

'Thunder and Lightning'

- *The forces that shaped the 20th century*

WORLD AND CHANGE

Distinct and dynamic

It is not easy to analyze the twentieth century; the issues and the forces at work are complex, the changes astonishing and the impact awesome. Of course, many of the ideas and energies at work in the nineteenth century flowed over into the twentieth century; nevertheless, what shaped those times are changes both distinct and monumental, creating a new and unique era in human history, and remarkable challenges to the church worldwide.

Times and tides

It is also hard to analyze the twentieth century, simply because it flows naturally into the twenty-first. Unlike other eras of history it is hard to view it with the same objectivity that we view other eras of history because we are still caught within its times and tides in a real way. It is not yet always easy to be certain of the full significance of many of the events. However, standing at the beginning of the twenty first century, an astonishing overview of change and character unfolds. We should remember that as the twentieth century dawned:

- The sun never set on the British empire;
- There was only one Republic among Europe's monarchies;
- The influence of the USA on the world was minimal;
- There had been no successful powered aircraft flight;
- There was no radio invented;
- The average British family expected up to two children to die in infancy;
- The name of Lenin was known only to the police;
- The birth of Mao Tse-Tung had only just taken place.

Century of contrasts

In an attempt to plot the forces that were at work throughout the twentieth the following observations can be made. It was a century of:

- **Abundance:** with the exploitation of the earth's resources;
- **Want:** with half the world population gripped by hunger;
- **Violence:** with the possibility of global self destruction for the first time;
- **Gentleness:** with welfare, pensions, public health and international aid;
- **Freedom:** with political, social and personal changes;
- **Anxiety:** with few guides from the past and uncharted future;
- **Revolution:** with this as the major hallmark of the times.
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Acceleration and change

Everything changed and accelerated. Between 1890 and 1980 global population doubled. Science pioneered unimagined frontiers; society was shaken to the core. Every corner of



the earth was explored; clearing forests, redirecting rivers, building dams, roads and airfields, changed its face. All this rapid change brought a huge gulf between generations, with anyone born before 1945 increasingly feeling strangers on their own planet.

- At times during the twentieth century people have felt that Utopia had arrived;
- At times during the twentieth century people have felt that good had been lost forever.

Whirlwind of advance

The whirlwind speed of change in the twentieth century was powered by science and technology. There were breakthroughs at every level of scientific enquiry, and the understanding of the material universe radically increased. Knowledge increased so fast that it was almost impossible to keep abreast of it.

- **Technical touchstone.** Enquiry into one area of science led to technical and economic “spin offs” in many others¹. In the 1980’s it was estimated that 1945 was the central point of history in terms of technological development, and that the 1990’s saw as great a technological advance as the whole of the previous 30 years. The stepping-stones of scientific and technological advance in the twentieth century were striking; for example:
 - In 1903 powered flight was achieved for the first time, by 1957 Russia launched the first satellite into space, and in 1969 the first human stepped upon the moon;
 - In 1905 Einstein propounded the theory of relativity, by 1919 Rutherford smashes the helium atom, and in 1945 an atomic bomb was dropped on Nagasaki.

Scientific and technological achievements brought huge benefits to humankind; in medicine, education, transport, communication, personal lifestyle and so much more. Yet human scientific prowess was turned to selfish and destructive ends also; reflected in wars and the ecological crisis.

- **Global village.** It was the social impact of technology that was the shaping force of the twentieth century. It created a new global consciousness; the earth became a ‘global village’. Communications lay at the heart of this. It became possible for an almost instant transmission of information to any part of the globe, the human race became a ‘neighbourhood’. Again, to examine certain stepping-stones is instructive:
 - In 1901 Marconi demonstrated ‘wireless’ communication across the Atlantic; soon there were millions of radios worldwide;
 - In 1926 Logi Baird operated a crude form of television; soon they were found even in the poorest shantytown globally;
 - In 1962 the ‘Telstar’ communications satellite was launched; by the end of the century they encircled the earth aiding communication, weather reports and the military.

