore enhances liberalism. The URC in the UK generally supports blessings for gay partnerships. The Episcopal Church in the USA, whilst mixed, supports a breadth of theology that gives it a liberal hue - but then such is the case with a strong liberal presence in Canada, the Scottish Episcopal Church, the Church in Wales, and among Anglicans in New Zealand. New Zealand Presbyterians are also liberal biased, as we know with the celebrated Lloyd Geering, and indeed there is

some good theology in the Church of Scotland with which it is historically related. I should mention here the non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church of Ireland, a liberal oriented Christian denomination. Then there are definite pressure groups within these Churches, so that in Anglicanism there is Inclusive Church and Affirming Catholicism with memberships but not local groups as such.

So let' s get to some sort of theory in order to ask why they don' t get together. There are basically two kinds of groups here. One of the liberal types form independently, and another liberal type is part of a greater whole that may include even some hostility. But before that - what is the liberal stance anyway?

James Luther Adams (1901-1994), a Unitarian, gives a clue:

- Revelation and truth constantly revealed
- Relationships based on a free covenant
- Directing efforts to a just and loving community
- That good must be given form and power in society - a social incarnation
- That there are divine and human resources that give rise to hope.

Well we can also add:

- Religious expression derived from the human individual and collective imagination and through conversation
- The dignity and worth of every individual given an expression on individualist grounds
- A freedom to express diverse religious forms

It may be of course that revelation and truth is not revealed but constructed, especially if religion is more like art, and it may also be that liberalism comes about whether or not there is a free covenant. In fact a free covenant may lead to illiberal religion.

Liberalism can be a group phenomenon as well as individual; it is rights based, and here liberalism spills over into liberty to function.

So to be liberal means you can be liberal about something, or liberal as a kind of ideological constitutional principle. Some people define Unitarianism as liberal about Christianity, whereas others say it is liberal as a general approach to religion - that is, ideologically constitutionally liberal. We see the same tension of definition in the LCCI.

So the PCN and the MCU are liberal about something. LCCI, Sea of Faith, Unitarians and Quakers are mainly liberal constitutionally, and some like the MCC and perhaps churches in mainstream denominations, and some such denominations themselves, have restricted forms of liberalism, usually responding to one agenda or another.

There is another difference between being liberal about something and liberal as a spread of positions - it can be, though it need not be, that being liberal about something involves more of a depth approach, as in doing theology, whereas being liberal and open constitutionally involves more breadth. The observation here is the decline of the place of theology in Unitarianism and the Society of Friends. Another

way of seeing this is that the something to be liberal about is about a "matrix" of understanding, into which liberalism makes an in depth critique and comes to understand.

In terms of both the liberal about something and also the more restricted form, the form of authority is of the small unit relationship to the main organisation. The others in contrast have a kind of independent gathering. This is a crucial difference for authority.

Well the classic forms of authority in sociology are charismatic, traditional and bureaucratic. Charismatic authority is at the birth of a religious or ideological institution. These involve the likes of Jesus or Buddha with a few followers who do the organising. The situation is very fluid, and often immediate followers can make great changes as the charismatic phase becomes modified. It does not take too long before the forward looking charismatic phase, in embodying the principles of the founder, and a few other necessary adjustments for institutional purposes, starts to look back at the founder. This backward looking phase crystallises into traditional authority. This means rules of the sacred determine who is in authority and the nature of leadership. The traditional phase lasts until modernity. Then comes the bureaucratic phase, with the focus on the present. In this, the person is chosen for the job based on their ability to do the job. The job itself is decided on rational principles. It is of course about secular organisation, but religions are involved: for example, if you want to be an Anglican priest today you have to pass nine criteria - and this assessment basis is an example of bureaucratic rationality. The bureaucratic hierarchy delivers the overall task, each task of leadership being a

speciality and generalising upwards in a triangle of authority. But two more were added to Weber' s scheme, and these are of interest to this discussion.

