

Churchman

EDITORIAL

Weaving a Tangled Web

The year of grace 2008 is now upon us and we still cannot say for sure what will happen to the Lambeth Conference, which is due to open in mid-July. Voices have been raised urging that it should be called off but, however desirable that might be, it seems unlikely. It is said that the First World War could not be stopped by last-minute appeals to common sense because the trains were already rolling and the timetables had to be observed. Something similar seems to be the case with Lambeth 2008. The university facilities would have been booked some time ago and to cancel them now would be costly. It might also create suspicion and ill-will towards the church which would compromise the availability of the venue ten years from now, and those who plan conferences have to bear such things in mind. So whatever happens to the Anglican Communion in the meantime, it seems a safe bet that the decennial meeting of its bishops will go ahead as scheduled.

Who will attend it is another matter, but the Western liberals will no doubt turn out in force, as will their few supporters from the developing world. How many conservatives will show up is harder to predict, but many of them will remember the French proverb *les absents ont toujours tort* ('the absent are always wrong') and decide that it is better to attend and put their case than to stay away and lose by default. This will almost certainly mean having to tolerate the presence of Gene Robinson, the Bishop of New Hampshire who, although he has conspicuously not been invited, will undoubtedly turn up and be allowed in, if only to prevent the media scandal which would otherwise ensue. Whether similar 'crash the party' tactics will be employed by uninvited conservatives like Robinson Cavalcanti of Recife is hard to say, but is more doubtful, if only because conservatives tend to be more scrupulous about such things than their opponents and less given to making provocative gestures. The American missionary bishops who have been ordained by African churches are not so predictable on this score, but as they lack the covert support which Gene Robinson receives from the administrative hierarchy of the Anglican Communion, it is perhaps unlikely.

In preparation for all of this, the Archbishop of Canterbury has issued an Advent statement in which he makes his own position and policy clear. He is forthright in condemning the kind of liberalism which sees nothing wrong in departing from the historic Christian faith, and even suggests that a time may come when people who insist on doing that sort of thing will have to walk apart from the rest. This is as close as we have yet come to an official acceptance of the idea that schism may be unavoidable, and since most observers have seen that coming for a long time, we must be grateful that this realisation is finally making some impression at the top. On the other hand, the Archbishop wanted to be ‘balanced’ in his rebukes, and so he issued an equally strongly-worded condemnation of those who transgress diocesan and provincial boundaries in order to support beleaguered minorities in other churches.

There is no secret as to who those people are. Liberal bishops from the USA are not travelling in large numbers to Africa in order to ordain and consecrate local liberals who are being persecuted by their own hierarchies—what movement there is is very much in the opposite direction! This approach is meant to be even-handed, but it is already clear what the end result will be. The rebellious liberals will turn up at Lambeth, but the rebellious conservatives have not been invited (because their consecrations are considered to be ‘irregular’). ‘Balance’ at the top veers toward the liberals further down the scale and it seems very probable that the organisers of the Conference will try to pursue these tactics as far as they can. If they succeed, Lambeth 2008 will do nothing to exclude the liberals from the Anglican Communion and effectively give them a green light to do whatever they want. If there is a split at all, it will be because some disgusted conservatives will leave, which will be officially regretted but unofficially welcomed, because it will make the liberals feel even more secure than they were before.

The Archbishop of Canterbury’s position is an unenviable one and no sane person would want to be in his shoes at this time. Whatever he says or does is bound to upset somebody, and perhaps the best thing is to annoy everyone to the same degree. At least there can then be no accusations of favouritism and both sides may be encouraged to come to the table, if only to defend their positions against the Archbishop! Unfortunately, the double-sided approach which his Advent missive adopted merely reveals what the true nature of the

Anglican crisis is. To understand this, ask yourself whether the liberals and conservatives in the Communion are equally guilty of deviating from the Anglican norm. The former have driven a coach and horses through the most fundamental tenets of orthodoxy, shared not only by Anglicans through the centuries but by virtually every Christian church. They have denied the divinity of Christ, overturned God's creation ordinances in the realm of sexual morality and denied the authority of Scripture and tradition for the life of the church today. Far from presenting their views with humility, they have insisted that they (and they alone) are right and that everyone else must defer to their prophetic insight. In their eyes, failure to do so is nothing but ignorance, prejudice and contempt for the work of the Spirit in the world today.

Conservatives on the other hand, have stood by the teachings of orthodox Christianity and insisted that they must continue to be the basis of the church's mission in the future as they have always been in the past. They have not sought to suppress dissident voices, but have said only that dissent must be seen for what it is—dissent, and not the norm. Theologians must be free to fly their kites if they wish, but they should not let those kites set the direction for the church as a whole. This attitude might conceivably be put down to ignorance but it is not intolerant. In the Western churches of the Communion, conservatives have usually left the liberals alone and gone their own way, figuring that it is better to spend their time preaching the gospel than fighting unbelief from one synod or committee to the next. As a result, the liberals have had a free rein most of the time and can hardly complain of being persecuted by fundamentalists.

