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Churchman

EDITORIAL

A Little Learning

A little learning is a dangerous thing
Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian spring
There, shallow draughts intoxicate the brain
And drinking largely sobers us again.

Alexander Pope's well-known lines from his *Essay on Criticism* speak to a common human failing. So important and valuable is education that even those who have little of it are liable to think that they have been raised above the tedium of their ordinary lives and placed on a higher plane of consciousness, from which they can survey the terrain on which lesser mortals toil below.

Despite his surname, it is unlikely that Pope had theologians in mind when he wrote, though he must have known many who were used to pontificating on any and every subject under the sun. Sadly, not even the most ardent admirers of the Anglican tradition would compliment it on the brilliance of its theological tradition, much of which remains opaque to most inquirers. Even those who have sought to discover what that tradition is (or was) have usually found themselves forced to concentrate on one aspect of it because it appears to be too diverse to constitute a coherent whole. Anglo-Catholics often gravitate towards the seventeenth-century Caroline divines and highlight the vaguely 'anti-Calvinistic' emphases that they have detected in them, whereas Evangelicals have preferred to focus on the Puritans, even though they were always somewhat counter-cultural and their most prominent leaders were eventually forced out of the Church of England.

Because of this, the impression is all too easily given that those who have definite theological convictions have always found themselves on the margins of the Church, whose dominant ethos is a woolly liberalism that refuses to take defined positions on most things but whose representatives are only too willing to exclude those who dissent from them. Liberals in the church do not hesitate to trumpet their tolerance but it seldom extends

to accepting those whose beliefs oblige them to draw a line between truth and error and (worse still) to separate themselves from those who profess the latter. To the liberal mind, people who insist on theological orthodoxy divide the Church, and in their eyes schism is one of the most grievous sins that anyone can commit. The intolerant cannot be tolerated, with the result that the 'anything goes' mentality is reinforced and transmitted to the next generation without serious challenge.

It is possible to write the history of the post-Reformation Church of England as a series of events in which rigorous theological positions were first proposed and then rejected. In the 1530s, the English Church refused to sign on to confessional Lutheranism, although it did not hesitate to appropriate as much of the Augsburg Confession as it decently could. Later on, it absorbed much Calvinist theology but never conformed to Genevan church polity, a failure that in many quarters called its Reformed character into question. England never ratified the canons of the Synod of Dort (1618-1619), though the reasons for that were not primarily theological, and attempts to foist a countervailing 'high church' ethos onto the Church led to civil war and further compromise. By the time the Act of Toleration was passed in 1688, allowing a limited freedom of worship to those who dissented from the national Church, the latter's base had been so broadened that there seemed to be little reason for anyone to be forced out of it. The eighteenth century can thus be portrayed as the great age of latitudinarian thinking, disturbed only by the growing force of evangelicalism in the 1740s and later, and eventually by the appearance of Anglo-Catholicism in 1833.

In their different ways, these extreme wings of the Church have fought each other for the right to claim the centre ground. The result has been the emergence of a rather narrow interpretation of Anglicanism at either end of the spectrum and the abandonment of the centre to an intellectual vacuum that its supporters like to call 'comprehensiveness.' The long-term non-viability of this procedure has become apparent in recent years, when the incompatibility of some basic theological convictions has grown to the point where the problem can no longer be ignored. But instead of seeking to pursue truth and exclude error, the leadership of the Anglican Communion has tended to succumb to the false doctrine that 'unity' must be preserved and promoted at all costs, most recently in the form of 'good disagreement,' a formula that is supposed to hold together people and principles that cannot be reconciled in a logical or consistent way.

Optimistic observers can always point out that the Anglican Communion has muddled through for so long now that nothing will

tear it apart irreparably, so a wide range of incompatibilities can be accommodated within the broad tent that Anglicanism is supposed to be. But recently there have been renewed attempts to bring some kind of cohesion (if not coherence) to the Communion by creating structures that will encourage a distinctively 'Anglican' theological culture to emerge and develop. This trend holds a special appeal to Africans and others from the Third World who are seeking to define their ecclesial identity in the face of active competition from other Christian bodies, but it is also attractive to converts in other places (like North America) who want Anglicanism to be as identifiable and as consistent as the alternative traditions they have left behind.

There have already been a number of moves towards a clearer definition of Anglicanism in the United States, where there is a fellowship of 'Anglican' Biblical scholars that meets every year in conjunction with the Society of Biblical Literature's annual conference in November. Quite who these 'Anglicans' are is something of a mystery, but it is safe to say that they are almost all American Episcopalians whose connection to the rest of the Anglican world is weak to non-existent. They are certainly not representative of world Anglicanism, though it is quite possible that they do not recognise that fact and carry on (as Americans often do) oblivious to the existence of other countries and their churches. What concerns us is not this parochialism but the fact that the idea behind it seems to be penetrating wider Anglican circles, and in particular, the bureaucracy at Lambeth Palace. The focus there is not so much on the Biblical as on the theological dimension of Anglicanism, and it is here that the rifts within the Anglican world are most likely to come to the surface.

The intellectual Anglo-Catholic tradition represented by men like Eric Mascall and J.N.D. Kelly seems to have run its course, at least for the time being, and there is little to be expected from that quarter. Perhaps the high church tradition will revive at some point, but that is unlikely to happen anytime soon. Evangelicals, despite their many internal divisions, are currently in a much happier place as far as their own identity is concerned. There is now a wide range of Biblical and theological scholars who are producing work of high quality and training younger people to follow their example. Bible colleges and training institutes of various kinds are plentiful and (on the whole) healthy, with a wide range and variety of resources at their disposal. They have adapted to modern technology in a way that no other branch of the wider Church has done and are often the only serious players in the ever-expanding e-sphere. Today, material of Evangelical provenance is used by almost everyone, a least to some

degree, though we still have some way to go before Evangelical writers are given their due in the academic world of the universities.