What happens, asked Burns and Stalker, in a technical economy, when expertise is dispersed throughout an organisation? The management pyramid has to defer to experts dispersed around the organisation in order to make decisions. This is systemic authority. Now in a Church after the Enlightenment, and after the growth of biblical criticism, and theological specialities of literature and history, dispersed theologians are going to be specialities of knowledge and will also make demands for their liberty to be liberal. This clearly affects those who are relating to a larger organisation and to a larger ideology or religious belief.

The second form of authority was developed by Elton Mayo, which is the group that forms to carry out a task. Now these can be within an organisation, but the principle is about forming a group to do something, and that group deciding on its own ways and means. This is called human relations authority. In my own sociology, I have used this form of authority to analyse the separatist religious group, such as the Unitarians and Quakers. Because Sea of Faith refuses even a Christian label, and organises itself, it is human relations based. After all these groups could decide to believe in any doctrine, and indeed the three allow for evolving beliefs and views, and they are the most porous regarding the surrounding general culture. In contrast systemic authority is in tension with a greater ideological and doctrinal body, and the range of outcomes is limited; the authority condition tackles a situation that is liberal about something.

This is where local groups set up by the MCU and the PCN are the most intriguing. There is some sort of transition here, with a move from systemic authority to human relations authority. The groups are still governed by a broader relationship, and so in tension, but this may break into something that becomes their own ideals.

Certainly groups like Inclusive Church and Affirming Catholicism remain systemic in authority, and can be no other, and the MCU must also be this in general, but local groups with some of their own autonomy start a movement towards independence.

The case of the Metropolitan Community Church is interesting, in that it is a self-gathering group, but chooses to behave as if it is part of a larger doctrinal body - and their separation allows the larger body to reject them. It is still human relations authority, however, as the imposed restriction is entirely theirs, and the separateness allows them to carry on regardless whatever the bigger organisation thinks.

Now the potential for human relations groups is anarchic, but this is rarely the case. Certainly they have their own tensions and restrictions even when they self-proclaim freedom of belief. One is formed by their own tendency to bipolarity, seeing things from two different ends. It has to be said, it is better for the long term health of an organisation if it can get away from a bipolar dyad to a multipolar triad. The Church of England was a triad of various traditionalists, especially traditionalist Catholics, liberals and forward looking conversionist evangelicals. Well, those conversionists have absorbed Protestant traditionalists, who have nowhere else to go. The traditionalist Catholics had their backs broken by the ordination of women. Which

means the Church of England has moved from being a triad to a dyad, a straight fight between two ends - liberals and conversionists. This is very unstable. If gay inclusion comes along, the evangelicals will split between conservative evangelicals and open evangelicals, just as the Anglo-Catholics did over women. Both the Unitarians and Quakers have bipolar tensions, but the UUA has managed to develop different centres of power, if rather group based, so that it has its religious rationalism divided between humanists and liberal Christians, but then that rationalism sets against the non-rational if reasonable approach of neo-Pagans and Easterns. This is a two by two bipolar tension, which has close instabilities but is less unstable regarding the whole institution (compared with a straight-fight bipolarity). The best set-up is a triangular structure of checks and balances, because issues are of a different two against one.

So that Weberian and extra scheme is the interplay between sociology, organisation and management studies, and theology. Now there is further sociological categorising which derives again from Weber but as much from Ernst Troeltsch. This is an interplay between sociology, theology and politics. This is Church and sect.

The simple division is between a Church in a wider supporting religious culture where people are born into the Church, they are assumed to be members through automatic baptism and perhaps further confirmation, and they marry through the Church, and the Church also buries them. The Church has given its ideology into the society, so belief demands are not particularly heavy, even though they are nominally credal. Against this is the sect, where the belief demands are high, and

you really have to make an effort to sign on to them. The reward is of course your inclusion into eternal life whilst the rest of the population are damned. Ernst Troeltsch stated that both forms are in the New Testament. However, he further stated that there is a third form of organising, that has only really come into fruition in the Enlightenment and onwards, and he called this Mysticism.