At the beginning of the century the ‘silent movies’ and the ‘gramophone’ were marking social change, which continued with increasing momentum in high-tec cinema, video and personal sound systems. Along with newspapers, magazines and paperback books, the

¹ For example space research has given us non-stick frying pans, hang gliders, Frisbees and thermal blankets among other things.



increasing availability of the multiplicity of media had worldwide social and cultural influence; especially in the post-war era.

The year 1946 saw the advent of the electronic computer; followed by transistors (1948), silicon chips (1962) and electrostatic word processors (1963). With them came the communications revolution of information technology which continued to increase in both pace and innovation; and give a world of 'instant tell' and the global 'web' of cyber space.

However, the 'global village' was not merely the fruit of advanced communications; there were other factors also. International trade and banking systems were built upon and within the communications networks; the sun never set on the money markets. Economic power was not restricted to countries, but also multi-national companies encircled the globe and often had greater power than individual nations. The economic and communication networks were not fairly distributed but were held in the hands of a few nations who largely represented the imperial powerbases at the turn of the century.

So media united the nations of the five continents, yet divided by politics, economics and ideas, amid social and ecological crisis. All this presented a huge challenge to the church.

Storm of war

War darkened the century as never before in history. Human technological ability increased its scope, with conflict itself being a frequent spur to scientific development. At the turn of the century the British monopoly of world power and trade in the nineteenth century was slipping away, old empires and modern states were straining to increase their wealth, size and security. July 1914 saw the states of Europe confronting each other; Germany, Austria and Italy against Britain, France and Russia. The assassination of Archduke Ferdinand in Sarejevo ignited the situation. Because Europe was at the height of her power and nations all over the world were interdependent upon her, a war in Europe inevitably meant a world war; the first in history. It ignited a conflict in 1914, which did not resolve itself until 1945 and shaped the twentieth century in the process.

The Great War

By 1918, 30 nations with a total population of 1400 million were drawn into the conflict. It saw the costliest battles in human history:

- Some 10 million soldiers died and a further 20 million were wounded;
- Some 10 million civilians died of disease, malnutrition and famine.

Never in history had war so devastated civilization. The social impact on nations and families was incalculable. It also set the stage for the deep worldwide change that was to take place in the twentieth century:

- It overthrew four empires (German, Austrian, Russian, Turkish);
- It heralded the end of European imperialism;
- It fuelled the communist revolution in Russia;
- It brought the nations of Africa and Asia into world affairs;
- It allowed America and Japan to profit from the war.



It was hoped that the 'Armistice' signed on the 11th hour, of the 11th day of the 11th month of 1918 would make it 'the war to end all wars'. But it was not to be so.

The Global War

Out of the ashes of the 'Great War' attempts at democracy, like the League of Nations, failed. Nations humiliated by social problems, jealous of neighbours wealth and stirred by national pride, turned to leaders who promised them a 'brave new world' by the use of force and the extermination of resistance. The Spanish civil war (1936-1939) became a tragic sign of what was to come:

- In 1931 Japan moved into China;
- In 1935 Italy moved into Abyssinia;
- In 1939 Germany moved into Poland ... and the world was at war.

This Second World War proved to be the most devastating conflict in human history:

- Some 70 million soldiers fought in it;
- Some 40 million soldiers and civilians died in it;
- Germany lost 8% of her population;
- Russia lost 10% of her population;
- USA and Japan were fully engaged this time;
- The entire world was in flames not just Europe;
- The Pacific, North Africa and Russia were all involved.

The aeroplane was the major weapon; not only engaging soldiers in the field but bombing centres of population indiscriminately. The 'Great War' had jarred the existing world order, the Second World War brought about its collapse. The old power systems were gone. It concluded with the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki; one era of conflict was over and another was just beginning.

The 'Cold War'

The most dramatic result of the conflict that ended in 1945 was the confrontation between Russia, who had occupied Eastern Europe, and the USA, the other superpower. The wartime 'alliance' had disintegrated, leaving a political chill and divided world; an 'iron curtain' and a 'cold war' symbolised by the 'Berlin wall'.

