



The *Via Media*

Johnston McKay

I must declare a number of interests at the outset. Andrew McLellan, who commissioned *Outside Verdict*, is one of my oldest and closest friends. I am a member of the Baird Trust which provided some of the funding to make the book possible. And in the course of the book Harry Reid, whom I count as a good friend, uses a number of flattering adjectives to describe me when he is reporting things I said to him in the course of conversations as the book was in preparation.

Harry Reid is a journalist, and journalists like clarity and certainties which can be, if not expressed in sound bites then at least encapsulated in a few short sentences. So I am not surprised that a number of people in the Church whom Harry has found attractive are the sort of people who appeal to someone with his journalistic approach. He himself wonders¹ 'Maybe I am a sucker, as some will already have suspected, for evangelical certainties'. Harry Reid concludes a chapter in which he touches on what he called 'the vexed issue of morality' with the conclusion that a case could be made out that as far as the Church of Scotland is concerned 'its ministry and its eldership, and indeed its ordinary members, could be doing much more to uphold moral certainties than they are.'²

My own view is that the sort of moral standards which Harry would like to see stressed more are standards of *sexual* morality, and ones on which I am not sure the biblical tradition is as clear as he thinks it is. Nor does it occupy as large a place in the biblical tradition as it is often assumed to occupy when compared with the structures you will find against, for example, political and social exploitation. I am also not convinced that it is helpful either to the church's image or to those who are often struggling with issues of sexual orientation and morality for the church to be as dogmatic as it is clear some of those who spoke to Harry want the church to be. I am still haunted by the evidence that on a previous occasion when the General Assembly approved a deliverance which homosexuals perceived as hostile to them, the



number of people seeking help and counselling from one Church of Scotland agency dropped almost to nil. I realise, of course, that there are differing attitudes to homosexuality within the Kirk, but it is vital that those who take a view different from my own express it in ways which are not pastorally damaging, just as it is important that those who share my more liberal views on homosexuality express them in a way which does not substitute one judgmentalism for another.

Harry Reid's liking for clarity appears towards the end of the book when he writes ³ 'I realise that I have been confused. When I was a journalist, I was used to looking at what might be called targets. This was wrong; that was wrong. This had to be done; that had to be done. The Church of Scotland is so infuriatingly elusive; it is not a meaningful target at all'.

It was precisely because those of us who have spent a lifetime in the Church of Scotland understand its ways and realise just how elusive it is that Andrew McLellan was right to look for an 'outside' verdict on it. Insiders' verdicts inevitably are too sympathetic and too tempted to accept as elusiveness what is simply lack of leadership and direction, and too willing to confuse inconsistency with paradox. So, while there is a sense in which we do have to be wary of Harry's journalistic liking for clarity, we also have to recognise that there has been a temptation to dismiss his own clear conclusions and opinions as stemming from the outsider's ignorance. That sort of patronising approach is both insulting to a distinguished journalist, and also sounds rather like the sort of attitude Robert Runcie was so critical of in his enthronement sermon at Canterbury Cathedral in 1982 when he warned against 'a strident self-confidence which suggests that we have nothing to learn' and using 'a loud voice rather than the quiet reason of the heart'.⁴

As Harry Reid himself admits, he is someone who likes to look for pragmatic solutions, and in his search for a pragmatic solution to the Church of Scotland's declining membership and influence, he makes an underlying assumption: that there are courses of action the Church could adopt, decisions it could take or policies it could implement



which would help reverse the trends. In other words: if the Church of Scotland *would only change* then then future would be brighter.

I am far from convinced by that underlying assumption, first of all because, as I will explain below, I am not convinced that the Church of Scotland, as at present structured, it capable of change. Let me here content myself with a current joke: ‘How many Church of Scotland ministers does it take to change a light bulb?’ ‘Change?’

The second reason I am sceptical of the assumption that there is something the Church can do to halt its decline is that it does not take account of the kind of society and the sort of secular world in which the Church lives today.

