

End of a Notable Chapter

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ON ADVENT SUNDAY 1970 the Anglican Church in India came to a glorious end. The four southern dioceses had merged with the Church of South India in 1947. Now the remaining dioceses in India lost themselves to find themselves anew in the Church of North India and the Church of Pakistan. As an act of piety the distinguished historian Mildred Gibbs, who had served for thirty years in India, has compiled this record,* and for good measure has included the story of Anglican work in Ceylon and in Burma.

I had better start by recording my three grouses.

In the first place, I disagree with the proportions of the book. The earlier period up to 1858 is remarkably well documented in fairly easily accessible sources, such as the monumental history of James Hough. Of the period of rapid development, 1858-1905, we know a good deal. Of the later period, 1905-1970, we know remarkably little. As it stands, the division of material in the book is as follows:

Early period	—	49 per cent
1858-1905	—	32 per cent
1905-1970	—	19 per cent.

What I would have liked would have been the following distribution:

Early period	—	25 per cent
1858-1905	—	25 per cent
1905-1970	—	50 per cent.

The story of the later years is little more than a sketch. Thus we have in great detail the story of the schism precipitated by Charles Rhenius in Tinnevely in 1835, a schism happily healed by 1838; we have nothing on the Alvaneri schism of 1925, which after nearly fifty years has not yet been entirely healed. We learn little of the Anglican contribution to the South India negotiations, and of the immense difficulties with which the Anglican members of the team had to contend.

I am not sure that the day for denominational histories has not passed. Co-operation between Anglicans and others in India began much earlier and was much more extensive than would be gathered by the reader of this

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book. There is hardly a mention of the missionary conferences of which the first took place in 1855; the most notable, that at Bangalore in 1879, was largely given up to the discussion of 'the Indian Church', a reality of which the Anglican missionaries present may have had only rather vague ideas at that time.

This is strictly clerical and missionary history. There is little about the development of an extensive and distinguished Indian laity, little about the demands for a genuinely Indian church which began to be heard as early as 1860, or about the experiments of such men as K. M. Banerjea (twice wrongly spelt as Bannerjea) and his friends. With these reservations I can say without hesitation that Miss Gibbs has produced a notable work. She has had access to records and archives which have never previously been used by historians of the Indian Church, and has brought together a great deal of interesting and valuable material.

The story is from the beginning complex. The Church of England in the early days sent out chaplains simply to minister to the servants of the East India Company, who did not expect to make India their home. But before long it found itself concerned with a permanent British community in India and with the growing Anglo-Indian population. By the middle of the nineteenth century missionaries exceeded chaplains in number, and were dealing with Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Parsis, with high-caste and low-caste, with outcaste and aborigines in every part of the country. No wonder that bishops at frequent intervals tore their hair over the eccentricities and irregularities of the situation. But it can be said, and this book confirms it, that before the end came in 1970, the Anglican Church had made a notable contribution to evangelisation, churchmanship, scholarship, liturgy and ecumenical development in India and beyond.

The history reveals at almost every point the drawbacks attaching to an establishment of religion. Three great moments of liberation came in Anglican history in India. The first arrived with the appointment of the first Bishop of Calcutta in 1813; the British Parliament was prepared to recognise the existence of Christianity in India. The second came with the discovery by the lawyers that the Acts of 1813 and 1835 applied only to the territories actually under the control of the East India Company at those dates, and that other bishoprics could be constituted without act of Parliament. Of all odd things, the diocese for Travancore and Cochin, being native states and not British territory, was brought into existence under the Jerusalem Act! The third was in 1930 when the Church of England in India became the Church of India, Burma and Ceylon. It is almost unbelievable that up to that time Bishop Cotton's famous prayer for India could not be printed in an Indian prayer book, and had to be inserted separately on the inside of the cover; and that the Tamil Prayer Book up to 1930 included the rubric that before ordaining a man the bishop must satisfy himself that the candidate is learned in the Latin tongue. (In England, where this is still part of the law of the land, the candidate might be encouraged to satisfy himself that the bishop is learned in the Latin tongue.) Miss Gibbs was not in India in 1930; I think that she has missed the immense psychological effect of the change on Indian Christians; they felt for the first time that they had a church which belonged to them. As she has rightly seen, the progress towards union was only the logical sequence from what might appear only as rather tedious changes effected by an Act of Parliament.

In dealing with so long and complex a story, the major difficulty is that of selection. Here I am not sure that Miss Gibbs has been altogether successful. Many undistinguished missionaries are mentioned by name. But justice is hardly done to Edward Sell, who had never been in a University in his life but ended up with a string of honorary doctorates and recognition as one of the greatest of Islamic scholars. (Incidentally he lived in India for nearly seventy years, and was active with his pen almost to the end.) Pundit Johnson of Benares, who could *speak* Sanskrit as well as an Indian scholar, does not appear at all. Tyndale-Biscoe is still a legend in Kashmir; all over the country one will find Biscoe boys, who though not Christians absorbed from their remarkable headmaster a great deal of the Spirit of Christ. I do not think that the reader would realise how great a man Bishop Waller of Madras was. It was he who so completely broke up the old missionary system in Tinnevely that in twenty years I never regarded myself as a missionary but always thought of myself as a servant of the Indian Church. But these comments really mean no more than that, if I had been writing the book, my selection would have been rather different from that made by Miss Gibbs.

It is a pity that the proofs could not have been read by someone fully conversant with the subject. There are a few small errors which could easily have been corrected. On p. 339, 'senior bishops' is misleading; what is meant is the two Archbishops in England, and the Bishops of London, Winchester and Durham. Miss Gibbs is not quite correctly informed (p. 338) about the relations between Curzon and Bishop Welldon; Curzon *did* engineer things in such a way that the return of Welldon to England in 1901 became permanent, and not as Welldon had intended, temporary. It was not from the C.M.S. but from the L.M.S. that the Mirzapur Hospital (p. 361) was taken over by Dr. and Mrs. Charles Neill, who would have been enchanted to find their names set out in full in a work in which their son scores only one passing reference. But these and others are only minor blemishes on the surface of a book, which is in the main distinguished by careful accuracy. This is a work which I shall have constantly by me as I continue my own researches into the history of Christianity in India.

Anglicans in England are for the most part astonishingly ignorant of the story of their communion as it has adapted itself to various climes and differing situations. It would do every one of them good to read Miss Gibbs' book. I think they would be amazed by the distinction and devotion of those who have served them over more than three centuries in India and at the measure of success granted by the Lord to their efforts. Christians in India and Pakistan are still a small minority. But much of the stability of the Church of South India is due to the tradition of solid churchmanship carried into it by the Anglicans who joined it. It is perhaps not without significance that the Moderator of the Church of North India is an Anglican who was bishop successively of Assam and Amritsar, before moving to Delhi and taking over two centrally important jobs. The Anglican tradition has been transformed but it is not dead.