The standoff between the superpowers, and the ensuing nuclear arms race, created the backdrop against which most of the rest of the century unfolded. Nonetheless the subsequent decades saw numerous wars, not least those in Vietnam, Afghanistan, Central America and Iraq.

In 1989, the dramatic sweep of events initiated by the Russian leader Gorbachev, led to the collapse of the Soviet Union, the overthrow of Communism in eastern Europe and the breaking down of the Berlin wall. While the last decade of the century saw an end of the 'cold war', it revealed fresh tensions and threats; tragically illustrated by the ethnic conflicts in the Balkans. The future was as dangerous and unstable as ever before.



THUNDER AND REVOLUTION

People power

Alongside war, the twentieth century was deeply marked by 'revolution'. It rose out of the strain and defeat of war, worldwide economic depression and reaction to imperial power. Many of the revolutions had their roots in the ideologies and social programmes formed in the previous century; expressed in nationalism or communism. They were as much revolutions in basic ideas as in politics, economics and social structures. The unique feature of the revolutions were the huge numbers of people involved; masses sweeping like a tide in a new direction.

Nationalism

The spirit of nationalism was at work everywhere; within Europe and out at the farthest reaches of the globe dominated by western powers. It was the force behind the Fascist movement in Italy, the Nazi movement in Germany, and it motivated Japan into the Second World War. Even more significant, nationalism was the energy that led to throwing off of the imperial yoke by the emerging nations. By 1914 the idea of 'self-determination' had been embraced by many non-white nations, by 1945 it had become a flood.

Before 1945 some 99.5% of non-western nations were under western dominion, by 1969 some 99.5% of non-western nations politically independent. This landslide of events, brought about by the political 'retreat of the west', deeply affected the global political structure and consciousness. It gave birth to the concept of the 'two-thirds world', and presented a very real challenge to the church in the second half of the twentieth century:

- **Asia:** before 1945 only 4 nations were not under colonial rule; the struggle of Indian independence (1947) set the pattern for other nations, many of who took a strong anti-western stance, both communism and nationalism shaped the continent.
- **Africa:** before 1945 only 4 independent states; many gained independence only after years of armed struggle,² many faced continual upheaval due to both tribalism and colonialism, initial western style governments often became one-party states.
- **Middle East:** the state of Israel was born of nationalism (1948) but ignited a struggle with Arab nations, the resurgence of Islam and fundamentalism (Iran) had nationalism and anti-westernism at its source; it had the ability to hold the west to ransom with its control of oil.
- **Latin America:** revolution is in the blood of this continent, the struggle for independence began in 1800 (Mexico), by 1960's two-thirds of nations had military governments; Bolivia had 180 revolutions in 160 years! - the struggle continued throughout the century for social justice.

Communism

Karl Marx died in London in 1883, but his shadow fell long across the whole of the twentieth century and around the globe. For him, 'revolution was the vehicle of history'

² The 'Mau Mau' in Kenya [1950's], Algeria FLN [late 1950's], Zimbabwe Patriotic Front [1965-80], Angola SWAPO (1975).



overthrowing the existing order, by violent means if necessary, to establish a classless society from which it was believed 'utopia' would emerge. Russia and China proved to be the key strongholds for its influence:

- **Russia:** the bread riots in Petrograd (1917) sparked the revolution against the backdrop of national humiliation in the Great War; by 1923 all opposition was defeated and the USSR was formed under Lenin. In 1928 Stalin seized power and began rapid industrialisation by ruthless means; the nation were treated virtually as slaves with an estimated 66 million dying between 1917-1959 through famine, disease, war and purges. The struggle to match the west in industry and technology continued until the collapse of the USSR in 1989.
- **China:** this nation embraced a quarter of the world population; it began a social revolution, toppling the Manchu empire, in 1911 under Sun Yat-Sen. The movement divided in 1927 when Mao Tse-Tung wanted a communist state; the struggle continued throughout the war and the 'Long March' (1934), but by 1949 the communist, People's Republic of China, was born on the mainland. They too worked to improve and industrialise the nation, with quite remarkable results. 1966 saw the 'Red Guard' youths of the 'cultural revolution' challenge softening communist attitudes. In complete contrast, the youthful democracy movement faced the tanks in Tiananmen Square in their protest against hard line leadership in 1989.

