

## Alec Vidler

### On Christian Faith and Secular Despair

Born in Rye, Sussex, son of a shipping businessman, Alec Vidler (1899-1991) was educated at Sutton Valence School, Kent, read theology at Selwyn College, Cambridge (B.A. 1921), then trained for the Anglican ministry at Wells Theological College. He disliked Wells and transferred to the Oratory of the Good Shepherd, Cambridge, an Anglo-Catholic community of celibates, and was ordained priest in 1923. He retained a life-time affection for the celibate monkish life, never marrying but having a wide range of friends, including Malcolm Muggeridge, who was at Selwyn with him. Muggeridge's father was a prominent Labourite and Vidler imbibed leftist sympathies in that circle. His first curacy was in Newcastle, working in the slums. He soon came to love his work with working class parishioners and was reluctantly transferred to St Aidan's Birmingham, where he became involved in a celebrated stoush with the bishop E. W. Barnes, himself a controversialist of note. Vidler's Anglo-Catholic approach to ritual clashed with Barnes's evangelicalism. Vidler began a prolific career of publication in the 1920s and 30s. In 1931 he joined friends like Wilfred Ward at the Oratory House in Cambridge, steeping himself in religious history and theology, including that of Reinhold Niebuhr and "liberal Catholicism". In 1939 Vidler became warden of St Deiniol's Library, Hawarden (founded by a legacy from Gladstone) and also editor of the leading Anglican journal *Theology*, which he ran until 1964, exerting considerable progressive influence across those years. He also facilitated a number of religious think-tanks in these, and later, years. In 1948 he was appointed canon of St George's Chapel, Windsor, where he set up "his own unofficial theological college, which comprised middle-aged ordination candidates known as 'the Doves', or, less charitably, 'Vidler's Vipers'".<sup>1</sup> In 1956 he was invited to become Dean of King's College, Cambridge. He lectured in divinity and plunged into college life, attempting to combat the increasingly aggressive secularity of the student body: "The beard, the flashing eyes, the black shirt, the white tie, all bring Alec irresistibly to mind, striding along King's Parade... In these last years he remained a doughty controversialist and one glimpsed the almost puckish spirit of someone who was never a respecter of persons".<sup>2</sup> He retired to Rye in 1967, leading an active life (mayor of Rye for some years), his beard and long habit making him a conspicuous figure. He died in 1991.<sup>3</sup>

\* \* \*

Alec Vidler was a distinguished church historian. Although he disclaimed being a theologian, he was deeply versed in religious knowledge, writing and preaching on Christian belief and doctrine as well as being an authority on Catholic Modernism. He disliked being labelled in any way. In his early church career he was often dubbed an Anglo-Catholic, and later a "liberal Catholic" or simply a "liberal Anglican", then (around 1940) an advocate of Neo-orthodoxy, and after that of Christian Radicalism. He was, as has been well said, never the slave of fashionable notions and never a party activist.<sup>4</sup> His overall position became, it could be argued, an advocate of a synthesised Anglicanism that embodied the more authentic elements of Catholic Modernism, including acceptance of

---

<sup>1</sup> Oxford DNB.

<sup>2</sup> *Times* obituary (29 July, 1991), p.16.

<sup>3</sup> For his life see, in addition to the above sources, A. R. Vidler, *Scenes from a Clerical Life: An Autobiography* (London, Collins, 1977).

<sup>4</sup> David L. Edwards, "Theology under Dr Vidler", *Theology*, 68 (1965), p.7 and passim. This was a special issue commemorating his work for *Theology*.

genuinely scholarly biblical criticism and history, and reconciliation between religious experience and a broader philosophical account of life and the nature of things.

He felt that the latter point was too often ignored. In this respect he had much in common with the English modernist Baron Friedrich von Hügel (1852-1925). Vidler said of von Hügel :

[He]placed himself in the vanguard of the modernist movement...It was just in so far as it ignored or treated with indifference the ontological reality of the supernatural world and the objectivity and transcendence of God, that von Hügel became ill at ease.<sup>5</sup>

Vidler discussed the multifarious types of Christianity in his great book *The Church in an Age of Revolution: 1789 to the Present Day* (Penguin, 1961). From his writings and memoirs it appears that his own position was sturdily in the Anglican tradition, and at variance with other schools such as liberal Protestantism and extreme Catholic Modernism, about which he nevertheless wrote with insight and understanding. As an historian he accepted the usual view that the Church of England occupied a unique place among Christian denominations. When at the Reformation Western Christendom broke into Catholic and Protestant parts, “the Church of England adopted a middle course and attempted to combine the two forces which elsewhere were regarded as incompatible”. Amid the shifting fortunes of history, it had continued this course: “Its historical formularies, as well as its subsequent and recent official pronouncements, are generally marked by a studied ambiguity, which is evidently interpreted in an inclusive sense...The consequence of its singular history is that Catholicism and Protestantism have each maintained a position within the Church of England as living religions, and at the same time neither has officially and finally been bound up with a hard and narrow theological system. The latitude of Anglican theology has been wider than any other Christian Church, and room has been found for those who are broadly attached to Christianity but not to Catholicism or Protestantism in particular”.<sup>6</sup> This was written in 1934, in his influential book *The Modernist Movement in the Roman Church*.

