

## *Preface*

### *Spirit of Liberality*

THE PIECES HERE CONTINUE in the liberal tradition of theology represented in *Traces of Liberality*, my essay collection of 2005. Theology has moved on since then, and in the present volume I try to reflect and assess developments in theology and the churches and in their diverse relationships.

Ten years ago it seemed to many observers that the liberal traditions in church and academy and in the public square were finally entering on their much prophesied demise. But prophets in history have very often been quite wrong.

Especially in the United States, it has been well noted that there continues to be a rich and inclusive stream of liberal theology in the academy. It has been realized that the numerical decline in the mainline churches has not taken due account of the wide reaching role of liberal Christian values on the embedding of a culture of human rights and concern for human dignity and for social justice in society, at a local and an international level.

Without attempting the prophetic, and sticking to the present, it seems to me that many of the luxuriant blooms of post-everything theology and church have not been as long-lived as had been expected. They have, however, provided a salutary reminder that the Christian faith can always be articulated in diverse manners, and that monocular visions, including monocular liberal versions, will always be of limited value. None of us can see the whole horizon; we can only try to bring to a conversation what we can ourselves imagine, and hope to encourage to conversation, and not simply on our own terms.

I have tried to indicate that liberal theological perspectives are to be found not only in professedly liberal projects, but throughout the rich history of Christian tradition, from the biblical narratives to the present, from Origen and Augustine, to Barth and Schillebeeckx. Good liberal Christian theology should be radically inclusive, not with the exclusiveness of indifference, but with the inclusiveness of Jesus Christ.

Inclusiveness will always be less than real until it is embedded in Christian community, in a church open to the world. This is the crucial challenge to churches which are often as obviously out of touch with a younger generation as they have ever been. Challenges are perhaps best met by considered and effective action, rather than embarrassed wringing of ecclesiastical hands.

It goes without saying that in producing these papers I have been deeply indebted as always to colleagues, friends, family, and the Pickwick publishing team. In particular, I am deeply grateful to Dr. Anthony Allison for extensive and careful scrutiny of the text, not least where consistency was complicated by the different publishing conventions of the volumes in which many of the pieces originally appeared.

—George Newlands  
*Edinburgh and Cambridge, 2014.*