The power of communism reached far beyond Russia and China, and influenced radical thinkers in probably every nation of the world, fuelling revolutionary movements in Asia, Africa Latin America and Europe. It's mixing with nationalism making it a very potent force. Its mixing atheism with 'utopian' idealism made it a real challenge to the Christian faith. Its collapse in the west and continuing hold in the east raised questions about its role in the future.

Cry of protest

As well as the huge movements of global conflict and revolution there were other powerful currents of social change and protest. These found their source in a deep longing for justice and rise of individualism with its desire to authenticate personhood. This proved to be another unique revolutionary force throughout the twentieth century. Three areas in which these forces were seen most strongly were among the youth, women and black communities.

Youthquake

Youthful rebellion was nothing new; however, the twentieth century saw it erupt, changing much that existed before and creating a new consciousness. The early decades of the century saw new freedoms in art, music and dance. They also began to hear the pain of the black experience through the rhythms of 'jazz' and 'blues'. All this sowed seeds which began to blossom among the youth in the post war era. Normal youthful rebellion, mixed with a desire for new freedoms after the austerity of war and a growing anxiety about the direction the world was taking.

Music became the medium to communicate, and the mirror to reflect, this revolution. In the 1950's the music and dance of 'rock 'n roll', which originated in the 40's, became popular in 1953 via Bill Haley. This gave rise to social groups like 'Teddy Boys' and 'Mods and



Rockers' in the early 60's. However, by 1962 the music of 'beat' and 'love' was beginning to be matched by songs of deep social comment; the Beatles, Paul Simon and many others, and above all the prophet of the new consciousness Bob Dylan.

By 1962 the ideas in songs were transferring to lifestyle. The Height-Ashbury district of San Francisco, once decaying and overcrowded, saw a new boutiques and fine art studios established by new bohemians who moved in from old 'beatnik' areas. Though out of the public eye 'the pot was boiling'. By 1964 the spotlight was focusing; there was the Timothy Leary's psychedelic cult, there was Ken Kesey introducing people to 'the Acid Test' of LSD and encouraging them to 'turn on and drop out'. Added to this came a flood of eastern mysticism in the form of Zen, TM [Maharishi], and yoga, Sufism, Hari Krishna etc. By the summer of 1967 Scott McKenzie's record, 'San Francisco', heralded a 'new generation with a new explanation'. These were the 'gentle people'; the Hippy era was born. While the popular phase passed the chord struck at this time has continued in the rise of the 'New Age' movement.

Not far away in the university at Berkeley another strand was forming. This was the more intellectual and political aspect of the youthquake; pioneering the concepts of an 'alternative society'. The autumn of 1964 saw the 'Free Speech Movement' on campus, with strong political emphasis. Focused by resistance to the Vietnam war and fuelled by radical political ideas it found a parallel in Europe among the students of the Sorbonne in Paris and the LSE in London. While the movement inspired many to work for political change, it also sowed seeds for the anarchy movement. Nevertheless, for all their variety, these youth movements clearly left their stamp on the century.

Feminism

Early in the nineteenth century the idea of women having equal rights with men was virtually unheard of; but it was a vision that became unstoppable. Early on it was realised that before women could have full equal rights they had to win one equal right; and that was the vote. In Britain, Emmeline Pankhurst founded the 'Suffragettes' (1903) and ran a powerful campaign up to the eve of the Great War. While the invention of the bicycle had begun to physically liberate many women, their ability to do men's jobs during the war aided 'the Cause' strongly. They got the vote at 30 years of age in 1918 and at 21 in 1928.

The right to vote was a significant, but small, step on the path to women having equality with men in society and more fundamentally being 'feminine persons' in a male dominated world. The 'women's movement' found fresh impetus and radical direction in the 1960's emphasis on political challenge; consciousness raising and the desire for more open and direct human relationships. It began to express itself in many different ways:

- Backed campaigns to reform the law on homosexuality, divorce, abortion, equal pay and sex discrimination;
- Wrote books to remove a woman's sense of isolation;
- The 'pressure groups' became 'self-help groups';
- The 'consciousness raising groups' became centers to aid battered wives, rape victims and to promote study, health and mutual support.