For Vidler, modern Anglican theology and attitudes generally had been shaped by the nineteenth century “Catholic Revival” or Oxford movement, intensely spiritual but at first content to revive traditional Catholic orthodoxy. It was, in Vidler’s memorable phrase, “academic, clerical and conservative”.<sup>7</sup> Then came the influential and pioneering *Lux Mundi* (light of the world), 1891, “the first considerable attempt to adapt Catholic teaching in its Anglican form to the requirements of modern knowledge”.<sup>8</sup>

Vidler wrote much on the theology of F. D. Maurice, whose stream of liberal theology influenced not only the *Lux Mundi* High Church theologians, but also flowed into a kind of Broad Church theology that was not unlike Adolph Harnack’s European liberal Protestantism. (His book on *The Theology of F.D. Maurice* was to come out in 1949, when he was warden of St Deiniol’s ). Maurice was one of his heroes. As remarked by Neville Masterman: “Like Maurice he has often championed a minority view

---

<sup>5</sup> Alec R. Vidler, *The Modernist Movement in the Roman Church: Its Origins and Outcome* (Cambridge University Press, 1934), p.208. The book deals mainly with Alfred Loisy (1857-1940) and George Tyrrell (1861-1909), but also includes English modernists such as von Hügel, Alfred Fawkes (1849-1930) and Maude Petre (1863-1942, a close friend and biographer of Tyrrell).

<sup>6</sup> *Modernist Movement*, pp.241-242.

<sup>7</sup> Vidler, *The Church in an Age of Revolution: 1789 to the Present* (Penguin,1961), p.52.

<sup>8</sup> *Modernist Movement*, p.243.

which has afterwards become popular; and as a result he seems to have lost interest in it. His method, though, has been all his own. Thus Vidler has been regarded as obscurantist when Liberal modernism was in fashion, then a modernist among obscurantists, an establishmentarian among disestablishers and a disestablisher among establishmentarians".<sup>9</sup> Thus Vidler parted company with Harnack's Liberal Protestantism when it advocated a return to the pure teachings of Christ and a jettisoning of subsequent dogma, liturgy, institutionalism, and all that "useless addendum" in Matthew Arnold's phrase. Vidler was more in sympathy with modernism's essential defence of Catholic tradition "as a legitimate development of the initial response made to the impact of Jesus upon the lives and spirits" of people, while agreeing with its reformist agenda.<sup>10</sup>

Vidler's book on Catholic Modernism (1934) dealt briefly with some modernist influence upon Anglican thought. This was mainly upon a small group of High Anglicans who sympathised with modernism's attempt to adapt received Catholic theology to modern science and biblical scholarship, for which of course it had received Papal condemnation and repression (most notably in the papal encyclical *Pascendi gregis*, 1907). There were two main directions, Vidler observed, in which modernist influence upon Anglicanism could be traced: "(i) in the claim that biblical criticism must be an autonomous science and that the Catholic critic must be allowed the same freedom as other critics; and (ii) in the development of the argument from experience to the truth of Catholic dogma" (*Modernist Movement*, p.251). Among those High Anglicans who followed the modernist movement with sympathetic interest were the now little known figures of G. C. Rawlinson, T.A. Lacey and Will Spens.

Vidler himself was obviously influenced by the movement that he spent so much time studying, but he also accepted that it was in its own way a product of its time and culture. This was both a positive and a negative. As thinkers of their time the modernists took fresh approaches and emphasised the need to reconcile religion with contemporary thought and feelings. But they also shared the defects of fashionable vogues such as "pragmatism, Bergsonianism, and philosophical anti-intellectualism... Thus the modernists tended in general to emphasize out of due proportion the doctrine of divine immanence, the purely evolutionary aspects of religion, and the practical and empirical aspects of dogma... If dogma is rightly to be regarded as in the first instance a rationalization of religious experience, theology must also show the reasonableness of believing in the ultimate reality of the object of this experience"(p.255).

Vidler approvingly quoted Spens's nuanced modernist approach. In his *Belief and Practice* (1915) Spens, according to Vidler, arrived at the view that some of George Tyrrell's methods could lead to conclusions that were less subversive of traditional orthodoxy. (Tyrrell was a controversial English Catholic Modernist). Spens's apologetic "is based not on any metaphysical structure, nor on an appeal to the New Testament as itself justifying a supernatural Christology, but to the whole stream of Christian experience as requiring the theology, which is its intellectual expression, as the most adequate means of explaining and co-ordinating that experience. Religious experience, not a body of information or a series of propositions which were once upon a time revealed *ab extra*, constitutes the data of theology". Like science, Christian theology must pass the test that it produce a "sound

<sup>9</sup> Neville C. Masterman, "The Mental Processes of the Reverend F. D. Maurice", *Theology*, 68 (1965), p.53.

