



## Catholic Theological Association 2012 Conference Papers Church, Credibility and Culture Introduction

Karen Kilby

---

The Catholic Theological Association of Great Britain held its 2012 conference in September in Durham to discuss “Church, Credibility and Culture”. Our aim was to reflect on questions of the credibility of faith and of the church, not in general and abstractly, but here and now, in the Great Britain of the second decade of the twenty-first-century. The essays collected here, which have emerged from the conference, reflect the effort to bring insights to bear on the question from a variety of perspectives and a range of academic disciplines.

Thomas O’Loughlin, in the paper which opened the conference, brings a historian’s long view to the question of the credibility of the Catholic Church. It is a large international organisation, monarchical in shape, making “appeals to divine approbation”, and we live in a period – post-1914 – when all such institutions are viewed with a degree of scepticism—even apart from any particular abuse scandals. O’Loughlin offers a framework for identifying the credibility gap the church now faces, identifying “four elements of incredibility” that he calls dissonance, mythic crisis, vectoral accountability, and transparency deficit.

James Sweeney, a sociologist of religion, sees the recent Bishops’ Synod on evangelization (October 2012) as an acknowledgment that the church is not coping with the challenges of modern culture. In the light of that Synod he describes the nature of what he calls the faith-culture crisis, offers a sociological analysis of that crisis, and considers how the church might respond in the future.

Ethna Regan brings to the discussion a perspective from a near neighbour, outlining the “national trauma” triggered by successive revelations of child-abuse in Ireland, and the impact this has had on the Catholic Church’s credibility. It is a perspective from within the midst of the crisis – this is something which must be not so much “faced” as “inhabited” – but Regan nevertheless offers suggestions both for understanding the roots of the situation in what she calls Hiberno-Christendom, and for discerning what the Catholic Church needs now to do.

In what was a short paper at the conference, Nicholas Healy introduces a systematician's perspective, looking at three ways of responding theologically to modernity. He presents Hauerwas's theology as much more closely allied to Schleiermacher than is usually supposed, and draws on recent work by David Kelsey to propose an alternative which is simultaneously more theocentric, more critical and more concrete. The church may gain credibility if it focuses more on God and less on itself.

In a broader sense, the relation to modernity is also the subject of the essay of Agata Bielik-Robson, who was invited to offer a paper from a Jewish perspective. Drawing on twentieth-century German Jewish messianic thinkers, including especially Jacob Taubes, she explores an understanding of modernity as a "reawakening of the original spirit of the Hebrew revelation".

The next two papers take a more concrete turn. Gavin D'Costa considers credibility in relation to questions of continuity and change, specifically in the Catholic Church's understanding of Islam, and more specifically still in relation to the development that occurred at the Second Vatican Council. He takes this as a case study for testing Pope Benedict's hermeneutic of the Council, and concludes that in spite of very significant changes in some ways on what is said about Islam, there is nevertheless a fundamental continuity on the level of doctrine.

Timothy Finigan brings the new movements and the new social media into the conversation. If we want to think about the church in relation to culture, then we need to think about the kind of media that can be accessed by far more enquirers than ever come to hear a sermon. Catholic sites are dominated overwhelmingly by traditionalists, and Finigan raises the question of whether they should be regarded as "an unrepresentative selection of extremists" or an indication that, for the young, a re-emphasis on tradition may enhance rather than damage the appeal of the message.

John McDade concluded the conference, and concludes this issue, with a critical discussion of the church and its credibility that uses Nietzsche to focus a criticism of religion. When religion moves beyond what can be legitimately said about God it creates a human product that invites disbelief. Current atheism, it is suggested, has its roots in inauthentic forms of Christian religion.

I am grateful to Geoffrey Turner, who, though he was unable to be at the conference this year, nevertheless took on the work of editing the papers collected here.

*Karen Kilby*

*Out-going President of the CTA  
University of Nottingham*

*Email: [Karen.kilby@nottingham.ac.uk](mailto:Karen.kilby@nottingham.ac.uk)*