

The Anglican Debacle: Roots and Patterns

No Golden Age

The first thing to note about the crisis the Anglican Communion is facing today is that it has been coming for a very long time. I remember almost twenty years ago reading an article by Robert Doyle in *The Briefing* entitled 'No Golden Age'.¹ (It's shocking that it is actually so long ago!) The gist of the article was that the idea of a golden age of Anglicanism, in which biblical patterns of doctrine and practice were accepted by the majority, is nothing but an illusion. Biblical Christianity has always struggled under the Anglican umbrella. At some times it did better than at others, but there was never a time when evangelical Anglicanism, even of the more formal prayer book kind, was uniformly accepted or endorsed by the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Latimer, Ridley and Cranmer were, after all, burnt at the stake with the consent of most of the rest of the bishops in Mary's church. The Puritans who stayed within the Church of England suffered at the hands of Elizabeth I, and William Laud and others made life increasingly difficult for them after Elizabeth's death. The re-establishment of the Church of England following the restoration of the monarchy in 1660 was never a determined return to the Reformed evangelical version of Archbishop Cranmer, but a compromise designed to exclude anything that resembled Puritanism. Wesley was hunted out of the established church. Whitfield had to preach in the open air when pulpits were closed to him.

However, the real seeds of the problem we now face lie in the nineteenth century. John Henry Newman's infamous Tract 90, published in 1841,

¹ R. C. Doyle, 'No Golden Age', *The Briefing* 22 (April 1989), pp. 1-6.

encouraged Anglicans to read the Thirty-nine Articles as a Catholic document.² In this way he opened the door to the possibility that you might publicly assent to the Articles while reinterpreting them to say what you wanted them to say. What he did in the interests of a more Catholic version of Anglicanism others would do in the interests of a more liberal version before very long. As one scholar put it, ‘whether he intended to or not, he taught us to lie’. Later in the century liberal approaches to the Bible and Christian doctrine were introduced into Anglican thought through men like Samuel Taylor Coleridge (whose *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit* was published in 1840 though it had most likely been circulating privately before then) and two collections of essays: *Essays and Reviews* published in 1860 and *Lux Mundi* published in 1889. By the end of the nineteenth century, liberal Anglo-Catholicism was the dominant form of Anglicanism in Britain and elsewhere (with one or two significant exceptions).

So it is not simply that a couple of rash actions in the past five years or even the last fifty years have undermined what was a pretty well-functioning institution prior to that. Evangelical Anglicans have struggled in a hostile environment within the denomination for a very long time. Sometimes their ministry has flourished, despite the hostility of the hierarchy. Whitfield, Simeon, Ryle, Stott, Packer, Lucas – God has raised up many Anglican evangelical leaders in England and elsewhere.³ But their faithful ministry has always involved struggle within the denomination.

² ‘It is a duty which we owe both to the Catholic Church and to our own, to take our reformed confessions in the most Catholic sense they will admit: We have no duties towards their framers.’ See John Henry Newman, *Apologia pro Vita Sua* (repr. London, 1965), p. 197.

³ In Sydney we can rejoice in the inheritance we have received from men like Frederick Barker, Nathaniel Jones, Howard Mowll, Broughton Knox, Marcus Loane and Donald Robinson.

That background might lead you to ask, ‘So what’s changed now?’ If the denomination has long been compromised in these ways, and evangelicals have always struggled within it, why are we arguing that we have now reached a moment of crisis where decisive action needs to be taken? What is different about what’s happening at the moment?

The Five New Elements

I want to suggest that there are five features of what has been happening in the last fifty years or so that have brought this current crisis to a head.

1. The first is an increasing number of public challenges to orthodox doctrine grounded in plain biblical teaching by serving bishops and other leaders in the Anglican Communion. It really is simply a matter of historical record that the last fifty years or so have witnessed an increasingly virulent attack upon biblical truth and biblical morality led by those who should have been guarding both. There had, of course, been a long history of such an attack from within the universities and colleges. Academic liberal theology had been flexing its muscles for over a century. Yet in the nineteenth and early twentieth century serving bishops within the Anglican communion had mostly been rather guarded in their public comments and made no attempt to change the teaching of the denomination in any official way.

