

Churchman

EDITORIAL

As Others See Us

In ancient times, when giants walked the earth, daily newspapers were staffed by courageous reporters and editors who went in search of the truth and printed it without fear or favour. It did not make them popular, but it often swayed public opinion and mobilised it behind any number of good causes. The reality of this heroic age was never quite as rosy as the legend portrays it, but it is fair to say that the modern press still contains journalists who find inspiration in that legend, and who do their best to add to its lustre by their own behaviour. In the case of newspapers like the *Guardian*, it can even be said that this aim has created a corporate culture which almost defines the paper's essence. Committed journalism cannot be objective (even if objectivity were possible), nor does it have the luxury of extended footnotes in which the subtleties of the argument can be outlined and discussed. On the contrary, it comes hot off the press, and often straight from the heart of the reporter, whose passion for his subject is so integral a part of his message that concern for factual accuracy can appear to be downright pedestrian.

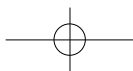
Those who share the journalist's interests and commitment(s) will naturally be inclined to support him (or her) on his chosen crusade, without bothering to enquire too deeply into the fairness of the overall presentation. On the other hand, those who disagree with him are liable to be apoplectic with rage at what they see as deliberate distortion of their position in the interests of hostile propaganda. The fact that the journalist has a potential audience of thousands, whilst the hapless reader has to keep his thoughts to himself—or confine them to whoever may be within earshot—merely adds to the latter's sense of helpless frustration.

Feelings of this kind are likely to be common among those Evangelicals who read Stephen Bates' book, *A Church at War* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2004), which purports to be a study of the recent controversy surrounding the aborted attempt to appoint a practising homosexual as a suffragan bishop and his subsequent promotion to the deanery of St. Albans instead. Mr. Bates could

have entitled his book *My War against Evangelicals* without changing a word of his text, since that is essentially what it is about. His devotion to the cause of ridding the world of this terrible menace is truly admirable, and one can only regret that the windmill which he has chosen to attack is not more worthy of his attentions than it is. Those of us who have sat through the average Evangelical committee meeting can only marvel at being compared with the Taliban, and wonder how on earth that organisation, if it indeed resembles Evangelical Anglicans in some way, could ever have terrorised a substantial portion of the human race. If knowing one's enemy is the first qualification of a good soldier, then Mr. Bates is a sadly unimpressive combatant, who derives his plausibility from what those who think like him are prepared to believe, rather than from any serious investigation of the facts.

Mr. Bates regards Evangelicals as the church's equivalent of UKIP (the United Kingdom Independence Party), an essentially reactionary group of people with little internal coherence and no real policy other than to wreck the system. They are utterly devoid of any redeeming qualities, and to the distress of the church's senior leadership, have chosen to launch an all-out campaign against an innocent and victimised minority—homosexuals, and especially homosexual clergy who want to be bishops. Apparently without any provocation, Evangelicals have vented their anger on people whose only crime is to dare to be themselves. Their behaviour is reprehensible in itself, contrary to the gospel of Christ, and (above all) doomed to fail in a society which has moved on from the Victorian era which Evangelicals hold so dear. Far from being humble servants of Almighty God, these evil people are scheming to take over the Church of England and impose on it a fundamentalism so narrow that even an ayatollah would have trouble faulting it. Quite where this menace has come from is something of a mystery to Mr. Bates, though he claims that over a period of thirty years or so, it has built up a formidable international network and has virtually taken over large parts of the Anglican Communion, much to the distress of senior figures in the church back home.

Like most people of his type, Mr. Bates is infuriated by Evangelicals and sees no need to treat them impartially or give them the benefit of the doubt. He is convinced that he understands where they are coming from, even if he does not know why they still bother coming, and this conviction makes any serious research unnecessary. He knows that Evangelicals have weapons of mass



destruction hidden away somewhere, and such is their guile that the only safe course for him and his allies is to follow a scorched-earth policy. Shoot first and ask questions later is his motto, and if the shooting goes as planned, the questions will not have to be asked after all.