<sup>10</sup> W. N. Pittenger, "Modernism", *ibid*, p.55 and *passim*. As Pittenger points out, Catholic Modernism arose largely in reaction against Harnack's narrow and culturally conditioned theology (eg, in the work of Loisy and Tyrrell).

general outlook”, or “must be compatible with a general philosophy of the universe” (p.261). Vidler would return to the issue of science and religion in later writings.

The onset of the Second World War provoked Vidler into anguished ruminations concerning the crisis in western civilization and religion. In February 1941 he ran a mission to students at Liverpool University. His addresses were collected (at first against his inclinations) into a book, entitled *Secular Despair and Christian Faith*, one of his most spontaneous works, printed virtually as given. Although church people in Britain were often complacent, Vidler believed that religion had become too diffused and unfocused. He noted that only a small minority now went to church or were practising members of any Christian communion. The country had become in practice secular, as had the west generally. How had this come about?

He chose the era of the Renaissance and Reformation as the defining watershed. As an historian he was aware of the pitfalls in ignoring continuities, and the folly of romanticising the Middle Ages. Nevertheless, he believed that the onset of secularization in the west could be traced to the breakdown of “the medieval synthesis”. As he wrote of the medieval era:

...allow for all that was sordid and cruel and primitive, it is still the case the Europe was then a whole as it never has been since. It had an integral culture. It was bound together by a common social system, a common religion, language, art, architecture, philosophy, law, literature, common institutions of all kinds. It was a hierarchical society in the sense that it was like a great pyramid, and at the top was God transcendent over the world, man’s maker and judge and redeemer... This visible world was dependent on another – invisible – world; that was taken for granted. To deny it was blasphemy. And blasphemy as well as faith was a terrific reality. It is almost impossible for us, who live in a world where faith and blasphemy of this kind have become practically meaningless, to imagine what the medieval atmosphere was like. For when God has been banished or transformed into a very doubtful hypothesis, blasphemy, too, ceases to have any point except as an idiotic survival, and sin becomes paltry and loses its magnificence when it is no longer rebellion against the living God – and death is sentimentalized when it is no longer a fateful transition to an eternal destiny.<sup>11</sup>

Vidler was no backward-looking romantic. He accepted that historical change was inevitable. The Renaissance and Reformation were necessary, in many ways beneficent: “The medieval synthesis was rotting from within... it had served its turn, and it had to give way to a new experiment”. But the underlying religious consciousness persisted for centuries. Integration did not sharply pass into disintegration. There were rather a series of fresh and partial integrations: the humanist culture of the Renaissance, the new religious formations arising out of the Reformation, the rationalistic culture of the Enlightenment, the romantic, revolutionary and liberal movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth century. But a fundamental disintegration was continuing beneath the surface. By the warring twentieth century, “it had become almost meaningless to speak about an integral European culture... The arts and the sciences, having achieved their autonomy, had all gone their own way; there was no common philosophy or religion; the one Church of the Middle Ages had given way to a multiplicity of disintegrating sects, and faith in God, so far from being the keystone in any arch, was an optional ornament which some people still cared to adorn a thoroughly secularized existence... We had arrived at a material bounty, or at least at the possibility of it, but spiritually and

---

<sup>11</sup> Vidler, *Secular Despair and Christian Faith* (London, Student Christian Movement Press, 1941), pp.10-11.

morally we had arrived at the wasteland” (pp.12-14). A sense of despair had seized people. They coped with it, very often, by the demonic integrations of totalitarian ideologies, mystic idolatry of the state and power. Tyranny or slavery was preferred to unbridled chaos. Even the British, with their pragmatic complacency and hopes for a welfare or leisure state, were being swept up into this whirlpool as the world was sucked into another world war.

What humans had to face up to was that, as a species, they were both susceptible to dreams of perfection, but fundamentally incapable of resolving the problem of their own destiny. (He borrowed the Greek term *Abraxas* to describe this law of contradiction). Man’s creative powers turned into flagrant self-destruction. The wonders of modern civilization had been accompanied by monstrous wars and atrocities. Humans left to themselves become inhuman or worse. This was not a present phenomenon but a permanent predicament in history. This was in fact the real meaning of “original sin”, a matter of human pride and vanity constantly undoing our best intentions. Vidler told his audience that despair about this predicament was the first essential step towards exiting the realm of fantasy into what was – despite the scepticism of the age – the realm of fact, “the first essential step towards getting beyond man’s delusions to God’s reality” (p.20). His emotional message was that humans must recognise the unpalatable fact that it was only by a basic act of despair, “of repentance and submission to the living God” that they could come to live from a new centre, one of compassion rather than egotism (p.24). In this there were undeniable echoes of Karl Barth’s theology of crisis.<sup>12</sup> Vidler in fact was instrumental in getting Barth to send an open letter to Christians in Britain in 1941 – the same year as these lectures – encouraging resistance to Nazism, while criticising shallow sentiments about the virtues of western civilization.

