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From the Canon Theologian...

In his short story “Bells in the Morning”, set in 1945, Richard Yates has two GIs dug in along the Ruhr in a morning mist. All the Church bells start to ring and they think for a brief moment that the war might be over. Until one remembers someone saying the previous week that it had been Good Friday. To which the other glumly responds, “Son of a bitch. Easter Sunday”.

Faith built on Jesus’ death and resurrection once overcame the violent fatalism of Rome’s Empire to change the world. Yet today those fictional soldiers are typical of the many who find such faith remote and uninteresting. Likewise, any kind of Church involvement beyond what the social niceties demand strikes most Westerners as unimaginable.

Mainstream Western Churches regularly fail to excite and compel even their own dwindling membership. Their occasional claims for success often rest on repackaging aspects of the good life as our society conceives it, or else providing a safe haven for the anxious and the nostalgic. There is little interest in anything genuinely different or countercultural.

This is why so many Easter sermons reduce the cross and resurrection of Jesus to legalistic or else therapeutic transactions between God and the private individual. No longer are they seen as world-historical events of enormous disruptive and re-directive power. No longer do they promise to radically re-situate our individuality and re-ignite the adventure of faith.

What is called “postliberalism’ in theology, Christian ethics and congregational practice offers the Church a third way.

It points beyond the current impasse between Christian conservatives and fundamentalists, on the one hand, and so-called “liberal” or “progressive” Christians on the other. These two poles are familiar to us from wider society’s culture wars in America and to some extent in Australia. Postliberals think that they represent the failure of Christian imagination.

As mirror doubles locked in mutual reaction, theological conservatives and liberals are equally culturally captive. Religion plays for each the essentially privatized, individualized role that modernity scripts for it. While the truth of faith is cashed out in one or other of modernity’s standard coinages: rationalism or romanticism.

Postliberalism finds its inspiration in three major sources.

Chiefly there is the Bible, understood as a narrative universe into which we are progressively engrafted. This approach, also known as narrative theology, retrieves biblical interpretation

from the sterile debate over propositional factoids into which it has typically descended among theological conservatives, liberals and anti-Christian sceptics alike.

A second source is the Church's traditional liturgies. Baptism and Eucharist are seen as countercultural engines for propelling us out of our confinement in the groupthink of individualism.

Rather than half-understood social customs, community obligations or even cherished personal moments, worship gatherings are meant to do real transformative work. They should foster what sociologist Robert Bellah calls "habits of the heart". The disciplined embrace of worship on these terms helps us form a new imagination, so that we re-conceive the world and our lives around a different centre.

The public celebration of word and sacrament thus becomes revolutionary theatre for confronting the abuses, betrayals and blind spots that diminish human thriving.

Here is an alternative to worship as a non-threateningly amateurish, old-fashioned exercise in nostalgic reassurance, as traditionalist conservatives like it. Or else to confecting the laboured relevancy that many liberals and conservative evangelicals prefer, which risks turning Sunday worship into a mediocre extension of the personal services sector.

Postliberalism's third source of inspiration is the Church's historic communities of radical discipleship, in particular Catholic monasticism and Anabaptist congregationalism.

Such radical Christian movements pointed beyond medieval Europe's defining if uneasy détente between Church and Holy Roman Empire, and early-modernity's annexation of power and sacrality by the nation state and the market.

Monasticism began as a demanding retreat into the desert, away from decadent currents in the newly-Christianized Constantinian Empire. Later the baton passed to St Benedict along with his Cistercian and Carthusian inheritors. All of these helped to "refashion" Europe, as John Henry Newman put it.

Of course, these monastic communities of single-minded attention to the way of Christ did not always fulfil their potential. So, at the radical end of the continental Reformation, Anabaptist communities took up Christianity's foundational challenge to live differently in the world.

Their Mennonite descendants among the so-called "peace churches", of whom the Amish are the most radical, inspire postliberals today. John Howard Yoder, whose best-known book was *The Politics of Jesus*, provided a formative postliberal voice from the Mennonite tradition.

The postliberal champions of intentional Christian discipleship respond chiefly to the condition of American Christianity. They want to disentangle faith and Church from the religious civic-mindedness, moralistic rationalism or else romantic individualism into which it has regularly descended throughout American history.

While individual freedom, "family values" and related obsessions of the Christian right carry great political weight in America, it is not Christ but American culture that effectively sets this agenda. The gospel is co-opted for socio-political duty, leaving little scope for churches to challenge the prevailing culture.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's conviction that when Christ calls someone to follow him, he calls them to die, would make very little sense for mainstream Christians, either in America or Australia.

Duke University ethicist Stanley Hauerwas is the main postliberal advocate for intentional faith communities. These provide the necessary context for Christian self-understanding and mission.