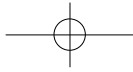
Alas for Mr. Bates, his aim is wildly off its target. When Dr. Philip Giddings told him that prayer for divine intervention was the best course for Evangelicals to follow, Mr. Bates simply assumed that he was tacitly conceding defeat by recognising the inevitable and coming to terms with it in the only way he can—by spiritualizing it. As Mr. Bates imagines the future, a few years from now Dr. Giddings will (however reluctantly) be taking in homosexual lodgers hoping to make friends with the curate, just as he has (equally reluctantly) stopped calling black people ‘boy’ and given up beating his wife. You just have to be patient with some people and wait for them to come round. What Mr. Bates has done, evidently without realising it, is look into a deep pool called Evangelicalism and imagined that he has spied the bottom, when in fact all he has seen is his own reflection—and that of his liberal bishop friends—on the surface of the water. It is liberals like him and his friends who have raised the temperature of the debate and created the present crisis in the church, not the Evangelicals, who never wanted anything like this and who have done their best not to over-react to the sort of provocation which Mr. Bates’ book represents.

The recent behaviour of the Bishop of St. Albans, which came too late to get into Mr. Bates’ book, demonstrates with great clarity just where the fault lies. After last summer’s fiasco in Reading, it was obvious to everyone that there would be considerable opposition to any high-profile appointment of a homosexual campaigner within the church. The subsequent election of Eugene Robinson as bishop of New Hampshire, which led to the appointment of the Eames Commission, was supposed to introduce a time of reflection and reconciliation, in which all sides in the debate would desist from provocative actions which would destabilise the situation even further. Evangelicals went away to submit reports to the commission, and did their best to abide by these terms. Was similar restraint shown by the other side?

The Diocese of St. Albans has an Evangelical suffragan (Bedford) who was one of the signatories of the letter which did so much to sway the establishment

against the Reading appointment. The diocesan bishop was fully aware of this, and though he obviously disagreed, solidarity with a colleague dictated a public display of unity which would avoid unnecessary embarrassment. Instead of that, the Diocesan discussed and approved the appointment of Dr. John as Dean of St. Albans without saying a word to his suffragan, leaving him publicly humiliated and in an almost impossible position. So far, the Bishop of Bedford has not resigned, though it is difficult to see how long he can carry on after such an open and calculated insult. The diocesan bishop even admitted that he knew how upset some people would be by the appointment, but that did not prevent him from making it—on the contrary. Those who were upset were simply expected to use the bad news as an opportunity to learn the joys of putting up and shutting up. Alas, some of them have reacted rather more forcefully than that, by banning the bishop from their parishes and withdrawing funding from the Diocese (as they are fully entitled to do under the existing system), but that has not deterred the bishop or made him think again. The sadness of it all is that the Bishop of St. Albans has destroyed his credibility and may be about to scupper his entire diocese by his colossal misjudgement—and for what? He has gained nothing from it but an albatross round his neck in the form of Dr. John, who will now be able to dictate episcopal behaviour more or less as he chooses. If the Bishop falls out with the Dean after this, his erstwhile policy of ‘inclusiveness’ will lie in tatters—and Dr. John knows it. The new Dean covets a bishopric, to which he feels entitled, and if he is unable to hold one officially, he can always manipulate the system behind the scenes—while Mr. Bates and his ilk deflect attention by cursing the Evangelicals and blaming them for the resulting mess!

Far from plotting some grand strategy, Evangelicals have been overwhelmed by recent events and are struggling to find an appropriate response to them. They are dogged by internal divisions which hamper their actions, and by the so-called ‘open’ Evangelicals, whose only belief is in the infallibility of an establishment which they are desperate to join. There are still too few of us who are able (or willing) to admit that the root of the trouble goes back to a departure from biblical authority more than a decade ago, when leading Evangelicals were persuaded to vote for the ordination of women. They did not see then, and many do not see now, that that compromise paved the way for the current crisis, and has seriously weakened the ability of the Evangelical constituency to resist the present onslaught. It is possible that some will wake



up and repent of their earlier mistake, but we should not be too optimistic about this. As Dr. Giddings apparently remarked in his interview with Mr. Bates, perhaps only a miracle can save us now. But as he then went on to add, our God is a God of miracles and his sovereignty is not impaired by the failings of his people. We cannot say what persecutions we may have to endure for the sake of his holy name, but we know that we should count it all joy, because the enemies of the truth persecuted the prophets in the same way long before us (Matt. 5:11-12). Even if we are called upon to walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we shall fear no evil, because we know and believe that the great Lord of the church will crush his enemies under his feet, and reign for ever in that Zion whose humble servants and ambassadors on earth we are called and chosen to be.

GERALD BRAY