The women's movement, which continued to have an important influence, was not simply trying to get a better deal for women, but to look at the heart of human relationships that



creates the barriers between men and women. While it was pioneered in Europe and North America its influence was, and continued to be, worldwide.

Black activism

In 1903 a black American poet said prophetically, “the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the colour line, the relation between the lighter and darker races”. The line could equally be called the poverty-power line; it has been said, ‘they are poor because they are black and powerless because they are poor’. The issue of colour demonstrated beyond doubt the way in which the ‘white’ European nations had increasingly dominated and exploited the peoples of the world since the sixteenth century; with the added tragedy that this behaviour had both been sanctioned by the church and described as ‘Christian’.

In the post-war decades no issue so bitterly divided nations and individuals; with non-white peoples wanting justice, equality and liberty. The whole subject had complex social, political, economic and historical roots. As with other movements black activism took its inspiration and direction both from the human cry for social justice and a desire to explore what it means personally, culturally and psychologically to be black in a ‘white’ dominated world. The issues faced in many nations were highlighted most clearly in the struggles in both America and South Africa.

- **America:** slavery gave way to emancipation [1865] but not freedom, despite fighting in the wars they faced deep prejudice in law and attitude. The 1955 ‘bus boycott’ ignited a flame for civil rights; the non-violent protest led by Martin Luther King climaxed in a nationwide march to Washington in 1963. Legislation led to little integration and the death of King [1968] saw violence embraced by significant black groups led by Malcolm X and Stokely Carmichael; this was no more politically successful. From the mid 1970’s there was increased opportunity for some blacks but many still struggled.
- **South Africa:** in 1910 the European settlers established a nation that excluded the indigenous Africans and indentured Asians and coloureds; in fact they were eventually legislated into the servitude of ‘apartheid’. Any opposition was, however peaceful, was often brutally put down as in Sharpsville [1960] and Soweto [1976]. Leading activists like Nelson Mandela were imprisoned on the notorious Robben Island. Individuals like Steve Biko, killed in 1977, gave birth to the ‘black consciousness’ movement, which inspired a new generation of black men and women to be conscious of both the plight and their blackness. Both internal and international pressure brought free elections in 1994, but the issues and struggle for rebuilding remained deep.

Spirit of the age

The technology that created the ‘global village’ also created a new global consciousness among its peoples. There was a strong cultural flow between nations:

- Westerners adorned their homes with African sculpture;
- Clothes designers used Polynesian motifs;
- Medical science used ancient Indian herbs to form drugs;
- Oriental religion had many followers in the west;



- Teenagers from Prague to Buenos Aires wore denim and carried bios.

However, there was more than just cross-cultural exchange taking place; as a result of media and trade a recognisable 'world culture' began to emerge. A culture that was essentially:

- **Western** in style; affluent consumer societies fuelled by mass production, marketing and credit being the growing expectation even if not the realization;
- **Urban** in location; by the year 2000 some 433 cities had over a million inhabitants and 75% of Latin America and 80% of East Asia lived in cities;
- **Technological** in economics; 'successful' countries were those producing wealth by manufacture, 'progress' was measured in terms of 'development';
- **Democratic** in politics; the 'will of the people' is the principle all leaders have to confront and is the ideal towards which people believe they are moving;
- **Scientific** in outlook; human understanding and exploitation of the material world as primary and true knowledge being essentially empirical;
- **Secular** in belief; all religious faiths were challenged by humanist attitudes which see values as essentially economic and morality as sociological.

This culture incarnated a 'spirit of the age', which was expressed through the media, literature, and art of our times. It revealed a conflicting paradox of attitudes:

- **Affluent:** an assumption and expectation of abundance;
- **Optimistic:** a belief that all problems can be solved;
- **Humanist:** a complete confidence in science and technology;
- **Individualist:** a demand that everyone is free to fulfill their own hypothesis;
- **Permissive:** a rejection of fixed standards and taboos;
- **Introspective:** a sense that people are sole arbiters of their own destiny;
- **Pessimistic:** a feeling that humans are lonely futile beings;
- **Escapist:** a commitment to indulgent pleasure and self-seeking.