When we interviewed a number of people for a television programme I produced about Harry’s book and its critique of the Church and recommendations for reform we were told by most of them that this is not an age when people join organisations, that there was an underlying belief in God which did not reflect itself in commitment to religious institutions, and that it should never be forgotten that whereas European Christianity may be in decline, in the United States, Africa and Korea the church was growing rapidly.⁵

There is a serious question mark to be raised about whether people who say they believe in God in opinion poll surveys mean anything remotely similar to the Church’s beliefs about God, or whether that vague belief is ever reflected in serious religious commitment.⁶ However, let me illustrate what I regard as Harry Reid’s failure to take account of the context in which the Church in Scotland has to function today, and the danger of relying on a widespread vague faith by referring to a survey on attitudes to religion amongst those who said they believed in God but had no connection with the Church, undertaken three years ago by BBC Scotland. Harry believes that the Church of Scotland should make much more of a celebration of Easter. ‘The Kirk should lead the way in a great revival of Easter as *the* Christian festival.....The Kirk should organise mass rallies or services at Easter time, preferably outdoors, and deploy the talents of its great



preachers (and it still has some world-class preachers) in an exciting, all-Scotland evangelical enterprise. These Easter celebrations would be positive and joyous occasions; the Kirk could organise mass choirs to take part, and could use the talents of its most creative music-makers.'

This is one of Harry's proposals which will probably receive, rightly, wide approval. However we should be cautious in believing that such events will bring outsiders in. The research undertaken by BBC Scotland showed that amongst the groups surveyed (aged 30-45, socio-economic groups C2, D, and E, all of whom expressed an interest in 'spiritual issues') there was strong opposition to anything which reflected ideas of suffering, compassion, justice, or death, the very ideas on which any understanding of what Christians mean by Easter must be based. The themes which the respondents wanted explored or reflected in religious programmes were personal satisfaction and what they wanted to experience was feeling good. If at the heart of the Christian message there are convictions about suffering love triumphing over heartless evil, then the survey raised serious difficulties for Christianity. It should also be added that in every group contacted the attitude towards the Church was not one of dislike but of hostility. Most of those who responded had known bad experiences at the hands of Church people, and while many of these were what those of us within the Church would describe as relatively trivial, for the people concerned they were significant in their rejection of anything which sounded like an invitation to become involved with the Church.

The third reservation I have about Harry Reid's search for the pragmatic answer to what needs to change for the church to halt its decline is that it led him, inevitably and understandably to ask the Aberdeen sociologist Professor Steve Bruce what in his opinion the Church should do to become more 'successful' and Professor Bruce's answer was to become more like a sect (in the sociological sense of the term), to stress what is 'different' about Christians and their faith. If the Church simply reflects the values and ethos of society, why on earth should anyone want to join it? What neither Steve Bruce nor Harry Reid pursued was the question of whether in adopting the model of



the sect and the ethos of the religiously distinctive the Church would not be abandoning something absolutely central to the Christian Gospel which claims that 'God so loved *the world*'. When our television cameras were rolling, and Professor Bruce reiterated his advice to the Church of Scotland to abandon its pretensions to a national role and become a distinctive religious sect I found myself forgetting I was at that point a professional television producer, and reflecting on his advice to the Kirk. I recalled that the original meaning of the word 'pharisee' was 'someone separate', that even if Professor Bruce's recipe was astonishingly successful there was a warning to be heeded about gaining the whole world at the cost of your soul; and more warnings from Robert Runcie's enthronement sermon kept running through my mind. 'The temptation to gain the Church's end by using the world's means is still with us. We are tempted to organise ourselves like any other party or pressure group, to establish sharper dividing lines between those who are members and those who are not..... We have spiritual treasure in the words of life; but it matters desperately how our treasure is shared, how those ends are pursued, and how the Church seeks to exercise authority'.⁷

