

390 A question of direction?

Two of my dear friends act as ‘spiritual directors’, and neither is terribly enamoured with the term: it’s not about ‘directing’ anyone, more about ‘walking alongside’ them. But the clear implication is that the directee is actually moving, in their walk with the Lord, and is willing to question their own (and their church’s?) direction of travel.

Looking back on 60 years of Christian travel (that’s why I suggested building up a life diary^[388]) I can see a zig-zag pattern, plus one cul-de-sac that required a total U-turn. But is faith about finding the ‘right’ line and pursuing it relentlessly (whether that’s you or your church)? Or is faith more about knowing the rough direction and moving forwards(?) carefully? Shouldn’t we at least be willing to change our minds (interpretations) in response to new situations, new ideas, new understandings?

Anyway, I’m finding McLaren’s *A Generous Orthodoxy* really helpful in pointing out the church’s directional changes, mainly over the past 500 years, to see if I/we can learn from their (our?) mistakes. What he shows us is not a pretty sight, which was part of the difficulty I had when I totally lost my faith – how could all those terrible things people did to each other be a ‘good thing’?!

Being positive, the Reformation showed up how the Church was saying (with considerable force!) that what *they* said was the truth and anyone who dared to think otherwise was wrong. [Historians, look away now...] So, just as the Enlightenment said that, by thinking, we could learn new things, so the Protestants said that we could study the Bible and it – rather than the Church authorities – would show us what was right.

But as I hope I’ve convinced you (well, I’ve convinced myself), what ‘the Bible says’ should more accurately be described as ‘my(our) *interpretation* of the Bible’. And as the Enlightenment came up with new understandings of the world and how it works, our interpretations have needed to change – which is what I mean by changing our direction.

Within my own lifetime I have seen the (biblical) conservative/liberal divide, and McLaren helpfully shows the massive effect of this in the USA, and how it has related to politics, which still has massive implications – even for the world as a whole.

The problem is [political historians, look away now...] what ‘they’ say must, by definition, be wrong, and so when power switches, the policies switch, and each side compares their best with the opposition’s worst. Sadly, churches have done something similar, except that Protestants, in working out their own interpretations, have then split from other Protestants who are ‘wrong’... and then they have split again...

So the ‘generous’ part of McLaren’s title is a plea towards comparing our own worst with other people’s (other groups’) best, to see if we can alter our own direction. Maybe there’s a chance that the church will survive, despite all we’ve managed to do, plus a chance that maybe the world will survive!