In 1941 Vidler was not optimistic about Christianity’s chances of survival. Theology had badly neglected important social issues. It had failed to develop a Christian sociology. Attempts were being made to rectify this. (He had written earlier about the social doctrines of some types of Catholic Modernism, and would continue this theme much later in his book *A Century of Social Catholicism, 1820-1920*, published in 1964). He detected a “real fermentation” of thought going on in the churches of the west (p.81). Issues such as social justice, a planned society, needed to be addressed: “All would agree that in the long run Christians must aim at the growth of a new Christendom – which does not mean the resuscitation of a medieval Christendom or of feudalism – but at a unified culture inspired by and based on the authority of the Christian tradition and adapted to the changed technical and economic conditions of a new society” (pp.82-83). However he detected no signs of a great Christian revival in Britain or Europe (he said little about America). The future was likely to be secularist: “you cannot reverse in the course of a year or two the process of European secularizations which has been going on for generations” (p.84). As the secularized society proceeded to its final and sterile disintegration, Christians could only hope for a Phoenix-like revival from the ashes.

---

<sup>12</sup> Vidler in a later work quoted Barth on human frailties and folly. It was only when people had taken in the perils of their existence, only when they knew they were hopelessly lost, only then (said Barth) that the preacher could proclaim the Word of God, which came from beyond the horizons of this world: Vidler, *20<sup>th</sup> Century Defenders of the Faith: Some Theological Fashions Considered in the Robertson Lectures for 1964* (Glasgow University) [London, SCM press, 1965], pp.86-87. Vidler expressed such sentiments, although he was by no means an uncritical follower of Barth.

Vidler often considered the relationship between science and religion. While he accepted that science was widely seen as a dissolving agent upon religious belief, he did not accept that this was a necessary or logical consequence of science. He had respect for science. As he said in a series of lectures given in Cambridge in 1949, and published as *Christian Belief*: “You will not hear from me any of those crabbing and belittling observations which some, at any rate, of the camp-followers of theology... are wont to make about the magnificent achievements of the natural and human sciences”.<sup>13</sup> In fact theology had only itself to blame for not making comparable advance. This was because theologians had simply not done the same amount of hard work and research, or given the same “disinterested devotion” to their subject as had scientists on theirs. Nevertheless science did not have all the answers. To exist as a human being was to be surrounded by mystery (as Albert Schweitzer had famously said). There was such a thing as incomprehensible reality. Vidler held “that when account is taken of all that is known or that is scientifically knowable, there still remain mysterious depths in the whole universe and in human existence which mortal man has not fathomed and which there is no reason to suppose he is capable of completely fathoming”. The essential function of Christian belief was to cast light on those mysterious depths; or rather to testify to “the shining of sufficient light” to draw people to go on seeking, to direct and keep people “in the way of finding”. Vidler’s whole approach was this “way of finding” (pp.11-12). The important thing for religion was not a set of hard and fast rules or abstract creeds, but a flexible way of constantly searching out the truth, a ceaseless striving after renewal. He had come to this conclusion after deep study of a range of Continental theologians. As his life went on he became even less attached to “abstract creeds”, or “rounded-off” systems of doctrines, and ever more flexible and ecumenical.

He was unimpressed by “proofs” of God’s existence. No such “proofs” could completely satisfy the criteria of rigorous philosophical analysis. Vidler was a great believer in applying the highest intellectual standards to religion (and not, as many sects did, accepting the shallowest beliefs): “No belief about the nature of the world, no interpretation of all the facts of existence, is intellectually compelling or demonstrative. There are difficulties and unresolved enigmas in every great creed... Probability is the guide of life” (p.13). Thus we come to the necessity for doubt. This was something that so many Christians failed to comprehend. It was through our God-given intellects that we were enabled to doubt, “and that is a high and human prerogative”. All belief was founded on preliminary doubt (as the theologian Susan Stebbing remarked). Sound faith would only grow after facing doubt: “if in this or any other time there is to be a renewal of Christian belief, of faith in a Living God, it will be in part the outcome of searching and rigorous doubting” (pp.14-15).

This doubt should be applied like a blowtorch to the many bewitching doctrines of so-called spiritualists and mystics. There had been a batch of such doctrines floating about from late-nineteenth century Britain, and the West generally, ranging from theosophy to Druidism. Vidler was ready to appreciate the spiritual truths in other religions and philosophies (such as Buddhism). But he deplored the uncritical acceptance of much that was around: “Because the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Christ there can be no excuse now for confusing him with *mana*, with weird impersonal manifestations of psychic energy, with ideological dynamism, or with vague mystical sentiments”. As the Gospel said, test the spirits whether they are of God. “Inspiration” as such was not a criterion of truth: “Claims to inspiration must be tested by the character and teaching of Christ, by the ways of

---

<sup>13</sup> Vidler, *Christian Belief* (London, SCM Press, 1954; 1<sup>st</sup> ed., 1950), p10. Following references in text are to this source.