Although it might not have been the first instance of this, we might start with the publication, in 1963 of John A. T. Robinson’s book *Honest to God*.⁴ At the time he was the Bishop of Woolwich. In that book he questioned the doctrine of God and many other elements of classic

⁴ J. A. T. Robinson, *Honest to God* (London: SCM, 1963).

Anglican teaching. And this was the new thing: that a serving bishop should mount a challenge to the doctrine of the articles and the teaching of the Bible in such a public and unashamed way.

Even before his consecration as Bishop of Newark in 1976, John Shelby Spong, an admirer of J. A. T. Robinson, had been writing controversial books. In fact his controversial views would eventually lead to charges of heresy, which were dismissed in 1987. In 1986 he published *Beyond Moralism: A Contemporary View of the Ten Commandments*. Two years later he wrote *Living in Sin? A Bishop Rethinks Human Sexuality*. A year later he openly and knowingly ordained a practicing homosexual man. He has denied the uniqueness of Christ as the only saviour of the world, and the authority of the Scriptures to determine Christian doctrine and Christian practice. In 2001 he published his autobiography: *Here I Stand: My Struggle for a Christianity of Integrity, Love and Equality*.⁵ In it he appended 'Twelve Theses for Christianity in the Twenty-first century' which begin with the breathtaking statement, 'Theism as a way of defining God, is dead'.

In 1984, the then bishop of Durham, David Jenkins, gained notoriety by commenting in a BBC interview that the belief that Jesus was raised bodily from the grave was ridiculous, an infantile preoccupation with 'a conjuring trick with bones'. His comments were regarded as controversial and he has argued they were taken out of context, but on any account is hard to reconcile them with the words of the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 15 – 'Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, he was buried, he was raised on the third day in accordance

⁵ J. S. Spong, *Here I Stand: My Struggle for a Christianity of Integrity, Love and Equality* (San Francisco: Harper, 2000).

with the Scriptures, and he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve' (vv. 3-5).

In 1995 the then bishop of Oxford, Richard Harries, defended his cathedral's invitation to a practicing Muslim to preach the university sermon on the BBC's 'Thought for the Day'. He quoted Jesus' words 'Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called sons of God' and then went on to deduce that since the Muslim concerned was working for peace in his own country he not only came under the blessing of Jesus, but shared the title Son of God with him. When challenged about the uniqueness of Jesus on the basis of John 14:6 he wrote 'to suggest that Jesus actually said those words is to deny 150 years of scholarship in the Gospel of John.'⁶

Michael Ingham, the present day Bishop of New Westminster in the Church of Canada was interviewed by the Ottawa Citizen in September 1997. In that interview he insisted, 'It's time for Christians to drop the idea that Christ is the one sure way to salvation'.⁷ He developed these ideas in his book of the same year, *Mansions of the Spirit: The Gospel in a Multifaith World*.⁸

Outlandish statements by bishops of the Anglican Communion, undermining the teaching of Scripture and the doctrine of the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion are only barely newsworthy these days. They seem to come with such regularity and disdain for anyone who disagrees with

⁶ Private correspondence to the speaker, 4 June 1995.

⁷ Ottawa Citizen, 26 September 1997.

⁸ M. Ingham, *Mansions of the Spirit: The Gospel in a Multifaith World* (Toronto: Anglican Book Centre, 1997).

them that only rarely do they provoke controversy. Instead, it's the orthodox who are the source of scandal as far as the secular press is concerned. Statements of orthodox Anglican doctrine are often ridiculed and then dismissed.

2. The second feature we should mention is the redefinition of the gospel that has occurred in some parts of the Anglican Communion. It is increasingly clear that the gospel of salvation by the cross and resurrection of Jesus, with its call to faith and repentance has been replaced in some quarters by a liberal gospel of universal reconciliation, what some call 'the gospel of inclusion'.⁹ It is vitally important to recognise that this is what has happened. It explains why the hierarchy in the American and Canadian churches won't let go of their advocacy of homosexuality, for instance. The full inclusion of practicing homosexuals into the life and ministry of the churches is a gospel issue as far as they are concerned. As one website put it last year, under the heading 'Drenched in Grace: Anglicans, Inclusion and the Gospel' –

More than at any time in the recent past, those who seek to offer an open, inclusive and welcoming Gospel within the Anglican Communion are facing great challenges. Now more than ever we need to be equipped with the theological and ecclesiastical resources which mean that we can with confidence affirm that the Gospel of justice, inclusion and peace we try to communicate is scriptural, rational and central to Anglican tradition.¹⁰

⁹ C. Pearson, *The Gospel of Inclusion: Reaching Beyond Religious Fundamentalism to the True Love of God* (Azusa Press, 2007).