Hauerwas challenges America's conservative churches that if they crave political influence, they should first become attractive examples of the Christian values they profess. He challenges liberal churches, whenever they define their mission as helping to make the world a better place, to start by being good churches.

This approach reveals the influence of moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre, whose virtue ethics calls for "communities of character" as the basis for producing transformed individuals and influencing wider society.

How might all this play out?

The postliberal Church can show how to live more critically and less anxiously in late-capitalist culture. Christians will learn to let go of today's obsessions with security and relative social position, in turn with wealth and consumption.

Family values will no longer be an excuse for retreat into the nuclear family and protective individualism, or used as a stick to beat those we disapprove of. Rather, congregations where belonging and identity are re-imagined will help forge the relational values on which wider civic engagement can be rebuilt.

In a departure from left-Christian rhetoric, the Church's prophetic witness will move beyond committee reports and quotes from bishops' Easter sermons critiquing problematic government policies.

Rather, the church's own faith communities will demonstrate to wider society what living differently with respect and solidarity actually looks like.

So instead of lamenting unemployment and today's blight of corporate downsizing, Christian employers can show how to work more humanely and collaboratively with employees. Thus in the face of a regularly dehumanising workplace culture, and the impersonal cult of managerialism, Christians can take the lead in modelling social alternatives.

Instead of simply protesting Australia's bipartisan political set against asylum seekers, Christian congregations become centres of welcome and practical resettlement help. This comes naturally to those who learn in word, sacrament and communal belonging that grace, gift and acceptance stand at the heart of reality in God's world.

We desperately need communities that can demonstrate such wisdom.

Beyond today's defence of fixed positions on women's ordination as priests and bishops by the Church's patriarchal conservatives and their feminist critics, new questions will emerge.

How best to foster Jesus' practice of radical inclusion, beyond antiquity's culture-defining distinctions between Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female? How best to model Jesus' culturally confronting preference to practice his leadership "under erasure", by taking the towel of a slave?

So postliberals may come to women's ordination, but do so by an entirely different route.

Instead of being mired in set-piece debates about human sexuality, postliberalism shows how open-hearted life together and embrace of the other helps to reposition these hot-button issues. In this way, conflicted positions come to wear the face of beloved friends and co-workers in the Church.

Rather than contending over objective rights or wrongs on gay marriage, for instance, the question shifts. It becomes one of learning to live together in communities that explore and commend the Christian virtues of fidelity and solidarity. Encouraging the formation of Christian households marked by generosity and hospitality, with the capacity to form children's imaginations accordingly, becomes a priority for Christian congregations.

This is not helped when a necessarily communal exercise in patient openness and mutual discovery is reduced to black-and-white abstractions.

Postliberalism is not just a practically-oriented movement, however. First it was an intellectual one, initiated by American Lutheran theologian George Lindbeck in his 1984 book, *The Nature of Doctrine*.

Lindbeck redefined the nature of Christian beliefs as the grammar and syntax of a living language in the Church. Not a made-up language like Esperanto, however, but a real, vibrant and evolving language. The sort found in communities of "native speakers".

Compared with conservative Christianity's regular emphasis on objective believing, then, postliberals see coming to faith as more like learning this new language, and its accompanying cluster of new community practices.

Compared with liberal Christianity's characteristic emphasis on one's own personal truth and experience, for which Christian belief and practice might provide helpful resources, faith for postliberals is more like hardware than software.

Here the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein and cultural anthropologists like Clifford Geertz point the way. They show how beliefs need to be understood through the forms of life that accompany them.

Perhaps we discern the influence of Martin Luther here, too, who taught that examining how we live our life reveals who our "God" most truly is.

This "thick description" of faith represents an improvement on the pointless too-and-fro between the so-called new atheists and Christian fundamentalists over the truth or otherwise of Christian beliefs. Brothers under the skin, Richard Dawkins and his fundamentalist opponents are prisoners of the same meagre modern rationalism when it comes to rightly comprehending Christian truth claims.

This is not to reduce the content of Christian belief to purely regulative principles, however, as radical Wittgensteinian philosophers of religion such as R.B. Braithwaite, Peter Winch and D.Z. Phillips advocate—with whom many mainstream churchgoers might agree.

What it does mean is that we cannot understand the cross of Jesus, say, apart from knowing the power of forgiveness in an actual community that practices it. Or understand Jesus' resurrection without experiencing the overcoming of evil, cynicism and the weight of a stifling past. All of which comes through communities mediating these realities.

At a time when many are seeking something to make churchgoing more invigorating and Christian belief more deeply engaging, postliberalism is a timely challenge to the churches.

The Easter story and Easter worship have more going for them than many conservative and liberal Christians imagine.

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