Such a list is inevitably over simplistic; but it reveals the shape and values of the monoculture, which impacted so much of human society, particularly in the second half of the century. It was clearly western in its orientation and mostly English in its communication; it was cultural imperialism. Nevertheless, it was highly seductive.

While the expectation appeared to be movement towards an increasingly globalised culture, the reality almost certainly proved to be different. People's national and ethnic identity, and their cultural and spiritual values were essential to their being that they would not easily be crushed. The greater the pressure from an homogeneous world culture the more steadfastly groups and individuals clung to the deeper values of their religion, language, art, music and literature. Where there is threat there was reaction. It was not a monocultural world that emerged but diverse societies in which spirituality refused to be crushed.

This is the background against which the church throughout the twentieth century developed and grew and which presented the challenges for its future.



Faith and tumult

The upheavals of the twentieth century challenged the existence of the church at every level. Its physical existence was challenged by the wars and revolutions; the very ordered world in which it flourished in the nineteenth century was swept away:

- **Russia:** the centre of the Orthodox church became communist;
- **Italy:** the heart of the Roman Catholic church cradled fascism;
- **Germany:** the womb of the Reformation was overrun by Nazism;
- **Britain:** the hub of empire and mission was increasingly impotent.

The 'national consciousness' of the emerging nations demanded, that while the church was welcome, it must be an expression of the nation with indigenous leadership. It must be 'self-supporting, self-governing, self-propagating'. It was interesting that so many leaders of the recently independent nations, especially in Africa, received their training in mission schools.

The intellectual attacks upon the church from secular and humanist sources, which increased in recent centuries, did not abate. The secular environment that had been created in many western nations also led to a passive indifference towards the Christian faith; which ignores the church as a viable option.

Nevertheless, the Christian community, in the post-war era grew faster than at any time in its history. Much of the old fell away, and a new vibrant community emerged.

TOWARDS UNITY

Working together

Towards the end of the nineteenth century Christians increasingly realised the importance, and expressed a willingness to work together. They increasingly realised that it was essential if they were to truly:

- Be able to express the body of Christ upon earth;
- Be able to evangelise the world with the gospel;
- Be able to encounter the hostile intellectual attacks.

As a consequence they began to organise themselves for unity. It began with worldwide networks of Protestant denominations linking together, but it soon grew into something greater. This distinctive movement was given the title 'ecumenism' [Gk 'oikoumene' meaning 'the whole inhabited world'].

Edinburgh Missionary Conference³

The 'ecumenical movement', in a truly interdenominational sense, began in a very positive manner; with a desire for world evangelisation. In 1910 some 1200 delegates from many countries, including some from Africa and Asia, met at an International Missionary Conference in Edinburgh under the leadership of John R Mott. Those present represented

³ The significance of this is dealt with in more detail in 'Developments in Mission'

the major Protestant missionary societies. The theme of the conference was, 'the evangelisation of the world in this generation', with the aim, 'to plant in each non-Christian country a church which was not divided'. Many of the delegates were young, vigorous, and inspired to fulfill the vision. However, they were to see their dream of worldwide evangelism shattered on the battlefields of the Great War. This tragedy took much of the early momentum out of the movement.

World Council of Churches

Despite the frustrations of two world wars contact and conferences continued between different groups who held to the vision of the historical Christian denominations working together in a common effort. The dream became a physical reality when the World Council of Churches was inaugurated in Amsterdam in 1948; with its headquarters in Geneva. Its basis of membership was: -

“The World Council of Churches is a fellowship of churches which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God the Saviour according to the scriptures and therefore seek to fulfill together their common calling to the glory of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.”

It included all the major Christian denominations east and west (147 churches from 44 countries), including the Orthodox. But not Roman Catholics, the popes insisted that all true Christians must return to the true church, though many Catholics worked for unity through prayer. The WCC has increased in its significance since that time. In its early decades its emphasis was on 'faith and order', which wrestled with the issues that divide Christians. Since 1968 its focus was with 'life and work' and the concerns of Christian impact in a fractured world, often creating debate about some of its radical proposals. It also looked for ways of having greater links with the Catholics.

