

What Price Honesty? – Looking back at the ‘Freeman Affair’

Tony Windross reviews how the Church has dealt with the challenge of Freeman’s Christian humanist book.

It’s difficult, as a radical in the current religious climate, to be optimistic about the future of the Church. We’re not flavour of the month – but then we never have been. Neither are we very numerous – but then we never have been. The real problem, though, is that we’re not even managing to reproduce ourselves – which means we’re not just on the endangered species list, but are actually on the verge of becoming extinct. Can nothing be done to tempt thoughtful and sceptical outsiders to engage with what we have to offer? Or is intelligently critical religion bound to disappear – and to do so sooner rather than later?

Maybe it’s a sign of age, but it’s hard not to look back half a century to the good old days of *Honest to God* with a certain amount of nostalgia. The 1960s were a watershed in all sorts of ways: change was not only in the air, but becoming embedded in the very fabric of society. And, surprisingly, religion didn’t seem to be asking for an exemption clause from the spirit of the times. So where (as George Best was once famously asked) did it all go wrong?

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The problem was that ‘it’ didn’t actually go anywhere at all. The churches made various liturgical and organisational changes; the toleration accorded (at least in some places) *Honest to God* showed how modern and open-minded everyone was; liberal clerics asked questions that previous generations hadn’t cared

(or dared) to; sex was spoken about in pulpits; and then life returned pretty much to normal.

So much so that most members of most congregations today, would be as shocked as their counterparts were all those years ago, if their local bishop started coming out with the kind of things that John Robinson did. Which shows how *completely* the Church has failed to take notice of what he was saying – and how strong the forces of institutional reaction and inertia actually are. The world *has* changed since the early 1960s, as is evident from old news footage or films. People dress differently, they speak differently, they think differently (in that they make different assumptions) and so on. But when it comes to theology – it seems that everything is more or less as it was.

For what *isn’t* on the agenda, *anywhere* in the Church, is the core of the whole thing: *‘that there is a supernatural being, and Jesus of Nazareth is his son.’* (*Way of Transcendence*, A Kee p.108). The rest is just detail, and tinkering at the edges: the Titanic Church is sinking – and all that’s happening is a modest rearrangement of the deckchairs – to the accompaniment of a vacantly-grinning music group, singing interminable banal choruses.

For large numbers of intelligent people in western society, the very idea of a supernatural Supreme Being is impossible. Instead of being a cause of devotion and worship, it’s simply seen as ludicrous nonsense. Thinking like that doesn’t make them bad people, but it does mean that Christianity is going to be unavailable to them, except via an enormous amount of re-interpreting and demythologising. And so, if it’s considered important to find ways of helping those outside to feel at home inside, – all the changes of the last 50 years have been a complete failure.

The bottom line is that religious belief means belief in God, and (none of the theological developments) has... brought belief in God nearer to non-believers. The reforms have been internal to the life of the Church, because they

presuppose belief in God – and it is precisely lack of experience of God which constitutes the barrier to (many) non-believers. – (A Kee p112)

The question then becomes whether people like that are forever to be excluded from faith – or whether the Church is able and willing to find some way of theologically accommodating them. If the Church *were* ever to take seriously the problems that many have with the God-symbol, all hell would break loose. But unless it does so, things are likely to carry on more or less as they are now. And *that* would be a unmitigated disaster – as was acknowledged by the Bishop of Chichester when he said:

The Church of England as an organisation is not approaching a precipice: it is already over it. But my job as a bishop is to stay in the creaking machine and do what I can to keep it going till it crashes.’ – (quoted in John Collins, *Faith under Fire* p.48.)

Not the current bishop, of course – but the saintly George Bell, friend of Bonhoeffer and Bishop of Chichester between 1929 and 1958.

I was ordained into the Church of England in July 1993, the very same month as the ‘Freeman affair’ was making the headlines. But before it all blew up I received an urgent communication from Anthony (who had responsibility for post-ordination training for people like me) not to mention *Sea of Faith* in any interviews I might have during the pre-ordination retreat. He feared (rightly) that to do so would scupper my chances of making it into the ranks of the clergy – and was generously concerned for my welfare at the very moment his own world was falling apart. Fortunately the subject never arose, and I somehow slipped in beneath the radar.

Given George Bell’s awareness back in 1946 of the gravity of the situation, and of the crisis of faith that was all too evident, there’s something deliciously ironic about the way that it was one of his successors who, 20 years ago, removed Anthony from his twin posts as Bishop’s Adviser for Continuing Ministerial Education, and Priest-in-Charge of St Mark’s, Staplefield. The bishop considered that Anthony’s

book, *God in Us: A Case for Christian Humanism*, was contrary to church teaching, which meant he was no longer considered suitable to oversee the training of junior clergy, or preach the gospel to his parishioners.

