

At the joint NASACRE / AEREIAC Conference on Mon 6 Mar 2017 'Religions are not Monoliths' we were treated to two valuably informative keynote presentations provided by the Revd Robert Reiss talking about 'liberal' Christianity and Dr Abdullah Trevathan talking about 'classical' Islam. As a taster of what was said extracts from Bob Reiss' presentation are provided below.

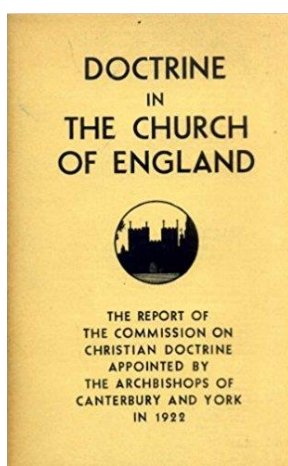
### Revd Bob Reiss on Liberal Christianity

"At its best I think the Church of England has always wanted to be in serious conversation with the intellectual life of the country. And that was certainly manifest in the Cambridge theology faculty when I studied there. So I mean by liberal Christianity an understanding Christianity that takes full account of other areas of knowledge and which tries to develop an understanding of the Christian faith that can engage seriously and thoughtfully with other intellectual disciplines and which doesn't merely retreat into its own intellectual comfort zone. I have to say I think liberal Christianity is not especially popular within the Church of England at the moment. But none the less that is what I feel committed to."



Revd. Robert Reiss  
Author of *'Sceptical Christian - Exploring Credible Belief'*

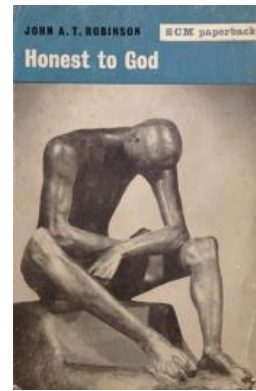
"So my professional experience of nearly fifty years has been within the Church of England where certainly there was much thought and public debate about what constitutes credible belief, although some moves towards that can certainly be found in the later parts of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as well. Some notable examples from the 20<sup>th</sup> century would include the following: there is the work of a body known as *'The Churchmen's Union for the Advancement of Liberal Religious Thought'* which was founded originally at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century but then renamed as *'The Modern Churchmen's Union'* in 1928 and in 2010 it is now called *'Modern Church'* no doubt because its chair is a woman. It is a good and interesting body and it still thrives.



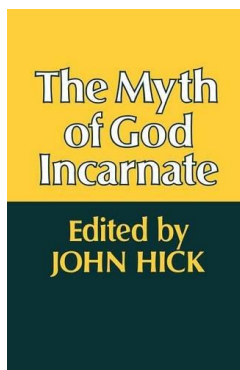
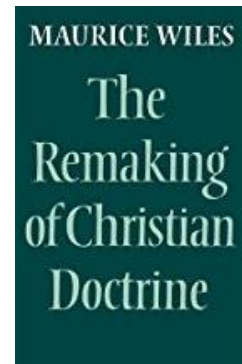
Then there was a thing called *'The Commission on Christian Doctrine'* which was established in 1922 but finally reported in 1938 under the chairmanship of William Temple who for much of that time of his chairmanship was the Archbishop of York but who then moved to be the Archbishop of Canterbury. That commission was certainly not a narrow liberal exercise as there were a very wide range of views within its membership. But it did recognise and acknowledge as being legitimate and permissible within the Church of England theological views a number of which could certainly be described as liberal at the time. And I shall give some examples of that later on. Then in the later part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century there were a number of reports from what was essentially its successor a body known as *'The Doctrine Commission'* and some of those reports

were even on such fundamental questions as 'What does it mean to believe in God?' And certainly there were a number of points of views in many of those reports which again could have been described and were described as being liberal.

And then of course there were various books written by individual clergy which caused widespread discussion when they were published. They were of course a lot of them but amongst those published in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century I would include the following; *'Honest to God'* published in 1963 written by the then Bishop of Woolwich John Robinson was one of the best-selling theological books of all time. Much of the interest in that stemmed from an article written by the Bishop in the Observer the week before publication where a sub editor had given it the headline, 'Our image of God must go'. It and the book caused a furore. I read the book in one evening and late into the night at the age of twenty fairly shortly after it was published and I found it utterly liberating. Here was someone, and a bishop to boot, who was raising all the questions and more that I was wondering about at the time. Of course, I had no idea then that ten years later I would be appointed a chaplain at my old Cambridge college Trinity by which time John Robinson had moved there to become Dean of Chapel. So I got to know him very well over the next five years. He incidentally preferred the word 'radical' to 'liberal' in the sense that he wanted to examine the roots of theology but the results of what he said would again certainly be described by many at the time as 'liberal'.



Then in 1974 Maurice Wiles who was Regius Professor of Divinity at Oxford had published a book called *'The remaking of Christian Doctrine'*, among other things suggested that the description of the Incarnation was not the only way of looking at the significance of Jesus. It too caused quite a stir. And then three years later Geoffrey Lampe who was the Regius Professor of Divinity at Cambridge also published a book called 'God As Spirit' which covered a related theme to Wiles' book and also occasioned much discussion although more in academic circles than Wiles' book which went to a wider audience than that.



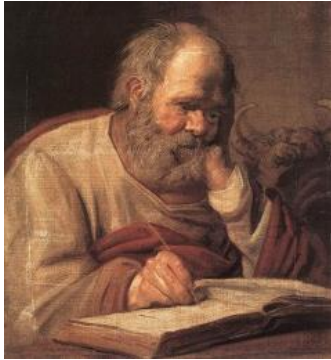
Then in that same year 1977 *'The myth of God Incarnate'* written by a number of distinguished theologians and edited by John Hick who was Professor of Theology here in Birmingham was published. It too caused a stir. And then of course later in the century there were the public statements and writings of Bishop David Jenkins the Bishop of Durham for ten years until 1994 and who actually died only last years. So a liberal interpretation of Christianity has certainly been a major part of the life of the Church for a good deal longer than I have been ordained."

"A second ground for scepticism arose out of what was called biblical criticism which started even as early as the 18<sup>th</sup> century and which has developed strongly over the years since then. That process simply believed that we should apply to the biblical text the same sort of critical processes that we would apply to any other historical document which was really about trying to set the various biblical writings in their context – where, when, by whom and why were they written. But they obviously raised questions about how they were then to be interpreted particularly in the very difficult cultural circumstances of later centuries. One mistake which is still too often made in my judgement is to assume the gospel writers were in some way like



Johann Gottfried Eichhorn  
One of the founders of 18<sup>th</sup>  
century biblical criticism

21<sup>st</sup> century historians that were trying to give an accurate account of what actually happened. But a careful examination of the gospels shows that actually they were not necessarily accurate history but four very different reactions to the life of Jesus each made with a particular theological purpose of the different gospel writers. Take for example one of the things mentioned in the



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beatitudes. A classic example of what I'm talking about would be the statement of Jesus in Luke's Gospel, 'Blessed are you poor for yours is the Kingdom of God'. In St Mathews' Gospel it says, 'Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven'.

Did Matthew add 'in spirit' because the Church he knew were wondering about its wealthy members and they wanted to make the words of Jesus even applicable to the wealthy or did Luke remove the words because he wanted to emphasize Jesus' commitment to the financially poor? We simply don't know. Such uncertainty about the original meaning is actually present in many of the gospels and in the sayings and actions of Jesus of course makes searching for the meaning fascinating. But it also raises very big questions about interpreting the New Testament."