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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 changed the world. It overcame the violent fatalism of Rome’s Imperial religion via a radical new social movement called “the Church”. Yet today those fictional GIs are typical of the many who find Christian faith remote and uninteresting. Likewise, any kind of church involvement beyond what the social niceties demand strikes most Westerners as inconceivable.

Christian faith and the beliefs articulating it makes most sense when embodied in a community. In the same way that learning a foreign language becomes more vital and engaging when one goes to live among native speakers. A lot that seemed difficult comes more easily “from the inside”.

Yet 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.

A movement in theology and Christian ethics called “postliberalism” is helping to identify these problems and to picture a way forward.

It offers a third way beyond today’s 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. Yet for postliberals these flaccid alternatives represent the shrivelling 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 believers are progressively drawn. 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.

Scripture comes alive in communal reflection on real-life issues. Consider the so-called “base ecclesial communities” of South America, closely associated with liberation theology. Gatherings of Catholic peasants who might otherwise have been radicalized by Marxist ideology found an alternative identity and empowerment. Biblical reflection on the economic injustice and political violence that blighted their lives fostered a countervailing sense of dignity and poise as God’s beloved people. Their movement constituted a non-violent social revolution.

A second source is the Church’s traditional liturgies. Baptism and Eucharist reinforce an alternative vision of what matters most in life. They rattle the cage of today’s ruling mindset, which is “look good, feel good and make good”.

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

Postliberalism might encourage us instead to think of the Eucharist as revolutionary theatre. It confronts every ultimately toxic version of human thriving with the public enactment of God’s vision for humanity.

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

Monasticism began as a countercultural alternative to decadent currents in the newly-Christianized Constantinian Empire. Originally monks and nuns withdrew to the desert, devoting themselves to scripture and liturgy, prayer and work. Their life together was marked by solitude, simplicity and mutual respect. Later the baton passed to St Benedict along with his Cistercian and Carthusian inheritors. Through their mission, ministry, architecture, land management, agriculture and learning these numerous monasteries helped to “refashion” Europe, as John Henry Newman put it.

Of course, monastic communities often failed to fulfil their potential as public witnesses to the way of Christ. So, at the radical end of Europe’s 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. The late American Christian pacifist John Howard Yoder, whose best-known book was *The Politics of Jesus*, provided a formative postliberal voice from the Mennonite tradition.

Postliberal champions of more intentional Christian living 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.

One particular concern is to retrieve the banner of Evangelical Christianity from the “Moral Majority” and its successor the “Christian Coalition”. While individual freedom, “family values” and related obsessions of the American Christian right carry great political weight, 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 groupthink of adversarial moralism.

Duke University ethicist Stanley Hauerwas is the main postliberal advocate for Christian communities living their faith more intentionally. Hauerwas challenges America's conservative churches that if they crave political influence, they should first become more 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.

A Catholic advocate of such thinking is the veteran German New Testament scholar Father Gerhard Lohfink. He resigned his Tübingen professorship in 1986 to live and work in a new religious community of priests and lay people called the Integrierte Gemeinde. Such movements are multiplying in Europe. Worth a visit are the Comunità di Sant'Egidio, based in Rome's Trastevere, and the Fraternités monastiques de Jérusalem, based at the historic Paris Church of St Gervais in the 4th arrondissement.

Lohfink is convinced that the Church will keep dwindling, its faith sinking further into implausibility, unless such communities of compelling witness can nurture a rebirth. In his book *Does God Need the Church?* he writes, "What the Church needs before anything else is itself to be a concrete *society* that makes faith visible as a way of life, different from neo-paganism".

If postliberal thinking began to gain ground, what are some ways in which the churches' habits and preoccupations might change?

Family values would no longer be an excuse for retreat into the nuclear family and protective individualism, or be used as a stick to beat those we disapprove of. Rather, congregations where belonging and identity are re-imagined would 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 would move beyond its committee reports and media quotes from bishops' Easter sermons. Rather, congregations and dioceses would demonstrate publicly what living differently with respect and solidarity actually looks like.

The Church would show how to abide more critically and less anxiously in late-capitalist culture. Christians would learn to let go of today's preoccupations with security and relative social position, which in turn fuel obsessions with wealth and consumption.

Christian congregations would take the lead in modelling social alternatives. Beyond today's cult of managerialism and its curse of corporate downsizing, Christian employers would show how to deal more humanely and collaboratively with employees. This is because they had learned to share God's justice and compassion through themselves being loved and valued in a Christian community.

Instead of simply protesting Australia's bipartisan political set against asylum seekers, Christian congregations would model a different, non-anxious response to "the other". This comes naturally to those who learn in word, sacrament and communal belonging that grace, gift and acceptance stand at the heart of God's reality.

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 would 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 practice of leadership "under erasure", by taking the towel of a slave?

So churches might well come to women's ordination, but by a different route.

Instead of being mired in set-piece debates about human sexuality, congregational life involving people of differing sexuality would help to reposition these hot-button issues. Such conflicted positions tend to soften once they wear the faces of beloved and trusted fellow travellers.

Rather than contending over objective rights or wrongs on gay marriage, for instance, the question would shift. It would become 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, able to form children's moral imaginations accordingly, would become more important than policing the makeup of those households.

None of this is 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. First it was an intellectual one, initiated by Yale University Lutheran theologian George Lindbeck in his 1984 book, *The Nature of Doctrine*.

Lindbeck redefined Christian belief 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, Lindbeck sees coming to faith as more like learning this new language, and its accompanying cluster of new cultural 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 Lindbeck 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.

This "thick description" of faith represents an improvement on the pointless too-and-fro between today's "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.

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 really believe in Jesus' resurrection without having been shown that Easter faith overcomes evil, cynicism and the weight of a stifling past.

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

Easter faith and worship have more going for them than many conservative and liberal Christians imagine, let alone those who Friedrich Schleiermacher called "the cultured despisers of religion".

The Reverend Canon Scott Cowdell is Research Professor in Public and Contextual Theology at Charles Sturt University and Canon Theologian of the Canberra-Goulburn Anglican Diocese.