¹⁰ www.thinkinganglicans.org.uk/archives/002141.html accessed 13/3/08. An interesting article by Philip Turner critiquing this redefinition of the gospel can be found at www.goodnewsmag.org/JulyAugust/ja06turner.htm Arguably these are simply catching up with the observation of Ashley Null in a lecture entitled 'From Thomas Cranmer to Gene Robinson: Repentance and Inclusion in Anglican Theology' delivered on 16 July 2004 in Grace Anglican Chapel, Rochester in which he argued that the centrality of repentance within Anglican faith and practice was being replaced by the theology of inclusion.

No one must be excluded from the Christian table, these people insist, no matter what they believe or what life choices they have made. Love must triumph over all so that no one is any longer considered 'unclean' (with obvious allusions to Acts 10). Exclusion from fellowship or responsibility with the churches on any grounds is interpreted as an act of discrimination, an issue of social injustice which must be overthrown.

Ashley Null, commenting on the consecration of Gene Robinson, a practicing homosexual man, as bishop of New Hampshire in 2003 put it this way:

The legislative leadership of the Episcopal Church, including a majority of the House of Bishops, believes that they have been called and therefore, inspired by the Holy Spirit to establish the guidelines by which the Bible is to be interpreted. And in keeping with their commitment to religious truth as an experience of the inherent oneness of all things, they have selected those biblical texts which talk about the inclusion of outcasts as the true definition of the Gospel of Christ. All other parts of Scripture are either interpreted so as to support this explanation of Christianity or rejected as no longer being applicable in our day.¹¹

There have, of course, been alternative explanations of the gospel before. However, this redefinition has become a rallying point for a redefinition of Christianity which aggressively seeks to eliminate all other understandings. Its adherents are crusaders, and the battle for the acceptance of homosexual practice is simply the next battle in one long war to overcome prejudice and discrimination.¹² The civil rights vigilantes of the 1960s have a new cause and a new justification.

3. The third feature that has made this a moment of crisis is the way attempts have been made to officially endorse teaching which is in direct

¹¹ A. Null, 'Understanding the Contemporary Episcopal Church', posted at <http://listserv.episcopalian.org/wa.exe?A2=ind0312b&L=virtuosity&H=1&P=1493>

¹² John Spong's autobiography makes this identification explicit.

conflict with the teaching of Scripture. This could be illustrated in a number of areas. We might focus on the defeat of a motion affirming the authority of Scripture on the floor of the General Synod of ECUSA in August 2003. Or we could think again about the refusal of the Australian General Synod even to allow a vote on a motion rejoicing in what God has done for us in the cross of Jesus just last year. However, because it is the catalyst for our immediate decisions, I will simply trace the official shift of position on homosexuality in the American and Canadian churches. Perhaps a time-line might be helpful.

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| 1943 | Lectionary readings touching upon homosexual practice are declared difficult by ECUSA and removed from the lectionary |
| 1989 | Bishop Spong of Newark openly and knowingly ordains a non-celebrate homosexual |
| 1994 | Bishop Spong drafts the Koinonia Statement defining homosexuality as morally neutral and affirming support for the ordination of homosexuals |
| 1997 | ECUSA General Convention defeats a motion to endorse the Kuala Lumpur Statement, which affirmed the Bible's teaching on human sexuality |
| July 1998 | Lambeth Conference passes Resolution 1.10 affirming the biblical teaching on human sexuality |
| 1998 | Synod of Diocese of New Westminster in the Church of Canada votes to endorse the blessing of same sex unions, although bishop urges caution for the time being |
| 2002 | Synod of the Diocese of New Westminster votes for the third time to endorse the blessing of same sex unions, this time with the support and encouragement of the bishop (a number of evangelical leaders, including Jim Packer and David Short) walk out |

