

Lecture on *Declinism*

St Cuthbert's College, in the Year of our Lord, 2048

In our lecture series of heresies of the Church this term, we have examined some choice heresies of the early church such as Arianism, Sabellianism, Pelagianism; as well as how the Church has already recovered from heresy. You may remember our study of Bishop Selwyn's pragmatic approach during church planting in Polynesia in the late 19th century: "But how, you will ask, shall truth of doctrine be maintained if we tolerate in the mission-field every form of error, and provide no safeguard for the purity of the faith? I answer that, as running water purifies itself, so Christian work is seen to correct its own mistakes."

Fortunately, this has been the case with today's topic - the 21st century heresy of "Declinism" which was prevalent for just over 100 years in Western Europe from the end of the First World War. Many of us who lived through those times are relieved to note that Selwyn was right: Christian work has corrected its own mistakes, so that today we find it hard to believe that so many in the West were taken in by this heresy. I will explain its main features and context.

Declinism was a term coined by Bishop Philip North, thirty years ago, in 2018. The principle feature of this heresy was that the Church across the world was in terminal decline, because the ongoing work of Christ through the active agency of His Holy Spirit was something of the past. Some did subscribe to an element of Christ's ongoing work, but this bore no relation in efficacy to the power of the Holy Spirit to bring Jesus back from the dead which had been seen throughout earlier centuries.

Proponents of Declinism built a credible internal world-view that refuted all other data. For example, even when proponents experienced first-hand church growth movements internationally (eg the flourishing contexts of Asia, Africa & South America), such was the belief in this heretical doctrine, that many Christians in Western Europe stuck doggedly to the belief that decline would soon come to the churches internationally – it was only a matter of time. Such arrogance and Euro-centrism can be traced to the empire building movements which had emanated from Western Europe over the previous five hundred years. They just couldn't accept that those whom they had ruled as colonial masters now had a clearer grasp of the Christian faith than they did, and that it was now their turn to learn. Particularly in the area of church growth or church planting, which, by the early decades of the 21st century was only just returning to theological college syllabuses, and tended to draw very narrowly on anecdotal local evidence and was normally seen with much suspicion.

To a declinist, the rationale for why the church was in irretrievable decline were cited variously as cultural shifts:

- From Christendom to post-Christendom
- From Modernism to Post-modernism

As we have shown in previous lectures, neither of these cultural forms (Christendom & Modernism) played any significant part in church growth in the first place. The Church internationally was alive and growing in places where Christendom had never been invented. As missiologist, Andrew Walls, in his encyclopaedic work, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History* wrote: "The new Christian heartlands in Africa & Asia ... are neither extensions nor replicas of Christendom. Christendom is dead, and Christianity is alive and well without it".

But the most quoted reason for Declinism was the “Secularism agenda”. Sociological studies reveal that this so-called phenomenon was, ironically, only fully subscribed to in church circles, and certain commenters on BBC Radio 4. Our studies of the culture of the period (eg as expressed in film, music, TV, internet, advertising) demonstrate that popular culture at this time was rich with belief in the supernatural and people would regularly speak of a sense of God or angels or intervention. Declinism was in effect a massive over-reaction to a noisy but minor social phenomenon.

You will recall that the culture of this late 20th century Age of Anxiety led to sociological narrowing and an increased ‘compartmentalising’ within many areas of British society. The Church of England did not escape this. Four well-documented typical side-effects of this Age of Anxiety on the Church of England were as follows:

- **Elitism** – the modern-day successors of Jesus’s band of unschooled fishermen (and notably Peter the rock on which Jesus built his church) were not able to make it through the stringent selection criteria which prioritised high academic ability and middle-class social background rather than the key factors for church thriving: faith, prayerfulness and ability to naturally share one’s faith in one’s culture. These are well documented as essentials by the Church Fathers (eg John Chrysostom “Christians who refuse to share their faith are frigid”). Fortunately, there were still vestiges of the original calling of the Church of England to be a church for the nation, as evidenced by the strapline on their website at the time: “a Christian presence in every community”, that enabled people waking up from the age of anxiety to realise that Declinism was a temporary phenomenon.
- **Moral Relativism** – this was a dominant ideology in British culture in the latter part of the 20th century. Its key assertion was that making judgements about how to live is impossible – there is no true virtue. In fact, to have a view on virtue was to be seen as intolerant. In the early decades of this century, as ‘millenials’ made their way into adulthood from chaotic family backgrounds with increasing incidence of mental health issues, the appeal of moral relativism started to wane. Millenials looked for a moral compass, an ideal at which to aim their lives. There was a sharp increase in vocations, as the tide turned. Rather than lampooning, there was intrigue about the Christian faith. Rather than the God of sentimentalism (typified by Voltaire: “God will forgive, that’s his job”) people reached out for the Christ who could walk on the waters of chaos and say “I am the way”. Rather than squeamishness about sowing good seed of the gospel, there came the realisation that people were hungry for the rich banquet of Jesus. “Of course, we didn’t force feed, but it was shame if they missed out on the banquet because we didn’t invite them” said one commentator
- **The abandonment of the poor.** A feature of declinism that is perhaps hardest for us to understand today was the presumption that, in order to have a ‘viable’ church (measured usually in purely economic terms) it was necessary to pull out of areas characterised by poverty and so where stipendiary ministry was hardest to sustain. Thus this period is marked by the slow withdrawal of church life in estates and inner urban areas, the redeployment of clergy to wealthier areas, the closure of buildings and chronic long-term under-investment. (It is reckoned that by 2018 the Church of England was investing less than half in ministry to deprived areas than the national average). It took some time for the Church to realise afresh that renewal always come from the poor and from the margins and the vanquishing of declinism was inevitably accompanied by the remarkable recovery of church life on the outer estates of our big towns. It is now a truism that it is from these

