
George Bell House was formally opened by the Archbishop of Canterbury in October 2008, on the fiftieth anniversary of Bell’s death. Set beside the cathedral, where Bell’s life and work is much commemorated, the house also stands outside the gate to the Bishop’s Palace, where visitors like Gandhi, Bonhoeffer, T.S. Eliot and Henry Moore came now and then across almost three decades. Today, George Bell House offers a valuable venue for small conferences. It certainly proved a very happy setting for this particular conference, held under the auspices of the journal Kirchliche Zeitgeschichte / Contemporary Church history. Speakers from a number of countries arrived on November 19 and throughout the following day they were joined by members of the University of Chichester, the cathedral, local people from Chichester itself and visitors from the breadth of the county.

The conference began with a paper on Ignaz von Döllinger, given by Dr. Charlotte Hansen, a Danish scholar now working with the George Bell Institute at the cathedral. The paper focussed attention on the confident character of Döllinger’s thought, his determination to rejuvenate Catholic theology and the response of the Vatican to what was increasingly viewed in those quarters as a challenge to its own theological authority. Yet Döllinger was a far from negligible figure: he won friends and admirers across Europe. Matters came to a head after the Vatican Council in 1870: from this point Döllinger’s fate was sealed. He was excommunicated, converged briefly with the Old Catholic Church, and soon retired from public life. Dr. Hansen concluded by drawing upon statements by Pope Benedict XVI and placing Döllinger’s ideas and experiences in a broader, unfolding context of Catholic theological life.

Professor Robert Ericksen of Pacific Lutheran University gave a paper on Emanuel Hirsch and “the turn towards Hitler.” Hirsch was a thinker who practiced and admired intellectual freedom in his own understanding of the Christian faith and message. However, he also saw intellectual freedom in the modern world leading almost inevitably toward what Kierkegaard called the “all-encompassing debate about everything.” He feared this turn toward radical scepticism, both in religion and in democratic politics; so he turned toward the discipline and control promised by Hitler, accepting Hitler’s claims to represent the traditional values of the German Volk. Only an authoritarian, völkisch, unified Germany could prevent the threat of nihilism and chaos he saw threatening in the modern world, and especially in Weimar. The way was open for an accommodation with the Deutsche Christen movement and National Socialism. Professor Ericksen suggested that questions about intellectual freedom remain relevant and difficult for us in our multicultural world. They cannot easily be resolved, but at least we can recognize how disastrous Hirsch’s turn toward Hitler proved to be.
Professor Gerhard Besier of the Technische Universität Dresden examined the careers of two more German thinkers, this time drawn from the post-war period. Hans Küng is, of course, a well-known name; in the Protestant Gerd Lüdemann there was something of a counterpart. Much of the paper examined the character of their thought and the reasons why they had become controversial within their own confessions. Both had very different church authorities with which to contend, but in both cases the story was one of confrontation, a good deal of manoeuvring over academic positions, a certain amount of avoidance, censure and repudiation. Küng earned many supporters within his own church and across Protestantism too. Lüdemann ended up with a Chair in the United States, from which he continues to write freely. This paper produced an extended discussion on the place of church authorities in the selection of theological faculties in universities, and also began to point towards the distinction to be found between the perceived responsibilities of teaching ordinands on the one hand and those of teaching students from all backgrounds.

In his contribution Professor Torleiv Austad of the Norwegian School of Theology looked at these themes from a Norwegian perspective, but also as one at various times involved in them as a senior church leader and a scholar. He began with the promise to the ordaining bishop with which an ordained minister begins their career and examined the story of Helge Hognestad, ordained in 1965. Hognestad was first influenced by Marxism, but soon became drawn to ‘New Age’ ideas and also became increasingly critical of the theological traditions of his church. In 1984 he resigned from office and five years later asked to be released from his ordination promise. In 1998 he sought to be readmitted, claiming that his thought was now compatible with Evangelical-Lutheran doctrine. This provoked a new debate and deliberations of the bishop, the Doctrinal Commission of the church and, in time, the state itself. Professor Austad concluded, “Intellectual freedom is important. But it cannot be used to undermine an ordained minister’s obligations and to break his or her promises.”

In the final paper, Professor Gerhard Ringshausen of the Leuphana Universität Lüneburg presented a paper which did much to complement this, but also enhanced the discussion of the meaning and reality of “freedom” in the context of Christian theology at large. He showed how the expression of freedom involves a wide range of meanings: first, the Christian understanding of freedom, which is founded in Jesus Christ, who makes his believers free of their sins and free to love to him; second, the sense that freedom is also a basic value of political and social life; third, the problem of differentiating and connecting both these understandings of freedom. Here, for example, it had to be asked if academic freedom in the Church and in theology could be understood as part of Christian freedom or as a consequence of it. The paper proceeded to explore these ideas in the theology of Luther, Troeltsch, Harnack and, most recently, Wolfgang Huber.

The conference concluded with the evensong service at the cathedral and a brief tribute at the spot where Bell’s ashes are interred. It was the eve of the festival of Christ the King. As we left, the cathedral organist could be heard practicing Bell’s own hymn, written for that festival while he was bishop here.

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