In his sermon in St Giles' Cathedral the morning after he was installed as Moderator of the 2000 General Assembly, Andrew McLellan referred to the churches in Canada inviting the unbelieving journalist Pierre Berton to take a long look at them from the outside and then write a book. 'His book' Andrew McLellan said 'was a terrible condemnation of complacency; and, while I remember little else of it, the title is with me yet: *The Comfortable Pew*. Oh Church of Scotland, have you the courage to do the same: to invite some shrewd analyst to put your dreams, your aspirations, your very life to exacting examination?..... We might learn a great deal more from listening to the honest assessment of those who look at us with fresh eyes'.⁸

On the evening Harry Reid's book was launched, I said on BBC's *Newsnight Scotland* that I thought Andrew McLellan had possibly been naïve in believing that the Church of Scotland would react to an outsider's verdict with the openness and receptiveness for which he was entitled to hope. However the fact that Andrew was speaking at a



book launch with most of Scotland's top journalists and many significant players in the world of the media present, *and not one representative of the Church of Scotland's media office was there*, was fairly clear evidence of the policy of official distance which I had already encountered or been informed of. There were, of course, representatives of the Kirk's Board of Communication present, because its publishing arm was publishing the book. But the primary job of those who run the media office is to foster good contacts with the world of journalism, and this was yet another opportunity missed. The pro-active approach of the late (and much lamented) Father Tom Connolly in assiduously cultivating editors and journalists contrasts markedly with the strategy of distance adopted by the Kirk's media relations office.

When I knew that Harry Reid was writing *Outside Verdict* I offered to BBC Scotland a television programme which was transmitted at the start of the 2002 General Assembly, focusing on the book and with the same title, *Outside Verdict*. One of Harry's proposals was that the Kirk should appoint an official media-spokesperson because, as he quotes Douglas Mill, Secretary of the Law Society of Scotland as saying, the Church of Scotland is constantly 'punching below its weight'. Another of Harry's proposals is that the entire structure and pattern of the General Assembly needs to be reformed and overhauled. Invitations to the officials in the church offices responsible for media relations and assembly business were refused. When a Scottish Television programme asked the Church of Scotland media office to choose someone to talk about Harry's book, again the answer was refusal.

A church which can be so unresponsive at an official level to a book which was providing the Church of Scotland with more positive publicity than it had had in decades is a church which needs to examine itself very closely. Was it not foreseen by those advising the Church of Scotland that the media, which as Harry Reid likes to say is both 'ignorant and voracious', would have asked whether the book in general and Harry's proposals in particular was going to be discussed at the General Assembly? Those of us insiders know that the business of

the Assembly is dictated by the Committees which report but did nobody realise that the failure to provide some sort of forum for discussion and the constant repetition of the statement that the Assembly had no plans to discuss the book simply created the impression that the Church was ducking the issues Harry raised? A Church better advised about how to handle the media would have found ways of deflecting this incredulity and making use of the publicity. People who work in the media know how important perception is, and the Kirk was perceived to be ducking the issues which Harry Reid's book raised, even if its officials can produce chapter and verse to justify themselves.

It is clear that in official circles there is at best a dislike and at worst a fear of public criticism, as is borne out by attacks made on *Life and Work's* coverage of the Assembly, and statements made by some of those responsible for managing and arranging the Assembly business that such criticism was inappropriate from a publication owned by the Church itself. A church which regularly complains it is ignored or misunderstood loses the right to complain, but more importantly the opportunity to communicate if it hides behind some sort of protective barrier which even critical *inside* verdicts are not allowed to penetrate.