By Mysticism he did not mean something like Sufi mysticism or monastic mysticism. He means individualism, and an ideology of free individuals forming to produce whatever happens to be believed. Mysticism is not a sect, because it is purely voluntary, and reflects something of the changing wider religious culture, but it is not a Church, because you do actually have to join. The Church, meanwhile, which has sectarian elements within it, starts to undergo complications as the culture shifts away from its assumed beliefs. Most people neither touch the Church, which increasingly resembles a museum, except for a declining number using its life rituals, nor do they join a sect, which is irrational and unreasonable, nor can they see any point in voluntarily joining a group to pursue some sort of reasonable open religious path.

This cultural shift has led to numerous revisions of Church, with all sorts of qualifications, and the denomination was added as a category by H. Richard Niebuhr. In my own sociology of religion, I scrapped the lot in favour of traditionalisms, Conversionism, Orthodox Liberalism and Heterodox Liberalism. The Church is now increasingly cut off from culture, so Church and denomination have no difference in terms of entry and belief demands, but they show the same differences within regarding liberality and resistance towards the shifting religious

culture.

However, I now want to add in a dynamic time element. It works like this. The conversionists, who attack the general culture, are not afraid to use its familiarity to get people in. So there is a kind of pop and rock music and common language culture of familiarity, a trendiness, so that new people can be coaxed in to the entertainment, love and warmth, and be hooked, and then introduced to the high belief hurdle. Thus Church of England evangelicals, and those of other denominations, chuck out liturgies and forms that get in the way of communicating. Thus new recruits are introduced to beliefs that are different from the common culture. They sign on and sign in.

However, after much time, these same people might have done some theological reading, and matured, or lost that first flush of religious youth. In a few enthusiastic cases they might even have gone to theological college, or used distance training, and had all their belief assumptions turned inside out. So at the other end, then, are forms of Church that understand the complexity of believing and are not so far from common culture or intellectual culture; however, they then provide cultural forms of worship that are distinct. So people may believe all sorts of liberal things, but the worship is produced with cultural distinctiveness, in ancient language, added symbolism, and use of high quality music, and through a sophistication of use.

One of the objections to Unitarianism or the Quakers, and maybe to groups that seem to be limited to discussing religion, is that they are "too thin". Never mind that they have people discussing faith openly, they ask for a depth of spirituality. Of

course, as discussed, there are potential symbolic alternatives, but they find great difficulty in getting themselves established. It is because they are at the wrong end of the time-line of belief and spirituality.

This time line then goes from culturally similar with belief different, to culturally different with belief similar. This is, of course, another crude categorising, another ideal typology of binary contrast, but it does mean that today the Church runs from belief sect to esoteric sect. Affirming Catholicism and Inclusive Church, and indeed the Modern Churchpeople' s Union, relates to the esoteric sect that now forms that end of the Church. We are not talking here necessarily about voluntary Mysticism, though the Liberal Rite deliberately has set itself up as an esoteric sect, and uses the terminology.

Of course, new people can join the liberal believing culturally odd esoteric sect, at one end of a Church, but it will strike as strange and as an acquired taste. The priests do their acts and it all looks very holy and, to the outsider, very odd. It is as odd as the Pagan priestess pushing an athame into a cup and saying strange words. Indeed, neo Paganism is also an acquired faith of sub-cultural forms and spirituality.

Set against this, there is something institutionally anarchic and transient about the category of Mysticism. Its danger is that it has nothing to root it. Now in the time of the New Age, we know that the cult - another category of sociological understanding - is dependent on personality and is a transient combination of spirituality and consumerism, an ongoing contradiction of the modern, postmodern and the

superstitious. The cult has a membership that is in and out, mainly determined by the contents of the wallet. The same danger of transience is with Mysticism - especially in postmodernity and the rise of the symbolic and imprecise - and yet there are means by which the Mysticism group maintains itself.

One way is by being, indeed, esoteric, such as with Quaker spirituality. But, actually, the forms by which Unitarians or Quakers, or indeed discussion and other activity groups, operate, are not difficult to get into or understand. Silence is simple. Well, some groups might be difficult to understand if they get too intellectual, but they rarely do. You might wonder why, of course. Compare that with the puzzlement over a chap or woman who keeps bending one knee at an altar table, where bells are rung or where certain colours are worn at certain times of the year. People become very attached to such acquired tastes.

