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Natural Priesthood, The Priesthood of All Believers and Parochial Ministry

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The confidence of the parochial clergy in their calling is being undermined in various ways and from several directions. Two of these assaults are: the expectations placed upon the clergy by what is often called 'folk religion', and the denial that their special calling has any validity in a church governed by New Testament principles. Both trends may be expressed in terms of 'priesthood'. The purpose of this paper is to explore these two phenomena, in the belief that each might illuminate the other.

Natural Priesthood

The first part of the title of this article is an oblique reference to the article by Douglas Davies, entitled 'Natural and Christian Priesthood in Folk Religiosity', which was published in *Anvil* vol 2 no 1 (1985). In that article, Davies acknowledges the existence of a set of universal religious needs, which may be termed 'folk religion', and suggests that a 'natural priesthood' is required in order to meet those needs. Much of his paper is devoted to describing and analysing some of the characteristics of folk religion, but the part which is relevant to the present study is his account of natural priesthood, and its relationship to the Christian ordained ministry. The tasks which are required of this natural priesthood are mostly ritual, and include performing rites of passage, endorsing political institutions and policies, and exercising control or influence over supernatural forces.

If every community does need natural priests, then it is perhaps not surprising that, in practice, within a 'Christian' culture, it should be Christian ministers who find themselves being used in this way. Many newly-ordained clergy find this to be the most difficult part of the transition into their new role: having pursued a vocation to ministry which they have perceived wholly from the point of view of a Christian congregation, they find to their dismay that they spend much of their time exercising this 'natural' priesthood, with which they may have very little sympathy, which they find hard to justify to their friends or their own consciences, and to which they certainly did not feel called! Davies recognises the tensions which Christian clergy encounter in seeking to reconcile their role as 'natural

priests' with their primary vocation to be ministers of the Christian Gospel, and he suggests that any minister who does not experience such a tension, together with its pain, may have abandoned the latter role in response to the seductions of the former. It is not the purpose of Davies's paper to explore the other way of evading this tension, but there have, of course, been many clergy who have simply refused to meet the demands of folk religion, because they are convinced that their role should be specifically Christian ministry to the church congregation; Christopher Wansey's book, *The Clockwork Church,*[1] describes policies of this kind, and provides a theological justification for them.

Davies, by contrast, argues that the task of the minister in response to those demands is neither to acquiesce in them, nor (certainly) to reject them, but rather to allow the Gospel to transform the situation, so that natural priesthood can become Christian ministry. It is, however, not so easy to see in practical terms how this may be done.

Davies suggests that there is an inevitable tension between what folk religion demands, and what Christian theology offers, a tension which becomes particularly clear in relation to the ministry offered to the dying, the dead and the bereaved. The qualifications demanded of the natural priest in such circumstances are 'ritual and theological competence', which will enable him to manage death on behalf of those to whom he ministers. This is one reason why folk religion requires professional clergy. Christian theology, however, according to Davies, takes a rather different attitude towards death. The characteristically Christian quality in the face of death is not power, or competence, or knowledge, but trust. A Christian minister, therefore, if he is true to his calling, displays a kind of 'spiritual incompetence' in such matters, and thereby signally fails to live up to what is expected of natural priests. Davies comments that in this respect, the professionalization of the clergy may militate against truly Christian ministry, but he does not pursue this interesting line of thought so far as to ask whether the Christian church should have a professional ministry at all.

The need for a professional ministry is, however, argued very forcefully by Wesley Carr, in his books *The Priestlike Task* and *Brief Encounters.*[2] He proposes two reasons to support this view: first, ordained ministers are perceived as the bearers of the tradition; secondly, the role of professionals within voluntary organizations such as the church is to 'manage the boundaries' between the organization and the wider world.

The first of these arguments is at least partly true, inasmuch as the person officiating needs to have, and to be seen to have, some kind of accreditation and status in order to function in this way. However, Readers and Non-Stipendiary Ministers qualify on that basis, as well as professional clergy.

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1 Becket Publications 1978.
2 Both SPCK 1985.

In response to the second argument, it is observable in many situations that various other church members seem in practice to manage the boundaries, and to provide access points to the organization. The ideal person to operate in this way seems, in many cases, to be someone who combines official or unofficial status in the church with real participation and identity in the community – such as a churchwarden, Reader, or P.C.C. secretary (or someone who has formerly held one of such offices), or – to use an example known to the present writer – the mother-in-law of the daughter of a previous incumbent! Carl Dudley, in his book *Making the Small Church Effective*,[1] describes this role as 'gatekeeper', and he maintains that the members who fulfil this function tend not to have any official status in the institution, and indeed to have a rather loose allegiance to it.