God's working which he has revealed, and by the witness of the apostolic testimony". Individuals alone could hardly expect to overcome the many barriers to attaining the full health and harmony that was the gift of God. Higher truths were more likely to be achieved by a corporate process, the work of groups and communities overcoming the rival ambitions, impulses and desires that were the lot of humanity. This was part of Vidler's defence of organised religion as opposed to the wild individualism of some Protestant sects. But humans would never attain to a final harmony or completion, even the greatest saints: "To live here is to move, to learn, to change. Both individuals and institutions, however, are always being tempted to settle down, to close their minds, to become petrified... It is the work of the Holy Spirit to disturb a man or an institution that is becoming settled or stiff... The Holy Spirit works like an acid on all complacency. He points and presses men onwards into the unknown" (*Christian Belief*, pp.66-67).

What had Vidler to say about the failings and apparent decline of religion? He freely admitted the historic flaws in the history of the Christian church. Some came about because of the necessary need of the church to organise itself, to move from the inspiring but chaotic groups of the early church into a more effective broader organisation. As he said, for the sake of making a clear impact on the mind of humanity, and in the interest of the church's universal mission, it had to be definitely organised, to have a "palpable structure and ethos". However with new possibilities of good also came new possibilities of evil. The new structures also released powers and ambitions that the church had not had to handle before: "the history of the church has been darkened by all sorts of collapses and corruptions. Worst of all, and the root of all, have been lack of trust in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Life-giver of the church, and the dependence of churchmen on other forces, and their greater attachment to a past which is obsolete than to the eternal which is always renovating" (*Christian Belief*, p.83). (Vidler here anticipated the famous remark made by his friend George Orwell in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, 1937, that, as with the Christian religion, the worst advertisement for socialism was its adherents. Certainly Vidler often expressed similar criticisms of his church and churchmen. "I am bored with parsons", he was to remark in a 1962 BBC TV show).

With large scale organisation came the temptation for the church to forget its distinctive character and to conform to the manners and methods of political systems, to abandon persuasion for coercion. Forgetting that its living spirit was God as its guide and governor, "the church allowed those men who were entrusted with the responsibility of leadership and government under [God] to acquire and wield unchecked forms of power". They set themselves up as lords over the church: "This corrosion was the more subtle in that the language of piety and the docile sentiments of the faithful could easily be exploited in the interests of the hierarchy's or the pope's will to power. Nor is it only popes and bishops who have lorded it over God's people, but priests and deacons and laymen, too". Petrification of doctrine and rituals also set in: "Thus the Bible and the creeds can be treated as infallible oracles like the Koran, instead of as witnesses which the Holy Spirit will enable the church to interpret in a living way and in the light of fresh insights and discoveries". Rites could become mechanical and even instruments that divided sects, instead of witnesses to the universal scope of Christ's saving work "and to the unity of mankind in the body of which he is the Head". However Vidler also saw the opposite danger – that beliefs and rites could become so attuned to the changing culture and climate of the ages, so relativistic and trendy, that they became futile: "The church knows that it is not just a fluctuating product of historical relativity, but is a witness to the finality of God and his Law and of God's work in Christ for the race and for all ages... Therefore there must always be a note of exclusion as well as of inclusion in the church" (*Christian Belief*, pp.83-84).

There was in Vidler's work, as in much other writing of the time, a recognition of religious decline, but no really incisive or deep analysis of the sociology of this change. It was a question of passing on hints, and valuable insights, but nothing systematic. Getting the word out, interpreting the Christian message more accessibly to people who were no longer so exposed to it: that seemed the greater priority. In his work at St Deiniol's, Windsor and Cambridge, he tried to gather Christians together in constant dialogue and renewal; to facilitate "faith's courteous and sensitive encounter with unbelief", searching for a "contemporary presentation of the everlasting Gospel".<sup>14</sup>

He had spoken of a sense of crisis in the churches during the 1930s, and urged that theology must change as the turbulent age around it changed: "In *God's Judgement on Europe* [1940] Dr Vidler, like Mr [T.E.] Eliot, saw Christendom destroyed not only by the militantly hostile creeds of Hitler and Stalin, but also by the secular ethos of a western liberalism in decay. A typical reference was to 'a society which is being thoroughly collectivized and depersonalized by its subservience to the power of the machine' (p.49) - a doom for which political and economic planning was no real solution". In this book "The Divine wrath was prophetically observed, as it tore down the rotten structures of a Europe which had abandoned the Faith. In his description of the inability of liberal humanism to cope with this Apocalypse, Dr Vidler came very close to Amos or Jeremiah"<sup>15</sup>.

In his book of 1950 *Christian Belief*, Vidler agreed that there was a "public sense of grievance that the church is not what it might be or ought to be". It was said to be boring and stale, no longer meeting the needs of the time, divided and confused. People connected the church, "not with the disturbing and renewing encounter of a Holy God", but with unattractive services, tedious homilies, the smell of hymn-books, old memories of strict observance: "And there is worse than that. The church makes large and lofty claims which are neutralized and even made to look absurd by its own conditions and its feeble practice". It claimed to have received a divine commission and to possess the secret of community, "but in a period like this when immense social changes are taking place and immeasurable disasters threaten...no plain word is forthcoming, but only what sound like archaisms or platitudes". The churches could not reconcile themselves one with another, "let alone reconcile the world". So the grave question must be asked "whether the church is anything but an institution like gothic or gothic-revival architecture which still survives from a civilization that is rapidly passing away - an institution which has not yet been replaced but will be replaced", attractive only to those who had nostalgia for the past, "or are without the courage or imagination to adapt themselves to the present and the future".