Anthony had known the Bishop, Eric Kemp, for many years, and had good personal relationships with him. But Bishop Kemp acted swiftly and decisively. Sentiment could play no part when it came to truth – and the Church knew all about *that*. Truth was what the Church *did*, and it was all there, in the traditional formularies, in the creeds, in the scriptures. The job of bishops was to make sure that others didn’t deviate from it. And so Bishop Kemp was well within his rights, and indeed could do no other – given his understanding of truth, and the Church’s role in safeguarding it.

The problem was that Anthony didn’t have the freehold. If he had, it would have been virtually impossible to sack him. The freehold was a safeguard which helped independently-minded clergy to question and explore, without feeling too fearful of their position. Hardly surprisingly, it’s now been abolished, with all new appointments being made under a system which gives bishops a much greater degree of control. Clergy fortunate enough to still have it have all been invited to relinquish it – with most politely declining to do so. But when they move, or retire, or die – the freehold goes with

them. And so as the few aging clerical radicals shuffle off into the sunset, they are unlikely to be replaced by any who are willing to speak out, to ask questions, to rock the boat, to make waves. And this makes an already bleak future that bit bleaker.

It was exactly ten years after the ‘Freeman affair’ that I sent the manuscript of *The Thoughtful Guide to Faith* to the Bishop of Norwich, in whose diocese I was then serving. I did so with some trepidation, as I didn’t want (even though I *did* have the freehold) him to play the part of Eric, to my Anthony. But far from suggesting I might like to try my luck somewhere else, he was generous enough to write some commendatory words, which were used by the publishers in publicity material. It showed that the Church of England, on a



good day, and with a sympathetic and intelligent bishop *was* capable of a broad and generous approach to theological exploration.

A few years later, I took up a new post in another diocese, despite being completely open about my theological leanings. Unlike Anthony, therefore, I have not been deprived of my living, despite occupying a broadly similar theological position. And so although the shameful way he was treated might be thought the result of being in the wrong diocese at the wrong time, his experience is undoubtedly far more the norm than mine, with current and future radicals likely to receive a frosty reception almost anywhere in the Church. We're not welcome, because we ask the kind of questions that people would much prefer not to get asked. And this is because we challenge people's understanding of pretty well everything.

All of my ministry has therefore been played out against the backdrop of fear and suspicion of those who dare to follow the theological argument wherever it happens to lead them, with Anthony being duly inducted into the pantheon of church infamy – which in the late 20th century included John Robinson, Don Cupitt, Ray Billington, Graham Shaw, Hugh Dawes, Lloyd Geering, Richard Holloway, John Spong, David Paterson, Stephen Mitchell, David Hart and Andrew Furlong.

Anthony Freeman's unforgivable crime was to be honest

All of these (and more) were the recipients of the unwanted attention of their bishops/and or governing church bodies and required to explain themselves. And so (by way of example) John Robinson and Don Cupitt, in their different ways, were marginalised; Ray Billington was expelled from the Methodist Church; Andrew Furlong was required to resign his position in the Church of Ireland; and so on and so on. It's a sad and sorry story, involving the loss of talented religious thinkers (something of an oxymoron, in our increasingly Evangelical times) and the attempted stifling of many others. It didn't always work, of course, in that several refused to be silenced, and continued as gadflies, irritating and upsetting those whose faith couldn't cope with the idea of difference. But although their activities were a sign of hope to many, their impact on the Church as a whole has been slender, to say the least.

Most clergy continue to cling to their certainties,

and to infantilise their congregations. Most bishops continue with the comforting fiction that all that's needed is to dumb down and jazz up the message sufficiently (like those saintly characters at Holy Trinity Brompton) and the punters will come flooding back. The Church of England embroils itself in issues of sex and gender, and prepares for institutional oblivion. Meanwhile, much of the rest of society continues to see the Church as of interest only to the sick or the sad or the stupid – and looks for spiritual sustenance elsewhere.