Neither Davies nor Carr has presented a convincing theological defence of the need for a professional clergy to fulfil the role of natural priesthood. Both of them tend to rely largely on sociological or anthropological analysis of human behaviour. Such a theological justification is, however, required if clergy are expected to embrace this role, or in any way to collude with this kind of expectation. Furthermore, neither writer adequately resolves the theological or personal tension in the life of the minister which they both recognise is created by this duality of role. Carr urges the minister to embrace marginalisation by simply providing what is asked of him, while Davies urges him to transform each pastoral situation, but it would not seem unreasonable for a working minister to retort that neither piece of advice succeeds in meeting his needs.

Both these considerations point to the same urgent need, viz, a theological justification for the involvement of a Christian minister in the activities of natural priesthood which will both resolve the tension between the two sets of expectations and also give guidelines as to how such ministry should be conducted.

The Priesthood of All Believers

The second element in the title of the present study consists of a venerable phrase which has long operated as a kind of Evangelical shibboleth, but has also featured in recent discussions of ministerial patterns in general, and *Of the Priesthood of the Ordained Ministry* – to name one such treatment[2] – in particular. The explicit biblical basis for the concept of 'the priesthood of all believers' is two verses from 1 Peter (2:5, 9) and three from Revelation (1:6, 5:10 and 20:6), most of which are allusions to Exodus 19:6, but it is also sometimes based more indirectly on the portrayal of Jesus as the 'great High Priest' in the Epistle to the Hebrews.

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1 Abingdon 1978.
2 A report of the Faith and Order Advisory Group of the Board for Mission and Unity of the General Synod of the Church of England, Church House Publishing 1986.

Much of the traditional use of these texts, and of the slogan which has been derived from them, has been to assert the privileges of the ordinary believer, over against the pretensions of a professional priesthood. Typically, the slogan might be cited in order to claim that all Christians have the right of access into the presence of God, by faith in Jesus Christ, the great High Priest, and that they are no longer dependent on the ministry of a human intermediary to secure such access on their behalf. Such an argument, for example, lay behind the Evangelical objection to the 'Eastward position' adopted in previous generations by many Anglican clergy when presiding at the Holy Communion, for that posture seemed to express a doctrine that the priest was standing, both literally and metaphorically, between man and God. Even when the slogan or the biblical verses are being used in non-polemical contexts, in order positively to expound the privileges of the believer, their primary significance still seems to be this right of immediate access into the presence of God.

A related use of the slogan concerns church order. Some people have used it to support their objection to the rules observed by most churches, including the Church of England, whereby certain ministerial tasks are reserved to ordained ministers. It is sometimes argued, for example, that any church member should be free to preside at a service of Holy Communion, on the grounds that all Christians are priests, and are thus entitled to perform priestly tasks. Whatever the strengths and weaknesses of this argument (and I will resist the temptation to pursue it), it is certainly a misuse of the verses in 1 Peter 2 or Revelation to adduce them in its support, for they are not concerned with church order at all.

Two criticisms may be made of these applications of the biblical material: first, they are too *individualistic,* instead of *corporate,* and secondly they concentrate too much on the *privileges* of priesthood, to the exclusion of its *mission.*

That the conception in the two verses from 1 Peter chapter 2 is corporate is clear both in the Greek and in virtually all English translations. In both vv 5 and 9 the noun is *hierateuma,* interpreted by the overwhelming weight of translations and commentaries as a collective noun, meaning 'priesthood' – 'designating Christians in their corporate capacity rather than as individuals'[1] – and in each case qualified by an adjective: *hagion* (holy) in verse 5; *basileion* (royal) in verse 9. Even the minority interpretation of the phrase *eis hierateuma hagion* in verse 5 as signifying 'to exercise holy priestly functions' would not seriously compromise this explanation of the concept in the whole passage, nor would the interpretation of *basileion* in verse 9 as a noun.[2]

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1 J. N. D. Kelly, *The Epistles of Peter and Jude,* Black's New Testament Commentaries, London, A. & C. Black 1969, p 96.
2 ibid. pp 90, 97.