Vatican II

We have seen how since the nineteenth century political and social pressures led the Roman Catholic church to adopt a more authoritarian and conservative position. Non-Catholics were treated as beyond the pale; hence their response to the ecumenical movement. As recently as 1950 Pius XII confirmed the doctrines of papal infallibility and the bodily assumption of the Virgin Mary. In 1958 a 77-year-old cardinal was appointed pope John XXIII. This saintly man from peasant stock was viewed as a 'caretaker pope', but in reality he was to initiate and oversee events that, to all intents and purposes, were to make a break with the church that had grown out of the Council of Trent. Pope John had served in several countries and realised that the Catholic Church played little part in many areas of the modern world. He wanted to 'simplify complicated things in the spirit of the gospel'. He called a Council for the Universal Church; known as 'Vatican II'.

On the 11th October 1962 the council opened with 2400 bishops and abbots present, plus 36 lay observers [seven of whom were women] and 31 Protestant and Orthodox observers [their number was to grow to 93 by the end of the council]. It was the first Roman Catholic assembly to be truly worldwide and it had two broad aims:

- Adapting the church to a world that was constantly changing;
- Affirming a return to Christian unity.



In his opening address pope John XXIII asked both Catholics and non-Catholics, 'to pray for the unity Jesus had desired'. While he was to die [1963] before the council ended in December 1965, the spirit and the work continued. There were no infallible pronouncements, simply a whole new climate in which the church could develop:

- It was pastoral in its concern for contemporary people;
- It called for ecumenical dialogue based on what Christians hold in common;
- It sought to heal Catholic enmity towards the Orthodox and the Jews;
- It encouraged a more positive attitude towards other religions.

It was a new era. Christians were shaken by the new opportunities; whatever happened things within the Catholic Church could never be the same again.

Lausanne congress

In July 1974 some 3000 evangelical Christians, from 150 different nations, met at Lausanne in Switzerland for the International Congress on World Evangelisation; an event which 'Time' magazine called, 'possibly the widest-ranging meeting of Christians ever held'. Its significance for evangelical Christians was in many ways similar to that of Vatican II for Catholics. The mind and commitment of the congress was expressed in a 'Covenant', which was both a wide-ranging confession of faith and a solemn pledge to pray and work for evangelisation. The congress was significant in three ways:

- The churches of the two-thirds world came into their own; as had been the case in the gatherings of the WCC in the 1960's. Half of the participants, speakers and planning committee were from the two-thirds world, and the most influential and provocative speakers were Latin Americans; Samuel Escobar and Rene Padilla.
- The churches of the west expressed penitence for its attitude of 'triumphalism' in its approach and practice in mission, recognising that all in the past had not been healthy and lessons had to be learned from others.
- The churches affirmed the responsibility to act in the area of social concern as part of the proclamation of the gospel, an area of great importance in the nineteenth century but neglected for most of the twentieth.

The Congress maintained much of its momentum with international groups meeting to continue debate on key issues such as; gospel and culture (1978), simple lifestyle (1980) and also on evangelism and social responsibility.

CROSS CURRENTS

Reaction and interaction

The twentieth century saw a great deal of theological debate and creativity; this took place because of both reaction and interaction. There were attempts to state the gospel in the light of secularism and skepticism; there was the challenge to proclaim the gospel in a modern world and in diverse cultures and political situations.



Liberals

Liberals had their roots back in the philosophical skepticism of the previous two centuries; their work was a through-going attempt to adapt their understanding of theology to the modern world. They were prepared to sacrifice many important elements of traditional Christian theology in order to do this. Their approach was most clearly illustrated in the work of Adolf Harnak (1851-1930), whose teaching was an optimistic humanism. He taught that Christian doctrine was essentially the product of Greek influence and believed that the essence of Jesus' teaching was, 'The fatherhood of God, the brotherhood of man and the infinite value of the human soul'. This spiritual humanism with its skeptical view of much of the biblical text had a strong influence on many in the church.

