

It's finally time for religions to adapt

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Why is religion not more like politics? It would be inconceivable for the Queen to govern the country through royal decree, as did the first Elizabeth. It would be equally unacceptable for today's government to be elected only by voters who were male property owners, as once happened.

Over the centuries, we have not only evolved politically, but have also seen it as natural and just. Yet with religion change is seen as at worst an anathema, and at best highly suspect.

Perhaps this is inevitable if one believes that an absolute truth was given at a particular point in history which is designed for all time and can never be challenged. Yet even in a conversation between God and humanity, can the message remain the same if the listener is different? This had led to the notion of "progressive revelation" — that the word of God is a continuing dialogue, with each generation having to experience it anew and interpret the will of God for its own time. Of course, this presents a different challenge: how to be sure we are hearing the voice of God and not our own preferences.

The amount of social transformation in recent

decades has been phenomenal. Each issue is important for those concerned, and collectively they add up to a large proportion of society. Ignore them religiously and we effectively tell millions of people they are not welcome in our places of worship.

Liberal rabbis have tried to make sure that synagogue doors are open to all those in the above situations. Religious rules have changed to accommodate them, such as marriage ceremonies for gay couples or female rabbis leading congregations.

A new book, *Inclusive Judaism: The Changing Face of an Ancient Faith*, reflects the enormous transition that has taken place in Jewish thinking and practice.

Among the most dramatic reforms has been redefining who is Jewish. Previously, one was born Jewish if one had a Jewish mother, but in an age of gender equality this no longer makes sense. Jewish status can now be inherited from either parent.

This was not without controversy, but bravery is sometimes needed. Some steps may seem radical, but unless we take them we will be cut off from the future.

The current crisis has likewise demanded that faith groups either collapse into passivity or respond in creative ways. We have been yanked back to the essence of faith: what counts is not the rulebook, but what helps people.

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