Here Vidler was making a call to arms to fellow believers to revivify their ideas and the church. Part of the problem was the church failings already alluded to. Churchmen had tried to make their church, and themselves, higher than the Trinity itself. Yet the bible had warned that the church should always be subordinate to, and dependent upon, the Holy Spirit. Vidler blamed the divisions within the church partly upon a failure to comprehend this problem: "different beliefs about the church are rooted in different beliefs or unbeliefs about the Holy Spirit". Vidler also put some blame upon society itself. People had become more hedonistic and self-centred. They were no longer prepared to make the sacrifices that the church demanded: "There is that in us which resents the uncanny assertion that there is present and active in the human conscience the Spirit of a Holy God,

---

<sup>14</sup> *Theology*, 68 (1965), p.2; and Edwards, below, p.11.

<sup>15</sup> David L. Edwards, "Theology under Dr Vidler", *Theology*, 68 (1965), pp.4-5.



who is pressing upon us when we would be left to ourselves, who is pressing us towards a way of common life in which we shall everywhere be responsible (not to the State nor to the will of a majority but) to an authority above all human authorities, and everywhere too responsible for one another, when all we wanted was to mind our own business and to pursue our own noble or sordid or dreamy enterprises” ( *Christian Belief*, pp. 71-72). Vidler saw signs that the churches were beginning to transform themselves. But these signs were not enough to make him confident that the transformation would be carried through on the scale and with the speed required.

In 1956 Vidler became Dean of King’s College, Cambridge, “a post that put him at the centre of the Cambridge ecclesiastical scene, and exposed him daily to full-bloodedly intellectual unbelief, for which King’s had a reputation. In January 1958 he launched the most important network of his career, a group of radical theologians in Cambridge. His own *Essays in Liberty* (1957) had given some hints of the radicalism to come. The Cambridge group had been suggested by Hugh Montefiore and Howard Root, and also included John Burnaby and Harry Williams. After several years of deliberation the group produced *Soundings: Essays in Christian Understanding* (1962), edited by Vidler, which declared that traditional Christian theology was faced by a range of seemingly insuperable difficulties, and offered suggestions as to how these difficulties might be overcome”.<sup>16</sup>

By 1963 Vidler was referring to “the radical unbelief of the contemporary world”. He had helped to organise a course of lectures under the auspices of the Divinity Faculty of Cambridge University but addressed to a wider audience. Their purpose was not to be Christian apologetics, but – one of Vidler’s dearest goals – to plumb the depths of objections to Christianity, enabling people to seek greater understanding of the fundamental doubts to which religious faith was exposed to in a secular age. Mature belief (he felt) must genuinely face the worst that could be made against it. The sceptical case must be made even more forcibly than its exponents could put it themselves. The issues must not just be evaded, as many Christians in fact evaded them: “If there is to be a profound recovery of Christian belief – or a profound rejection of it – it will surely come out of such an experience rather than out of an awareness of only one side of the question”. The lectures were published as *Objections to Christian Belief*, and Vidler did the chapter on “Historical Objections” (the other contributors were D. M. Mackinnon of Corpus Christi, H.A. Williams of Trinity and J. S. Bezzant of St. John’s).<sup>17</sup> The topic of unbelief was much in the air at the time. About 1,500 people attended the lectures per week, up to 20% of the student body, and the book was reprinted three times in two weeks.<sup>18</sup> However the Cambridge clerics were soon eclipsed by Bishop John Robinson’s controversial (but more superficial) book *Honest to God* (1963).

In *Objections* Vidler canvassed the whole issue whether Christian faith depended upon the historical veracity of Christ’s life, crucifixion and resurrection, or whether it could be founded simply upon

---

<sup>16</sup> *Oxford DNB.*, entry on Vidler by Matthew Grimley and Sam Brewitt-Taylor. They add that *Soundings* was “the most intellectually heavyweight work that the ‘radical ferment’ in the theology of the 1960s produced, and caused a significant stir in the ecclesiastical press”, though it did not turn out, in Vidler’s later opinion, anything like as radical as originally intended.

<sup>17</sup> D. M. Mackinnon, H. A. Williams, A. R. Vidler, J.S. Bezzant, *Objections to Christian Belief* (London, Constable, 1963), pp.8-9.

<sup>18</sup> S. D. J. Green, *The Passing of Protestant England* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp.292-293. Green is recommended on the whole issue of religious decline from c.1920-1960.