I make these points not just because, as someone working in religious journalism I am saddened when a number of good, and some of them distinguished journalists talk to me in disbelieving and disparaging tones about the press and media service they encounter in the Church of Scotland, but because behind the criticisms I and my colleagues make there is, for me, a vitally important theological point to be made about openness and transparency and honesty, which was what Andrew McLellan hoped for when he preached in St Giles'. Just as the Christian faith is not just concerned with personal salvation but with the life of the world, what George MacLeod learned from his grandfather Norman to call 'whole salvation not just soul salvation', so Christianity is spread not only by private communication but by public discourse. The Gospel is public truth, and ultimately the church and its Gospel are not served by retreating into the culture of the committee room and ecclesiastical politics. John Knox (whom Harry Reid thinks Scotland does not know



enough about) once famously said 'Take from us the freedom of assemblies and you take from us the Gospel'. In a world where the media provide the twentieth century equivalent of sixteenth century assemblies perhaps we should reflect that if the church denies openness of discussion about itself, something of that honesty, transparency and faith which the church should exist to show will have been taken away from us.

I turn now to some of the important themes of Harry Reid's book, one of which is his conviction that the Church needs drastically to change. I have already expressed my own belief that the Church of Scotland is virtually incapable of structural change. I am aware that structures are not everything, but they are much more significant, restricting and inhibiting than the recent report *Church without Walls* implied. It is structures which continue to ensure that 'the church's resources are least where the need is greatest, and greatest where the need is least', a statement frighteningly first made in the Church of Scotland General Assembly in 1911 and will continue to be true unless a way is found to enable structures to be changed. But the Church of Scotland's structures contain a built-in inertia which makes change extremely unlikely.

Norman Shanks is quoted in *Outside Verdict* as pointing out at the General Assembly which Harry attended (during the debate on 'Church without Walls') that other attempts to bring about a change in the structures of the Church of Scotland had failed: the Anderson Commission reported in the early nineteen seventies, to be succeeded by the Committee of Forty chaired by Professor Robin Barbour, which inspired the Assembly Council which was intended to have such executive power that its members had to be elected by single transferable vote on the floor of the General Assembly. Each and all of these met huge resistance from those who knew their way around the Assembly's procedures and could ensure that any proposals for change died the death. I can remember the real mood of enthusiasm which the Anderson Committee's report generated amongst those of us who were very young ministers at the time, but when the Committee (and its Convener) were criticised for failing to couch their

recommendations in the procedurally acceptable form, a good deal of the enthusiasm was dissipated. I can recall what I can only call the euphoria which greeted the acceptance of the Committee of Forty's proposals to set up an Assembly Council with power and an auxiliary ministry which would begin to break the clerical mould. Within a couple of years the Assembly had been persuaded (by a future Principal Clerk) that the Council should be subject to the Assembly like all other committees and at a stroke the executive ability to effect change was lost. Soon the Council became appointed, just like other committees. Its teeth had been successfully drawn and it has achieved very little since. As I write those who responded to the call to the auxiliary ministry have just been told that it is a ministry without a future.

Harry Reid is absolutely right to point out⁹ that 'A body which meets annually with hundreds of *different* voting members each year may have its merits, but it is surely not the right body to make long-term executive decisions.' But it is exactly the right body to be used by those who accept, understand and believe in the Church of Scotland as an institution defined by its legal status and operating at a decision-making level only through its legal procedures. It is understandable, though I believe ultimately to the Church's detriment, that those who administer and manage its affairs are those who have already accepted that the Church's legal status and its legal procedures are the best way for the Church of Scotland to operate institutionally. And each generation of ministers produces people who instinctively accept that the legal model is the most appropriate one for the Church. In the Chapter he calls 'The Kirk's Great Monster', Harry Reid provides examples of where this legalism and bureaucratic centralism fails. A deeper analysis needs to ask whether the Church's structures can change while, in the words (I think) of Miss Jean Brodie, 'those who like this sort of thing will find this is the sort of thing they like'.

As a result, according to Martin Allen¹⁰, 'More and more people in the Kirk are just doing their own things. They ignore it.'