This situation creates something of a dilemma for Anglican Church authorities who want to create a theological approach that they can regard as typical and recommend it to the Communion as a whole. Should they rely mainly on an academic theology that is increasingly distant from the life of the Church (and is hardly 'Anglican' in any meaningful sense) or should they give more weight to what might be regarded as 'popular' viewpoints, which are likely to be shared across the Evangelical world but not by other Anglicans? And what about those who come from this popular Evangelical tradition and remain closely connected to it, but who have also developed a sophisticated theology, rooted in classical Reformation sources, many of which can be found in the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Church of England?

One of the more depressing features of recent theological discussions within the Anglican world has been their total inadequacy when it comes to their use of source material, whether Biblical or historical. Debates about the ministry of women, for example, have been conducted by people who either know nothing about what the Scriptures teach on the subject, or else who are prepared to twist its words to suit their own agenda. Nobody who reads the ancient texts objectively would say that they support the ordination of women, not least because the whole concept of 'ordination' is a post-Biblical development that needs to be reviewed and reformed across the board. But instead of recognising that and making proposals for a thorough rethink of the whole system, what we have had is a lengthy and ill-informed discussion of how to reinforce the present state of affairs, without giving serious consideration to the principles on which it ought to be built.

The result of this is not 'good disagreement' but a fruitless dialogue between those who know what they are talking about and those who do not. Since the former are almost inevitably a minority, they lose out and the ignorance of the majority is allowed to take over. Unfortunately, this example is far from being unique. One way or another, it dominates theological discussion in almost every respect. A few years ago, when Bishop Tom Wright engaged with John Piper on the question of justification by faith, a sizeable portion of the Anglican establishment failed to understand what they were talking about. Justification by faith was not something they had ever heard of, let alone had occasion to debate, and a matter that lies at the heart of Anglican identity was dismissed by many as an incomprehensible irrelevance.

A Church that has increasingly relied on part-time clergy trained on weekend and evening courses has inevitably produced a large supply of ignorant ministers who are incapable of having any serious theological discussion at all. Even many theological colleges are no better. All too often they have replaced objective teaching by 'sharing experiences' and substituted self-expression for learning. Few have ever taught anything resembling historic Anglicanism. How many ordinands today study the Thirty-nine Articles, read the Homilies or use the 1662 Book of Common Prayer? How many have ever heard of canon law, let alone examined it in any detail? Yet these are the people who will be expected to defend and administer the principles that these classic documents enshrine.

It would be wrong to pretend that the Evangelical wing of the Church is notably better in this respect than its other branches are. The best that can be said of it is that there is a greater awareness of the problem in some Evangelical circles and that in those places serious attempts are being made to address it. Not only in England, but around the world, theological courses designed to deliver solid Biblical and theological training to the different churches of the Anglican Communion are being developed and promoted. These courses emphasise a conservative approach to the Bible, an acceptance of the theology of the classical Anglican formularies, and the need to defend and apply them in the face of modern liberalism. Needless to say, they are opposed for that very reason by voices within the establishment that do not want orthodox Christianity to prevail in the Anglican world.

The current 'conversations' about same-sex relationships are a case in point. These have been promoted by people with a revisionist agenda who know that their proposals are unacceptable to orthodox Christians of any denomination, but who are determined to leave their mark on the Church nonetheless. Many conservative preachers and teachers, who would far rather be engaging the secular culture of our time, instead find themselves caught up in debates with people who have no understanding of basic Christian doctrine and who probably should not be in the Church at all. These so-called 'revisionists' want to invert Christianity by giving it a meaning and an application that is alien to the very nature of the gospel. The inability of wide sections of the Church leadership to see that this is a distraction that is almost bound to do more harm than good creates an impasse from which there is no escape. To be an 'Anglican' theologian in their eyes means to be engaged in a dialogue that makes no sense to the orthodox, because in reality it is a debate between right and wrong, and even between good and evil. The fact that is largely conducted

between those who know what they are talking about and those who do not merely frustrates the former and persuades them that there is little to be gained from such a fruitless enterprise.

In a situation like this, Evangelicals in the Church are left with very little choice. Dialogue with the ignorant and misguided is a waste of time and participation in their schemes for diluting the truth of the gospel is a denial of their calling as believers. The Church deserves better than this, and those whose primary interest is in helping others find the way to heaven cannot allow themselves to be distracted in this way by siren voices talking about ‘unity’ and ‘love.’ Our unity is with the saints of every age, and our love is focused on God, not on any perceived need to accommodate the views of those who are promoting false teaching. What the Church authorities need to understand is that the inevitable result of this difference of perception is that Evangelicals will increasingly go their own way. We do not hate the wider Church, and so must earnestly pray that by standing up for the truth we may be able to point it in the direction of deep and meaningful reformation. But our desire for unity and peace must not obscure our need to be faithful to our calling. If we are forced to choose, the truth must come before unity and the love of God must take precedence over any politeness that we may owe to those who teach error. A little learning is indeed a dangerous thing—so dangerous that it threatens to engulf the Church and distract it from its first love. We must reject such shallowness and drink deep from the well of righteousness so that our minds may be clear and our wills strengthened as we seek to fulfil the calling entrusted to us by God.

GERALD BRAY