It's difficult to see many (even any) positives in the chronicle of radical religious thinking in the churches over the last 20 years. The authorities have fought to keep such stuff out of circulation, whilst those in the pews who've stumbled across it have either ignored it, or been appalled by it. Far from leading to a broadening of horizons, and an opening up of the discussion, it's been cast off into outer darkness. And there's absolutely no reason to suppose the situation is about to change. Mindlessness and conformism rule almost unchallenged, with no aspiring bishop daring or (more likely) even wanting to offer any sort of counter-narrative. Ultimate truth, it seems, is both easily definable and readily accessible. In turn, this means that there is no need for any sort of ponderous agonising about religious 'stuff'. Clever people (especially those long ago) have shown us what we need to believe and how we need to think. Our task is simply to get on and believe and think it.

Anthony Freeman's unforgivable crime was to be honest. He refused, any longer, to keep his questing and probing to himself. And when he dared to give voice to the thought *'I do not believe in God'*, it really was a Crossing the Rubicon moment. In a world of sound bites there is no room for nuances, and so all Anthony's protestations about his loss of traditional faith leading him to something new and deeper, were in vain. He should have known better, of course, given how long he'd been in the Church, and how familiar he was with its limited horizons and institutional timidity. But a fatal combination of integrity and enthusiasm got the better of him, and he foolishly began to entertain the hope that the Church really was reformable, and therefore salvageable. He either didn't know, or didn't care that his thoughtful critique of religion would be savaged by the religiously-illiterate, as well as by those who ought to have known better.

For although he felt keenly the end of the traditional God, the sad fact was that few others did. Many of those outside the Church had no interest in the subject (largely on the grounds of what they saw as its innate absurdity) but were clear enough as to the nature of the God in whom they did *not* believe. They were not prepared to countenance the possibility that things might actually be a whole lot more complicated

than they'd assumed. Most of those inside had no real problems with believing the orthodox stuff – and were mightily indignant at what they saw as a betrayal by one who should be an upholder of sound doctrine.

The heady excitement of the 1960s had long since vanished into the sand without trace by the time *God in Us* was published. Challenges to norms and orthodoxies were no longer in fashion, and the country was still in the shadow of the years of Thatcherite authoritarian certainties. The political and economic turmoil of the 1970s and 1980s had made the world feel a less secure place, which meant that it was about as inauspicious a climate as could possibly be imagined in which to offer a fundamental challenge to the Church.

Challenges to norms and orthodoxies were no longer in fashion

No one sets out to break a butterfly on a wheel, and the Church obviously felt that the Freeman affair merited grave sanctions. But did it really? Couldn't some better accommodation with the new ideas have been made? Because the outcome was hardly to anyone's advantage. It involved the loss to the Church of a committed, energetic and talented priest, with all the personal anguish associated with it. It made the Church itself look draconian and ridiculous in the eyes of many outside. And it made many of those inside embarrassed and ashamed. It acted as a cautionary tale to any who might be tempted to follow his example. And it almost certainly narrowed the range of people prepared to offer themselves for ordination.

It affirmed the beliefs of the orthodox, who could sleep soundly in their beds, knowing that Truth remained Truth, even in a post-modern age. And it showed that the Church was not prepared to bend with every passing intellectual fashion. It showed that the Church, although outwardly benign and smiling, had a steely side when it came to challenges to its doctrinal authority, and should not be regarded as a soft touch. Truth was a deeply serious business, and once any breach was allowed, who knows where things might end up?

In the 20 years since this all happened, the Church has continued its numerical decline, and is regarded by many of the intelligentsia as a laughing stock. And for those of us who are deeply committed to it, this is

profoundly dispiriting. The continued existence of a radical presence within the Church depends on winning the battle against the forces of conservative hegemony – and the odds of this happening are vanishingly small. Maybe the best that can be hoped for is that isolated pockets of theological contrariness will somehow continue, so that, in an increasingly networked age, people with radical tendencies can at least maintain some sort of contact. Nietzsche's Madman despairingly realised that he'd come much too soon – and maybe would *always* be too soon.

Perhaps the time would *never* be right for such iconoclasm? Perhaps the Church never *will* be receptive to such thinking? But we have to sing (and can only *ever* sing) the song that is within us. Anthony did so 20 years ago, and paid a high price for it. And although most of the Church remains as antediluvian as ever, a lot of us are in debt both to him and to all who have done their best to keep the rumour of God alive. T S Eliot famously noted that *human kind cannot bear very much reality* – and it would probably be expecting too much to hope that the Church might be any different.

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Correction

A Mayday Note in *Sofia* 106 stated that John Knox's *First Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstrous Regiment of Women* was first published in Edinburgh. Although John Knox is closely associated with Edinburgh and spent many years there as leader of the Protestant Reformation in Scotland, his *First Blast of the Trumpet* was originally published in Geneva in 1558.