I have spent the last fifteen years encountering ministers and congregations the length and breadth of Scotland and I can vouch for

what Harry Reid calls¹¹ 'this disconnection between the supreme decision-making body and the ordinary members'. Indeed I understand that if there was one clear message from the extremely well-attended meetings which Harry and Andrew McLellan spoke to in various parts of the country following the book's publication, it was the degree of disconnection which there is.¹²

The Convener of the Assembly Council, Helen McLeod is quoted as saying¹³ 'We are having to fight congregationalism all the time. If you are only concerned with what happens in your own congregation, it is obvious you will not see the wider picture'. I fear Helen McLeod has misunderstood the tendency to congregationalism, which exists precisely because *far-seeing ministers and congregations have in many cases seen the wider picture, recognised the Church of Scotland's inability at an institutional level to stem the ebbing tide, and have decided to concentrate on their own parishes and congregations, and their survival because they see little future for the wider, national church, and find its institutional reluctance to accept change a real hindrance to their work at a local level. My own experience of visiting churches is that where there are fine ministers and enthusiastic congregations the congregationalist strategy is bearing fruit.*

Harry Reid clearly regards the Church of Scotland's status as a national church as important, though he quotes the leading conservative evangelical layman, Professor David Wright¹⁴: 'The Church of Scotland's national network of parish churches offers immense opportunities for a nation-wide ministry of the gospel. Any other national role looks increasingly like dangerous self-delusion.' What David Wright makes clear is that the Church of Scotland's role as the national church gives it a function not a status, and in this he is right, though I would want to argue that such areas of concern as are reflected, for example, in the report of the Church and Nation Committee, or the Board of Social Responsibility (which Professor Wright might be tempted to regard as attaching an importance to the view of the Assembly which is self-delusory, and which Professor Steve Bruce said on the television programme about *Outside Verdict* was 'posturing') as a very important part of the *function* of a national church,



which is to play its part within civic society. To wrestle with issues, as the Church of Scotland has, about the morality of the war in Afghanistan or the place of Section 28 and then to offer conclusions as a contribution to civic debate about public policy is not the posturing which one radio journalist has described as 'a bunch of ministers telling the rest of us what to do' but rather a national Church fulfilling its function of contributing to the common weal.

I would much prefer the phrase which was used frequently in the debates leading up to the union of the Church of Scotland and the United Free Church in 1929, 'the national recognition of religion' because it does not restrict the function of a public church to the Church of Scotland. When, six years ago, as the debate about a Scottish parliament moved towards the referendum, I produced a television programme about the relationship between the Church of Scotland and a new Scottish parliament. I was very surprised to discover that although the Church of Scotland (through its General Assembly) had supported a Scottish Parliament ever since 1945, no serious examination had been made about the relationship between the Kirk and any future parliament. Whether there should be a formal relationship is open to question, but what has happened is that now the Church of Scotland's constitutional marginalisation in Scotland reflects the way things are. In many ways *Outside Verdict* is one man's painful cry that this is so. It also helps reflection on why it is so.

¹ Page 32

² Page 177

³ Page 218

⁴ Runcie, *Windows onto God*, London, 1983

⁵ On the television programme the Aberdeen sociologist Professor Steve Bruce argued that Christianity was growing only in countries where populations were growing. However the expert on African Christianity, Dr Andrew Ross, pointed out to me in conversation

and private correspondence that in central Africa in particular the Church was growing at a faster rate than the population.

- ⁶ See the article by Professor Steve Bruce in the Church of Scotland's magazine *Life and Work*, June 2002.
- ⁷ Runcie *op cit*, pp 1,2
- ⁸ McLellan, *Gentle and Pasionate*, Edinburgh, 2001, p. 5
- ⁹ P. 166
- ¹⁰ Quoted on p.182
- ¹¹ P. 182
- ¹² I explored this disconnection in the Wallace Lecture in November 2000, particularly with regard to the disparity between the view of the Church assumed to be axiomatic by Assembly Committees and the attitude towards their local church taken by the majority of Church members.
- ¹³ P. 80
- ¹⁴ Writing in *The Realm of Reform*, edited R.D. Kernohan, Edinburgh 1991, p. 39