Christ's teachings of certain moral and spiritual truths, and was not inescapably bound up with the historical facts of the New Testament. This issue had been a vexed one for Christianity since at least the rise of biblical criticism in the nineteenth century. Vidler was well versed in biblical scholarship and well aware of the uncertain nature of much of the evidence then available: "if we look closely into the question, we have to acknowledge that no beliefs about matters of history can be proved to be certainly true: strictly speaking, they can never have more than a very high degree of probability. Do Christians then live and die for what they must allow to be not certainly, but only probably, the case?" (*Objections*, p. 65). No believer in absolute dogmas or the claims of "infallible" popes, Vidler also admitted the subjectivities and biases that could, and did, affect historians. It was a worry to him that, unlike on the Continent, British scholars of Christian origins were almost universally clergy. As he himself knew, the elucidation of Christian origins was mostly carried on within the sound of church bells (in his case, as Dean of King's College, Cambridge, the bells of Great St Mary's and the solitary bell of King's College Chapel).

Vidler's approach – the product of a lifetime of study and contemplation – was that Christ's life must be put in the whole context of the Old and New Testaments, together with the subsequent history of the Christian movement. Judgments about the origins of Christianity needed to be influenced by assessments of the total Christian phenomenon in history. This did not make life easy. Christian history had a brighter and a darker side. On the brighter side (as even the agnostic T. H. Huxley conceded) there were the ideals of strength and patience, justice and pity for human frailty, compassion and self-sacrifice, ethical purity and nobility, the faith of martyrs and millions of followers. On the darker side, there was "the quarrelsomeness of the Christians, their intolerance, their censoriousness, their legalism, their arrogance, the blatant immorality of doctrines which they have accepted with equanimity, and the Christian Church's all too frequent resemblance to the Jewish Church which crucified Christ". Vidler admitted the dilemma that thus confronted many believers. How they responded depended on various factors. The most important (he believed) were two: (1) the enduring impression or impact made by "the person of Jesus as he is portrayed in the Gospels"; and (2) the believer's "participation in the Christian mystery as a present reality", by what they found "in the shared experience of the community of believers – it may be in the eucharistic sacrament or in the Friends' meeting house". It would depend on whether or not they found "something there which despite all puzzlements" held them and spoke to their deepest level of being. The element of participation was crucial, and might (as the theologian Paul Tillich had reflected) offset the element of incertitude and doubt. At this point Vidler commented: "And here I might interject that I often find myself more in sympathy or *en rapport* with non-Christians who have a sense of the strangeness and incertitude of our world and of the duty of a large measure of agnosticism than I do with Christians who are cocksure about their beliefs" (*Objections*, pp.74-77). He may have had in mind friends of his such as Malcolm Muggeridge or Anthony Powell.

In his book *20<sup>th</sup> Century Defenders of the Faith* (1965) Vidler revisited Catholic Modernism, as well as English Liberal Catholicism, Neo-Orthodoxy, and Christian Radicalism – styles of thought that he had studied and been influenced by, and some of which he had participated in. The book also served as a place of personal reminiscences, and reflection on the modern age. He seemed in sympathy with the judgment of the English Liberal Catholic scholar John Neville Figgis (1886-1919), who in *Civilisation at the Cross Roads* (1912) had said: "We live in an age of unparalleled anarchy both moral and intellectual". Modern intellectuals (Figgis thought) could agree in nothing but rejection of religion (a sweeping verdict but characteristic of *fin de siècle* thought). Scientific materialism was influential but

not widely held as a creed. Beyond that, said Figgis, all was chaos: “Positivists, agnostics, idealists, pessimists, optimists, sceptics, theists, atheists jostle one another and nobody knows what his next-door neighbour thinks”. In Figgis’s view – and Vidler seemed to agree – religion had been undermined philosophically by the rise of naturalism, founded on the success of physical science. Naturalism postulated the uniformity of nature, and this predominance of a single method had created prejudice against Christian faith. However, this was too simple. The universe existed on different levels. Scientific naturalism was qualified to deal with the mechanisms of nature, but it was powerless to account for the deeper spiritual aspects of human existence: “Either the whole world, seen no less than unseen, is conceived as personal, spiritual, alive, ever fresh... or else it is seen as mechanical, impersonal, dead... The one is the world of Catholic Christianity, the other that of Pagan philosophy or scientific fatalism and its more spiritual or at least decorative variety - Pantheism”.<sup>19</sup>