- 23 July 2002 Rowan Williams announced as Archbishop of Canterbury despite having admitted that he had knowingly ordained a homosexual man¹³
- 20 May 2003 The Bishop of Oxford announces that Jeffrey John, an advocate of gay rights and himself a non-practicing homosexual, will be the next Bishop of Reading
- 7 June 2003 Gene Robinson, a practicing gay man is elected as bishop of New Hampshire
- 6 July 2003 Jeffrey John withdraws his nomination as Bishop of Reading after much discussion in the press and a meeting with the Archbishop of Canterbury
- August 2003 General Convention of ECUSA votes to confirm Gene Robinson
- 2 Nov. 2003 Consecration of Gene Robinson as Bishop of New Hampshire
- April 2004 Jeffrey John named Dean of St Albans
- April 2004 retired Bishop Otis Charles 'marries' his homosexual partner in Pasadena

The roots of this shift in thinking can be seen way back in the 1940s. However, in the last ten or eleven years the pace of the push to officially revise the church's teaching on this issue has sped up. Now it is not just a matter of an individual bishop's heretical opinion, either expressed in private or published for general consumption. This is the institution changing its official position.

4. The fourth feature we should mention is the way these developments have taken place in full knowledge and in open defiance of the objections of the rest of the Anglican Communion, most commonly on biblical grounds. Those involved were asked not to proceed. Carefully reasoned

¹³ The interview was published in the UK Telegraph on 2 June 2002.

arguments explaining the teaching of Scripture were presented again and again. Letters were sent between bishops and primates. Phone calls were made. But so committed to the cause were the bishops of ECUSA and the bishop of New Westminster that they refused to listen and rejected all calls to turn back.

The repeated nature of the calls to turn back is very easily demonstrated.

In 1997, three years after Bishop Spong's Koinonia Statement began to circulate throughout the Episcopal Church, the Second Anglican Encounter produced the Kuala Lumpur Statement, upholding the biblical teaching on human sexuality. A year later at the 1998 Lambeth Conference, after extensive discussion, Resolution 1.10 was passed, again affirming the biblical teaching on the subject. That same year ECUSA rejected the Kuala Lumpur Statement and the New Westminster synod voted to bless same sex unions.

In March 2001 the Primates of the Anglican Communion met in Kanuga, in North Carolina and called upon churches to avoid actions which might damage the credibility of mission, after identifying the theology and practice regarding human sexuality as a flash point. Within months the synod of New Westminster voted for the third time to bless same sex unions. A Global South Steering Committee visited New Westminster to investigate and in the end advised orthodox parishes to seek alternative episcopal oversight.

The Anglican Consultative Council got in on the act in September 2002, approving a motion urging dioceses and bishops to refrain from unilateral actions that would strain communion.

A month after the election of Gene Robinson as Bishop of New Hampshire in June 2003, a group of over sixty worldwide Anglican leaders warned the General Convention of ECUSA that a confirmation of Gene Robinson's election would result in ECUSA having placed itself outside the boundaries of the Anglican Communion.¹⁴ Indignant at the interference, the General Convention confirmed Gene Robinson a month later (August 2003).

In October 2003 the Primates of the Anglican Communion released a statement following an emergency meeting in Lambeth Palace which included the observation that the consecration of Gene Robinson and the blessing of same-sex unions in Canada, if they should proceed, would 'tear the fabric of our communion at the deepest level'.¹⁵ This meeting called for the protection of dissenting parishes and set up the Lambeth Commission to propose a way forward. Within a month Gene Robinson was consecrated in defiance of the rest of the Communion.

5. The fifth and final feature I want to highlight is for many people one of the most disturbing of all. It is the open persecution by the hierarchy of the Episcopal Church and the Bishop and Diocese of New Westminster (and indeed others) of all who dissent from their program of doctrinal and moral revision. In early 2003, as the situation in New Westminster was deteriorating, and following the encouragement of the Global South for parishes in dispute with the bishop to seek alternative episcopal oversight, Bishop Buckle of the Yukon offered to provide just that to the

¹⁴ the statement has since been removed from the Anglican Communion website - its url was anglicancommunion.org/acns/articles/35/00/acns3522.html

¹⁵ The communiqué can be found at www.anglicancommunion.org/acns/news.cfm/2003/20/26/ACNS3633

beleaguered parishes. In response, Bishop Ingham of New Westminster instigated charges against Bishop Buckle and the parishes seeking his oversight and before long the offer was withdrawn.¹⁶