Karl Barth

Karl Barth was probably the most influential theologian of the century; he challenged the fundamentals of liberalism with the publication of a New Testament commentary on Romans in 1919. He emphasised the deity and wholly 'otherness' of God, and the distinction between God and humanity. He said, "You don't say 'God' by saying 'man' in a loud voice". He argued that it was completely impossible to know God apart from revelation and that Jesus was the central and primary revelation of God. God's word was something revealed and was an 'event' rather than a 'statement'. Scripture pointed forward expectantly and looks back reflectively on the event of Jesus, and become an event in our own lives through the encounter of the Spirit. Barth led the challenge of the 'confessing church' against Hitler, with the 'Barmen Declaration' (1934), when the state church compromised.

Fundamentalists

Fundamentalism provided another response to liberalism. Between 1910-1915 a series of twelve small books called 'The Fundamentals' were sent to every theological student and Christian worker in the USA; affirming the basic truths of Protestant Christianity. The move led to the formation of a strong conservative evangelical coalition from many churches. Their rallying point was the inspiration and infallibility of scripture. While the term 'evangelical' became a broad term for those who appealed to the authority of scripture, those who particularly stressed 'infallibility' were identified as 'fundamentalist'. Scholars like BB Warfield and Carl Henry gave the movement intellectual force. Fundamentalism popularly, though, tended to be anti-intellectual and hostile to contemporary culture.

Existentialists

Existentialists were philosophers concerned with experience rather than objective statements. This way of thinking influenced some Christian theologians who wrestled with either the seemingly lifeless doctrines of the church or the struggle to make the gospel relevant to the contemporary world. Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) saw an infinite gap between God and humanity, and argued that faith was not rational but the acceptance of paradox, 'a leap into the dark'. Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976) saw the biblical world as 'mythical', so its text must be 'demythologised' and given existential meaning for the modern mind; 'faith is freely opening ourselves to the future'. Paul Tillich (1886-1965) wrestled with the concept of God in the contemporary mind; he described God as 'the ground of all being', not 'a Being' but 'Being itself'. These ideas, plus those of Dietrich



Bonhoeffer's 'religionless Christianity' (1944), influenced John Robinson's 'Honest to God' (1963), Paul van Buren's 'The Death of God' (1963), and Don Cupit's 'Taking Leave of God' (1980).

Water Buffalo theology

New dimensions in theology were born in the orient when a Japanese missionary, Kosuke Koyama, working in Thailand wondered what relevance the theology he preached had to the peasant in the paddy field sitting on the back of a water buffalo. He began to rewrite Christian theology in the light of the different life rhythms and thought forms presented by Asian culture and called it 'Water Buffalo Theology'. He started from the human situation and pointed to God and from there back to the human situation. In another book, 'Three Mile an Hour God', he contrasted the practice of learning in theory with learning in life. 'Forty years in the wilderness is God's basic educational philosophy' ... 'God walks slowly because he is love ... Love has its speed. It is an inner speed. It is a spiritual speed'. The tranquility of the orient brought new perspectives to biblical truth.

Liberation theology

'Liberation Theology' was another theological influence from the two-thirds world, but this time Latin America. Here a whole society suffered from the oppression of unjust structures; despotic regimes and exploitive 'development'. Catholic bishops at conference in Medellin in Colombia (1968) challenged institutionalised violence and called for 'far-reaching, daring, urgent and profoundly innovating changes'. They warned against the seductive temptations of violence though saw it valid in extreme situations. This call for 'liberation' gave birth to 'liberation theology' and its many exponents. It did not claim to be a universal theology; it started with the concrete situation in Latin America and called for 'praxis', practical involvement. Marxism sometimes influenced its political analysis and its call is to be a poor church. The events of the Exodus are a major inspiration, and the atonement of Jesus must be seen to have something to do with everyday justice.

Questions

1. What do you believe were the most significant factors [positive and negative] for the church during the twentieth century? How do you see them affecting the future?
2. In what way do you see the twentieth century as unique in comparison with the other centuries of salvation history? In what ways do you see it harmonising with all previous centuries?

Reading & Resources

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