Recently however, the theological meltdown in the American Episcopal Church has produced an internal crisis in which conservatives have felt obliged to make a stand. In some places, where they are a majority in a diocese, they have been able to take matters into their own hands, but elsewhere they have had to fight against an opposition which has not hesitated to employ all the resources of canon law against them. Faced with the choice of surrendering to heterodoxy or leaving the Anglican fold altogether, some of these conservatives have appealed to like-minded bishops and churches in other countries to come to their aid. From places as diverse as Nigeria, Rwanda, Uganda and Bolivia, that aid has been generous and consistent. The bishops and archbishops who have travelled to the USA to perform consecrations and ordinations have done

so at the invitation of local American congregations and have seen their activities as an emergency rescue operation. They do not transgress diocesan and provincial boundaries as a matter of principle, but have been faced with a situation where the alternative is clearly worse. It is true that there is a law of unintended consequences and, as the Americans have found in Iraq and Afghanistan, leaving may prove to be much harder than going in was in the first place. Once an African missionary diocese takes root in the USA it will not be easy to reintegrate it into a reconstructed Anglican Church of America and we must face the possibility that future archbishops from the developing world may be tempted to justify and perpetuate something that began as a regrettable necessity but then took on a life of its own.

That however, is tomorrow's danger. Right now, the conservatives who have attracted the Archbishop of Canterbury's ire occupy a moral high ground quite alien to their liberal opponents. They have nothing to repent of and can rejoice in the knowledge that those who asked them to come are extremely grateful for the ministry they have received. They are gaining momentum and once grassroots American Episcopalians realise that there is a viable alternative to the heresy and immorality which currently dominates their church, the trickle of defections to the missionary alternatives may turn into a mighty flood. Certainly, if the Episcopal Church in that country collapses it will be from internal causes, and not because of pressure applied from abroad, however much that may be blamed for the debacle.

In sum, the conservatives who have deviated from the norm have done so on matters of form, whereas the liberals have digressed on matters of substance. Here is the true nature of the Anglican crisis, which goes right back to the beginnings of Tractarianism in the 1830s. The Tractarians, who later developed into Anglo-Catholics, based their case and developed their strategy by concentrating on form and denying the content of their Anglican inheritance. The Church of England was an episcopal church and therefore it was Catholic in a way that other protestant bodies were not. What the formularies of the Elizabethan Settlement said, and the vast majority of church members at that time believed, did not matter as long as the 'apostolic succession', guaranteed by a laying-on of hands that could be traced back to pre-Reformation times, remained intact. By those standards, Rome was a true church but the Presbyterians were not. This attitude continued to dominate high church

Anglican circles at least until Vatican II when Rome started talking to Protestants as if they were fellow Christians and the Anglo-Catholics had to follow suit.

By then, of course, Anglo-Catholicism had developed a liberal strain which was ideally suited to a movement which emphasised form over substance. Wearing stoles and mitres became all important just as belief in credal orthodoxy became increasingly optional. The end result of this is that now we have a situation in which a self-confessed unitarian like John Shelby Spong of Newark (USA) is a bishop (now retired) in good standing, whereas a thoroughly orthodox man like Martyn Minns of Falls Church, Virginia, is beyond the pale merely because he has been consecrated by a Nigerian. The absurdity of this is apparent to outside observers, including many in the Roman Catholic Church, but it has yet to dawn on the leaders of the Anglican Communion. This is the true crisis that we face. Does our faith consist of beliefs that we must hold in common if we are to dwell together in a single church community, or are we kept together by essentially legal procedures? Granted that it is best to have both of these, if that is not possible, which of the two will be sacrificed first?

The answer, as recent Anglican practice has demonstrated, is that matters of form will almost certainly win out over those of substance. One of the reasons for this is that they are much more easily discerned. Everyone knows when a bishop has been irregularly consecrated, but how many people are competent to judge whether a radical theologian has stepped outside the bounds of orthodoxy? It has long been understood at parish level that a clergyman who refuses to baptise babies will be far more pastorally disruptive than one who preaches Buddhism from the pulpit, if only because the people who want their babies 'done' daydream their way through the sermon and have no idea what the preacher has said. Project this attitude onto the hierarchy and you can understand why the Anglican communion operates the way it does. The challenge that conservatives face is therefore much greater than the need to defeat the liberals on particular points of doctrine or practice. The only way to ensure the long-term future of our Communion is to insist that we are held together by a common confession of faith more than by anything else, and when this is abandoned or compromised, fellowship in Christ is impossible. Twenty years ago the BBC did a comedy series, *Yes, Prime Minister*, in which one of the episodes concerned the appointment of bishops in the Church of

England. Sir Humphrey, the PM's chief of staff, told his boss that the Church liked to keep a balance. The PM asked him what kind of balance he was talking about, whereupon Sir Humphrey replied, 'the balance between those who believe in God and those who do not'. Two decades later, Sir Humphrey's analysis is a fitting commentary on the Archbishop of Canterbury's Advent letter. He too is concerned to keep the balance, and whether he realises it or not, it is exactly the same balance that *Yes, Prime Minister* put its finger on. The challenge to the godly bishops of the Anglican Communion is to overturn this approach once and for all and to expose the current governing policies of the church as the tangled web of deceit which they essentially are. Pray for them as they go to Lambeth and pray too for our church, that it may be set free from the evil forces which are gnawing away at it from within and find the grace which only God can give to become a light to the world and a true witness to the faith once revealed to the saints.

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