In both verses, and on either interpretation of the phrase in verse 5, the emphasis is on the service which the priesthood is called upon to fulfil: 'to offer spiritual sacrifices to God' in verse 5, and 'to declare the wondrous deeds' in verse 9. These are the two dimensions of a priest's role: respectively, a ministry to God on behalf of the community, and a ministry to the community on behalf of God.

There is less emphasis on the corporate nature of Christian priesthood in Revelation 1:6 and 5:10, for in both cases the simple plural word *hiereis* is used, rather than the collective *hierateuma*. Like *basileion hierateuma* in 1 Peter 2:0, however, the phrases *basileian, hiereis* (1:6) and *basileian kai hiereis* (5:10) seem to be versions of Exodus 19:6, and the meaning is intrinsically corporate. In 1:6, once again, the emphasis is on the priests' service to God, although Caird plausibly suggests that, in addition, 'they have the further task of mediating God's blessing to the world.'[1] The context of Revelation 5:10 and 20:6 is more or less apocalyptic; it is, therefore, not surprising that the priestly ministry envisaged in these verses is essentially one of praise, with no relation to the neighbourhood, for these verses are not concerned with the task of the church in the present age.

So far, then, from being as assertion of the prerogatives of the individual Christian, the meaning of these verses seems, rather, to be that the Christian Church is called upon to exercise a corporate priesthood vis-à-vis its surrounding community. Under the New Covenant as under the Old, the raison d'être of the people of God is its ministry to and on behalf of those outside its membership, but the community of the New Covenant may be just as inclined as that of the Old to evade this responsibility in favour of introversion and self-congratulation. In what kinds of activities, then, should the church engage, in order to fulfil its obligation of corporate priesthood?

Suggested Solution

So far, this paper has identified two questions, both of which relate in different ways to priesthood. The first of the questions is how a Christian minister may fulfil and justify his imposed role of conducting religious ceremonies on behalf of people who have little or no other connexion with the Christian Church. The second question is what the Christian Church needs to do in order to live up to its divinely-appointed task of priesthood on behalf of its neighbours.

The main purpose of this paper is to suggest that each of those two questions is the answer to the other! That is to say, the priestly ministry which the Church is called upon to exercise for the benefit of its surrounding community consists of that work of meeting universal human needs which was described in the first part of the paper under the title 'natural priesthood'; and, conversely, the theological justification for the involvement of Christian clergy in providing a religious ministry to people outside the membership of their own church is the doctrine of the priesthood of the Church. If this composite answer is coherent, then it succeeds in answering the problems and difficulties outlined in the first parts of the paper.

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1   G. B. Caird, *The Revelation of St John the Divine,* London, A. & C. Black, 1966, p 17.

Practical Outworkings

If, as has just been suggested, natural priesthood is located in the whole local church, rather than in the minister alone, then certain changes of perception and of practice are called for. All attempts to treat the clergyman as a 'holy person' should be resisted, and he should make it clear that when he undertakes some ministry of 'natural priesthood' he is doing so as a representative of the local church. Likewise, every opportunity should be taken to involve other church members in this ministry.

The practical outworking of these principles will be easier and more convincing in some settings than in others. The parochial system of the Church of England theoretically provides a foundation for this model of ministry, but in many towns and cities the connexion between congregation and parish has been badly obscured. In villages, and in other parishes which still think of themselves in those terms, it is not difficult to perceive the relationship of the Church to its community, and local residents are probably all very aware of this relationship; it would, therefore, be easier to promote the principles enunciated in this paper in a parish of that kind, although there is no reason why parishes of a different character should not also be encouraged to work on those principles as much as they can.

Two examples will indicate how the ministry of natural priesthood might be fulfilled in terms of the priesthood of all believers: prayer and death.

One of the main tasks of natural priesthood is prayer, on behalf of those who do not pray for themselves, or who believe that the prayer of a holy person will be more efficacious than their own. Prayer of this kind is frequently expected of clergy in the course of their pastoral visiting, and most clergy seem very happy to oblige. If it is desirable to replace the idea of the 'holy person' with that of the 'holy people', then it is important that this ministry of prayer should be seen to be exercised by the whole Church, not just the minister. One very good way in which some churches achieve this is to pray in the course of public worship for the sick and troubled of the parish by name. To pray in this way for church members only might to easier and perhaps more attractive, but to do that would be to fail to act as a priesthood. Naturally, safeguards are needed (in particular, permission must be given before someone's name is broadcast in this way), but experience has shown how much this priestly ministry is appreciated by all concerned. When a minister visits someone in need, it is more fitting for him to offer to bring the need to the congregation for prayer in this way, than simply to 'offer a prayer' himself. Nor is it only the sick and needy for whom the Church should be praying: some churches pray for their whole parish, street by street, on a weekly rota during their Sunday services.