What happens is that a set of expectations form within liberal groups around behaviour and expectations. Identities form, usually based on the bipolar or additional formations, that themselves make demands on those who identify with the sub-group. "Will you join our side or their side?" Thus it is incredibly difficult in the Unitarians to be a progressive Christian, and even more so with a thorough non-realist theology, simply because of the demands of the Christian group that has its own particular conserving agenda. If you want to be a radical Christian, you are better off in the so-called mainstream. On the other hand, if you want to be a pluralist, its side is suspicious of even liberal Christianity. Also, in some Unitarian places, be careful about lighting candles, wearing robes and so on - these go against the long, Puritan shadow. These expectations limit outcomes and keep a

group coherent if bipolar or otherwise.

Here we come to the central question.

It is the particularity of purpose, the function, and the terms of expectations of outlook and behaviour, that then keeps these groups from joining any other groups. The sub-cultures formed are the dynamic that forms a jigsaw piece with a shape that cannot interlock with another jigsaw piece formed by the purposes and sub-cultures of another liberal group.

So, is that it? We must examine further if this pessimism of separation is actually the case.

Take the Liberal Rite: they want to be alone. They did, though, set up a fellowship through which others can associate. They chose congregationalism, and this is the organising principle of independence.

The Modern Churchpeople's Union exists to continue the broad Church, latitudinarian, Arian and modernist heritage formed in the Church. It wants to continue the role of a reasonable theology, and be discerning. This overlaps with, say, Affirming Catholicism, though the latter retains broad Church leadership aims of old - even though it is now a pressure group and at one end of the new Anglican bipolarity. Affirming Catholicism is about a reasonable approach of an old tradition whereas the MCU is more modernist. Inclusive Church is very close to Affirming Catholicism, but it wants to influence Open Evangelicals too and is more people-

centred. Why can't they merge? Well, their purposes keep the separation going. Friendly - but different.

Why can't local groups merge? Why say can't the Progressive Christianity Network merge with Sea of Faith? Well, Sea of Faith includes the atheist, the religious humanist, the secular, philosophical non-realist, the don't know Christian whereas the PCN is clearly Christian, and wants a progressive Christianity. And then the PCN is quite positive about the eucharist, whereas in the Unitarians the eucharist is divisive at best and increasingly ignored, with other rituals being tried as it slowly relates to the New Age and to the reasonable non-rationalist (as the UUA has done). In other words, distinctive purposes create sub-cultures, with new arguments and boundaries and so shield from sub-cultures with boundaries in other groups.

Of course, none of this stops individuals either changing or moving about, or being in two or more groups at the same time. The individual can pursue several religious purposes, and thus the individual is far more flexible than the groups.

But perhaps groups could join together: after all denominations merge, and mergers have undermined former traditionalisms and increased the impact of liberalism.

On the Modern Churchpeople's Union website there is a liturgy provided, by Jonathan Robinson, which is a eucharist. It has quite a bit to do with earth, fire, water and air. It is not trinitarian and it more or less removes the supernatural. One can imagine this being used in many of the liberal groups, although perhaps not the Unitarians and not the Quakers. Nevertheless the ideas there can be used, stripped

out, and reused.

Secondly there is a sharing of issues of modernism and postmodernism across various groups. Again not entirely. The MCU and Unitarians have a largely modernist background, such as the Unitarians over time removing what is no longer believed and looking for a kernel of objective truth in what is expressed. Postmodernity is more symbolic, tending to keep what has been inherited, using it and giving it a different even ironic even suspicious interpretation. Let's put it this way: in the semiotic system of the sign, there is a signifier, the word or symbol that is used, and the signified, the meaning to which it points. Now in poststructuralism and postmodernism, the connection between signifier and signified is radically uncertain, and so the postmodernist focuses instead on the signifier - such as liturgy as a form of spirituality in itself. The modernist inheritance is very strong, and this means looking for the signified - the kernel of the meaning, especially God. Yet there is nothing to stop modernist groups evolving a postmodern understanding, and we see some of this in the reduction of rationalism in the UUA, the rise of the kind of pragmatic reasonable postmodernism as represented by the late Richard Rorty - who was, after all, a liberal, even if a secular liberal.