urban plants and renewals, characterised by warm community, generous proclamation and a strong but simple faith, that mainstream Anglicans have recovered the heart of Gospel-living.

- **Divisions** – the 20th century was fraught with internal divisions and there grew a culture to publicly malign other Christians in a way not seen for many generations. This was particularly corrosive in the new age of social media, where the knee-jerk reactions of the few could be heard above the considered response of the many. The aftermath of the C of E's decision to ordain women bishops in 2015 was a case in point. There arose a (thankfully) short-lived nervous desire to "purify" the church (explicitly or implicitly) from those who, for historically well-respected reasons, disagreed with the church's decision. This historical & geographical myopia appeared to lead to a subconscious unarticulated ambition to become a narrow club which bore no relation to the wider worldwide church where the majority of Christians also believed that women could not be bishops (a stance that had held sway for 2000 years). This also coincided with a phase in wider society where disparaging statements about men, especially all-male gatherings, were socially acceptable – one of the few forms of bigotry which needed no apology. Note our use of 'thankfully' – the data has shown that significant church growth and renewal of church life has come from these very sections of the church in the last thirty years. History has now demonstrated that, in Bishop Selwyn's language, the pure water is found swirling in diverse pools and streams; the drive to "bottled purity" actually caused the pollution.

Unfortunately, at times, a key vehicle of promoting disunity and suspicion were some of the theological training institutions, who had a tendency to school ordinands into labelling each other according to 19th century divisions. The reasons for this are various, though one factor was their independence from parish life and the oversight of bishops, often predicated on a desire to please the university more than relate to the church. It became acceptable for tutors to have no meaningful involvement in everyday parish life, due to the intense demands of marking, reporting and quality assurance processes (another hallmark of the wider Age of Anxiety). Ironically most of the flourishing theology of the previous two hundred years had been birthed within a church and ministry context, rather than in academic contexts which saw no reason to take account of living faith in the parishes. You need to remember that this was still the period of the 'great oversight' in which some believed the world was best understood by pretending that religious faith was a minority interest despite all the statistics showing that then, as now, most people in the world express religious faith. Added to this, the key factors which had led to church growth and flourishing over two millennia (eg the practical skills of prayer, building unity, having great courage & sharing faith) were hardly touched on in core syllabuses. Ordinands were not encouraged to have any degree of ambition in these areas. This was not unique to theological training, in fact church culture in places appeared to encourage people to aspire to the opposite: for most of the 20th century C of E Synods had been structured so as to prioritize cynicism over hope and division over unity.

Fortunately, there was an awakening of the Church of England in around the third decade of the 21st century as a groundswell of people simply got bored of the fruitlessness of narrow-minded infighting & elitism, when there was such an appetite for the gospel across all areas of the nation. The starting point was a re-discovery that unity and speaking generously of others was such an important factor for churches to thrive and grow. To quote Bishop Selwyn again: "And I speak from observation, ranging over nearly half of the Southern Pacific Ocean, that wherever this law of religious unity is adopted, there the gospel has its full and unchecked power. Missionaries must be

ready at a moment to put their lives in their hands and go out to preach the Gospel to others, with no weapon but prayer, and with no refuge but in God.”

As with the other heresies we have studied in this lecture course, it is easy to simply laugh or shake our heads, thinking ‘how could they have been so misguided’. However, in your assignment you need to try to appreciate how good people were fooled in this way, to study carefully the key ways in which the Church started to spot the heresy and combat it.

Examples of web-articles of Declinism from second decade of the 21st century:

www.spectator.co.uk/2015/06/2067-the-end-of-british-christianity

www.spectator.co.uk/2017/12/mission-impossible-the-c-of-es-attempt-to-woo-new-members/

Jill Duff, 10.5.19