Vidler had been involved with movements in England that were roughly described as Neo-Orthodoxy and Christian Radicalism. As he was at pains to point out, these were not at all organised or coherent movements as such, but rather a variety of trends and loose dialogues between people with diverse positions. Neo-Orthodoxy could be described as the predominant fashion in theology during the Second World War and for a decade or so afterwards. Its frame of mind as a biblical theology was to assume the foundations of theology to be secure, and then confidently to work at repairing or reshaping the superstructure. It focused not only on important matters such as the ecumenical movement and church unity, but also tended to become obsessed with issues of worship, ritual, ecclesiastical and episcopal matters. Vidler encountered these preoccupations in his role as editor of *Theology* at the time. As he recalled: “I used to say to my friends that I was disconcerted by the fact that theological students, the younger clergy and the like, when I conversed with them, never seemed to shock me by coming out with any startling novelties or disturbing thoughts: on the contrary, I could shock them by the things I said much more than they ever shocked me by anything they said. It should have been the other way on, as I was now a fuddy-duddy who should be allergic to new ideas”.<sup>20</sup> Of course what Vidler really thought was that much more fundamental questions had been addressed by thinkers of earlier decades, even centuries – historical matters that were no longer being thoroughly taught. True, some basic issues were being addressed abroad, as in the work of theologians such as Paul Tillich, Martin Buber and Dietrich Bonhoeffer (Bonhoeffer’s papers from prison, written before his martyrdom by the Nazis, had been published in England in 1953): “But none of this seemed to make much difference to our English theological climate” (p.103).

Vidler was essentially a facilitator. He described how, soon after returning to Cambridge in 1956, he gathered together a group of younger theologians who felt much as he did “about the lethargic or ostrich-like condition of English, or at least anglican, theology” (p.104). They began meeting to discuss more radical ways of raising, if not necessarily resolving, fundamental issues. This culminated, as we have seen, in the publication of *Soundings* in 1962. The term “Christian

---

<sup>19</sup> Quoted from Figgis in Vidler, *20<sup>th</sup> Century Defenders of the Faith: Some Theological Fashions Considered in the Robertson Lectures for 1964* (London, SCM Press, 1965), pp.61-63. Vidler saw an affinity between the neglected Figgis and thinkers such as the Anglican P.T. Forsyth and the Catholic G. K Chesterton: “All three were highly rhetorical and addicted to startling epigrams. They supplied a wholesome challenge and corrective to prevalent trends in Christian apologetic, but they tended to depreciate the need for restating the grounds for Christian belief in as cool and lucid and precise a manner as was possible” (p.64). The reference to cool, lucid and precise gives an insight into Vidler’s personality as well as thought (although he could be a combative public debater).

<sup>20</sup> *Defenders of the Faith*, p.102. Page numbers in the text hereafter refer to this text.

Radicalism” was coined at this time, in the midst of the *Honest to God* debate. David Edwards used the term in an essay about the uproar. Vidler believed that the whole debate, which evoked strong reactions ranging from rejoicing to horror, at least raised hopes of a “new deal” in the honest presentation of the Christian faith, “a salutary upheaval in the Church” (p.107). From about this time he began to participate in television discussions of religion. Also at about the same time, the context of Christian debate was being significantly influenced by the appearance of searching new writings (Vidler thought Gregor Smith to be an original and radical thinker, while a more general impact was being made by the posthumous writings of Teilhard de Chardin). More tumultuous was the ongoing reforms in Catholicism initiated by Pope John XXIII, which had just culminated in the Second Vatican Council (1962-65).

Vidler had considerable sympathy with the new “subjectivism” that had come into theology from younger scholars (with earlier impetus from Bonhoeffer). This enabled ordinary Christians to escape from the more “objectivist”, philosophically tough, theologies, preoccupied with grounds for belief in God or the problem of evil. It was now possible for Christians to understand their faith “as an individual, subjective vision of the kind of life worth living, which they derive from Jesus, and which gives them insight and courage to encounter whatever comes to them day by day in their personal experiences and their personal relations” (p.114). As H. E. Root suggested, these new voices were more in touch with deeper feelings in Christendom, and part of a wider reaction against organised religion. In Vidler’s words: “Christians who accept this point of view are enabled to feel as insecure and so, paradoxically, as much at home in this secular, empirical, changing world as anyone else. They are no longer burdened with a sense of being in this age aliens or survivors who need still to be buttressed by archaic beliefs and ruled by traditional or collective *mores* and sheltered in the sanctuary of a stable institution. There is exhilaration in knowing that you are free and open to whatever may come, and no longer wedded to doctrines that are liable to be shaken by evidence or argument and to an ethic that is based on law instead of love” (p.116). This, it will be seen, was something of a retreat from his earlier emphasis on collectivity. Elements of Tyrrell’s thought also surfaced here.

Vidler believed that religious studies should include all the options and available readings, not just the objectivist or subjectivist way of responding, but also sceptical, theistic readings and attention to the world’s other religions, Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim and the rest. (This was prophetic of the way in which modern universities have since gone). Vidler refused to come down on one side or the other, always trying to see the validity in each school, affirming rather than denying (in Coleridge’s famous maxim). Nor was he “selling out to secularism”: “I can see that we are at present sociologically conditioned to an almost exclusive preoccupation with the secular, and for that reason – and with the past and the future in mind, not to mention the eternal – I mean to keep myself open to the possibility that more is available to human experience than is comprised within the secular perspective”. What made him tick, what in fact had always made him tick, was history. He remained always an historian: “It is the whole Christian movement in history of which I am thankful to be an inheritor... That is why of all the defenders of the Christian religion whom I have considered in these lectures it is the Roman Catholic Modernists with whom I feel most kinship, not least because they could not see the end of their enterprise” (pp.120-121).