Just over a week ago the same Bishop of New Westminster wrote to Professor Jim Packer, author of numerous books including the classic *Knowing God*, and David Short, the Rector of St Johns Shaugnessy following their vote (along with their church) to stay within the Anglican Communion yet seek the oversight of a faithful bishop, the Bishop of the Southern Cone. The letter charged them with a relatively new ecclesiastical offence, 'Presumption of abandonment of Communion' and threatened to remove their 'spiritual authority as a minister of Word and Sacraments conferred in ordination'.¹⁷ The bishop's supporters have protested that this action is entirely legal and in accord with the constitution of the denomination. However, these measures are devices which the liberal establishment has created with this one purpose in mind: to punish anyone who object to their practice and who seeks a way of remaining true to biblical teaching and Anglican doctrine when the denomination itself has abandoned it.

There are many other horror stories. The new presiding bishop of The Episcopal Church, Katharine Jefferts Schori, began suing those who opposed this program almost as soon as she was elected to the position. To date the dioceses of Fort Worth and Quincy and more recently the bishop and diocese of San Joaquin have had legal action taken against

¹⁶ Details can be found at listserv.episcopalian.org/wa.exe?A2=ind0311b&L=virtuosity&H=1&P=1397

¹⁷ See www.anglicanessentials.ca/wordpress/index.php/2008/02/29/ji-packer-threatened-with-suspension

them.¹⁸ The denomination is suing these churches for their property, seeking to depose those who speak out. The legal action may well be protracted. Some have resigned because they do not have the financial resources to resist the revisionists in the courts. Yet the opposition is not going away.

Individual parishes are being targeted by bishops with the revisionist agenda. 'The Connecticut Six' are a group of six clergy and parishes who have opposed the diocesan bishop on the issue of support for Gene Robinson the acceptance of homosexuality more generally. Ministers have been unceremonially deposed, church vestry meetings declared illegal, church officers sacked, and in some extreme cases a diocese has moved in at night to change the locks and so prevent the dissenting ministers and congregations from having use of their church buildings.¹⁹

Despite repeated calls from many quarters to respect those who disagree with them and to seek ways to provide alternative oversight where this is requested, the Presiding Bishop of The Episcopal Church and others in the house of bishops have pursued a program of retaliation and persecution of the orthodox in their dioceses. It is not too much to say that ecclesiastical bullying of the orthodox has reached epidemic proportions in The Episcopal Church, in Canada, and in other places as well.

Those of you who follow the websites will no doubt know of many more instances. Friends of mine in the UK have been called in and threatened

¹⁸ Details can be found on the diocesan websites: www.fwepiscopal.org/index1.php
www.dioceseofquincy.org <http://sanjoaquin.anglican.org>

¹⁹ A statement from the Connecticut Six can be found at www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-religion/1412016/posts

by their bishop in response to votes of no confidence following the appointment of Jeffrey John and Dean of St Albans. Jeffrey John has since publicly ridiculed the idea of penal substitutionary atonement.

It is true that in the recent round of invitations to the Lambeth Conference this July, the bishop of New Hampshire was not included. This has been greeted with protest from the Episcopal Church's House of Bishops. But the Presiding Bishop of The Episcopal Church is still invited, although she supports Gene Robinson and has acted in this unconscionable way towards orthodox bishops, dioceses, clergy and parishes in the USA. Those who took part in the consecration of Gene Robinson are still invited. Those who engineered Jeffrey John's appointment as Dean of St Albans are still invited. Bishops within the Canadian church are still invited.

The parishes and Christian ministers who are under attack have been left out to dry by the Archbishop of Canterbury. He appointed Peter Carnley, the retired Archbishop of Perth who is no friend of evangelical Anglicans, to chair the panel of reference established to consider their cases. As was to be expected, nothing has happened. The legal cases are still proceeding. The confiscated property remains in the hands of the heretical institution.

Conclusion

The crisis we face at the moment has a different character to the background struggle that evangelical Anglicans have long endured. These five factors have taken us further down the road of denominational apostasy than we have ever been before. The embrace of teaching and practice which is directly opposed to the teaching of Scripture is now

being institutionalised in a new way. And it is being done in the face of careful, godly, biblical calls to stop. What's more, those who are making that call are being recast as the villains and every effort is being made to disenfranchise them and remove them from the Communion.

That's what's different now. That's why we need to act.

- A paper delivered by Dr. Mark Thompson at the Chapter House of St. Andrew's Cathedral, Sydney, 14th March 2008.