Davies, in the article previously cited, pays particular attention to the tasks of natural priesthood in relation to death, and it will be appropriate to give some specific attention to that subject in this paper for it is currently the most enduring of the demands which folk religion makes on the professional clergy. The theological understanding of priesthood in this regard

will affect both the choice of minister and the way in which the service is conducted.

The standard folk-religion perception is that funerals require an officiating clergyman, and that any such minister – whose status may be recognized by his mode of dress – is acceptable for this purpose. In most areas, the clergy have succeeded in persuading funeral directors to observe parochial boundaries when making their arrangements, but the public perception of this policy seems to be that if the local incumbent wants all the funerals from 'his' parish to be referred to him, it is probably because he does not want anyone else to receive the fees! If the local incumbent is unavailable, then either he will 'put it on the rota' or the funeral director will find another clergyman who will agree to take the service. Some funeral directors have even developed a relationship with a 'tame' retired minister, who is willing to conduct funerals for all and sundry on request and for a fee. Arrangements of this kind, in which a funeral is conducted by an anonymous clergyman who has no relationship with either the deceased or the mourners, seems to be quite acceptable to many bereaved families. This use of the clergy in relation to death-rituals is consistent with the account of folk religion given by Davies.

If, however, the principles urged in this paper are to be adopted, then the practices and expectations of clergy, funeral directors and bereaved families should be modified. The officiating minister in this case should be seen as the representative and spokesman of the local community in general, and of the body of regular worshippers in particular. This interpretation can be pointed out quite unobtrusively – for example, if the minister wishes to begin his address at a funeral with an expression of condolence, it would be easy to preface the remark with the words 'On behalf of St So-and-so's Church . . . .'

It will doubtless be appropriate in most cases that the officiant at the funeral of a member of the local community should be the presiding minister of the local church, but if either he is not available or some other member of the ministry/leadership team has a more immediate pastoral link with the deceased or bereaved, then it should be such a fellow-elder who presides at the service. In this sense, at least, deacons and lay-people may exercise a 'priestly' ministry; they, however – just like those who in ecclesiastical structures are 'in priest's orders' – will do so not by virtue of any status of their own, but strictly as the representatives and spokesmen of the priestly people of God.

One of the good things about the present writer's own experience as an incumbent was that local people happily accepted the ministry of Readers in relation to funerals, for those lay ministers, like the Vicar (but unlike a clergyman imported from outside the parish), were perceived as representatives of the parish church, and therefore of both God and the community. Such an understanding is easier to encourage in circumstances where the parish church is regarded as the 'natural' setting for a funeral, and less easy when most funerals take place at crematoria or municipal cemeteries.

This perception of the officiating minister as spokesman of the community will also affect the way in which the funeral is conducted. The aim of the whole service, but particularly of the address and prayers, will be to articulate in a Christian way the feelings of the community about the life which has now ended, and about their own loss. Such an aim and interpretation of the rite would be unrealistic if the officiating minister did not recognisably represent the community to which the deceased belonged.

In addition, however, to being identified with the community, and thereby being able to represent it before God, the priest should also be identified with God, and able to represent him before the community. So, rather than simply reproducing or endorsing what other people say about the deceased, the officiating minister on behalf of the church interprets and comments on their assessments in the light of the Bible and of Christian faith. As the minister fulfils this dual role, the content of the funeral service becomes, in Wesley Carr's vivid phrase, 'one of the sets of spectacles through which the dead person is remembered'.[1]

Many churches in recent years have developed teams of lay visitors to share in the pastoral work relating to death and bereavement, especially offering bereavement counselling. One further implication of the principles enunciated here is that this particular way of sharing ministry is very much to be encouraged, for it, too, encourages a change of perception away from the priesthood of the 'holy person' towards that of the 'holy people'.

These two examples of the demands made upon the church by the adherents of folk religion have been explored as paradigms for others. If the central contention of this paper is accepted, then clergy need no longer feel uneasy about meeting such expectations, for they do have a biblical and a human basis; but they should scrutinise their policies and their practice so as to ensure that when they operate in this way they are perceived to be doing so as the representatives of the local church which is called to be a 'royal priesthood', ministering to both God and the neighbourhood.

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1   *Brief Encounters*, p 108.