There is also nothing stopping these groups looking for different sources of traditions: I would be the first to say to postmodernists like me, take a look at James Martineau the Unitarian theologian of the later nineteenth century. He was a, yes, modernist theologian of subjective individualism. Martineau combined a conservatism about liturgy, which simply reflects the old inherited language of religion, with a radical individualism that collapses into an interfaith pluralist position

he did not want, and a postmodern position about which he was too early. The nihilist textualism position follows on from Martineau, and one that allows a creativity of signifiers in liturgical poetics to enhance spirituality.

Surely all liberal groups agree that there is an absence of primary sources about Jesus of Nazareth, that therefore using the gospels for a historical approach is tenuous, and that they are primarily narrative faith documents, as indeed has been every doctrine and reflection since. Whether you think we are nearer the truth through discernment, or simply engaging in yet another religious narrative, there are grounds for agreement here. Martineau went further, that the biblical account is but one example of a wider, general, religious truth. We can also move directly from James Martineau to John Hick today. Lloyd Thomas himself developed his Free Catholicism from James Martineau. An interesting extra about Martineau is that he was a Tory and had a conservative streak in him, as seen in his liturgical side, but his theology is highly unstable in a postmodern setting like ours, in other words ripe for postmodernism itself.

So much to agree on, and yet purposes and traditions get in the way, even in liberal groups. Yet, look at the denominations that did merge. When the United Reformed Church was formed in 1972, a lot of baggage had to be given up by congregationalists and Presbyterians. Then it absorbed the Churches of Christ of the Scottish central lowlands in 1981, which involved many of the Anabaptist tradition having to accept infant baptism in the rest of the URC. In 2000 the URC absorbed the Congregational Union of Scotland, and this meant two Presbyterian traditions now in Scotland. We know how many treasured differences were

subsumed by the Methodist merging back in 1932, and how the old arguments are diminishing as Methodists consider remerging back into the Church of England - something that would hugely affect the worship culture of the Church of England and undermine treasured practices that would therefore be another source of liberality.

It is a fact that denominations merge when they are weak, as indeed many of these denominations will structurally collapse by 2050 on present trends. They also merge when the arguments to keep them apart are being lost, but even then the merger is painful. Although the liberal groups we have discussed form because of newer arguments, they are not strong, and they too could reduce their particularities in favour of a wider liberal identity. Back to Martineau - he was a broad Church anti-denominational religious liberal. He would favour such a move, and so did Lloyd Thomas.

New groups form on current issues, and therefore these particularities become instantly precious and form sub-cultures within. And yet, these issues overlap all over the place.

As a matter of current dynamics, there are the ongoing Anglican Communion's troubles. For some time Nigerians, Ugandans, Rwandans and Kenyans have consecrated bishops in the United States for congregations leaving The Episcopal Church because of its inclusivity. A Church of England priest, all but effectively with the Nigerians, calls it a "revolution". A schism in the Anglican Communion, with an alternative centre from Canterbury, is seriously likely, but it should leave the

remaining Anglican Communion that little bit broader and tolerant. However, it could go the other way. The progressive Episcopal Church might be sidelined from the Anglican Communion in an attempt to keep the Africans in, or there may be a reaction of a tougher approach to the Bible and via a restrictive Covenant to try and woo the Africans back should they leave. If the Anglican Communion and Church of England becomes less tolerant, then there may be a spillage of liberals into more semi-detached or even detached groups. A restrictive Covenant of Anglicanism could lead to alternative Covenants and an organising of alternative inclusive groups. Of course liberals do rarely leave.

A question here to keep in mind is whether, when liberals really cut the rope, some of the assumptions of Christian expression hold up, or whether there is an inevitable movement to some sort of religious humanism. It is a difficult one because you can fix liturgical practices and reinterpret them, but there is always the question of why. These are questions of how institutions uphold or undermine ideologies. Getting together both undermines the restrictiveness of traditions and advances a plurality of messages, but this needs people to live and work with those who think and believe differently.

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