

A Review of Muriel Porter's *Sydney Anglicans and the Threat to World Anglicanism: The Sydney Experiment*.

Mark Thompson, Friday, 29 July 2011

---

Muriel Porter has been attacking Sydney Anglicans for years. In synods and committees and in print, she has vociferously opposed the position of the Diocese of Sydney on a whole range of issues. Never very far from the surface, though, is her anger at the diocese's attitude towards women priests and bishops. She has campaigned on the other side of this debate with vigour for more than twenty-five years. She takes no prisoners and has been willing to use whatever means might be at her disposal to further her cause and, as even those who agree with her in principle have often recognised, to vilify those who, for whatever reason, disagree with her.

In 2011 *The New Puritans* has been revised and brought up to date with a new title: *Sydney Anglicans and the Threat to World Anglicanism: The Sydney Experiment*. As with the earlier volume, Muriel Porter acknowledges quite openly that she is 'obviously not able to report on Sydney objectively and evenhandedly' (xv). The acknowledgement was unnecessary. Even without it, the highly polemical nature of the book — and a significant degree of distortion that inevitably arises from that — is obvious. The book is littered with unsubstantiated assertions introduced with words such as 'Some have suggested ...' (e.g. pp. 70, 107), 'I suspect the real reason ...' (e.g. p. 71, 75) and 'Perhaps ...' (e.g. p. 159) (The title of the book itself is a giveaway of course, but the final titles of books are sometimes the work of the publishers rather than the author.) Unfortunately, it is also littered with factual error, half-truth and the attribution of false or hidden motives to those with whom she disagrees. Sydney Anglicans might think they are taking a stand on the teaching of Scripture but in reality, she repeatedly asserts, their motivation is much more sinister.

The book is organised around the premise that Sydney's experiment with radical Protestantism, sourced in the theology of a maverick Principal of Moore College, Broughton Knox, and given full expression in the episcopate of his student, Peter Jensen, represents a serious threat to faithful Anglicanism in both Australia and throughout the world. In order to support this contention, Porter needs to recast the doctrinal, ethical and ecclesiastical innovations of the past thirty years in global Anglicanism (women's ordination, revised attitudes on divorce, acceptance of homosexuality, the rejection of

exclusive claims about Jesus and salvation, and a rejection of the thoroughgoing truthfulness and reliability of the Bible) as faithful discipleship and the decisions of Sydney's synod and archbishops (not to mention the teaching at Moore College) as aberrant, unAnglican and ultimately a misuse of Scripture.

A clear instance of how she does this is found quite early on in the book:

*The 'uniqueness of Jesus' is something that Sydney Anglicans — along with other conservative Christians — are passionate about. Jesus' redemptive death on the Cross, they maintain, only redeems those who explicitly and consciously make a faith commitment to him. The classical Christian position is rather more nuanced: Redemption is only through Jesus, yes, but that does not require explicit faith in him, but rather is effective wherever God's love evokes a response. (22)*

On what definition of the 'classical Christian position' could this be true? Is it what Thomas Cranmer taught and embodied in the Articles, the Homilies and the Book of Common Prayer? Can it be found anywhere in the church fathers? Is it consistent with the New Testament? However, for Porter, only a radically conservative Christian would raise such questions. When it comes to the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion, in particular, she wonders why anyone would make them a 'yardstick of orthodoxy' (23).

*To my mind the Articles are a quaintly-worded, seriously limited summary of Anglican understandings of faith and doctrine, scarcely relevant to modern Australian life. (24)*

The book takes aim at a number of targets within Sydney, including Moore College, AFES, ACL but it returns again and again to attack Peter Jensen, and, as the source of the distinctive and in her mind aberrant theological stance of the diocese, Broughton Knox. (Porter's chief complaint against Knox is, unsurprisingly, his tenacious opposition to the ordination of women. As the book draws to a conclusion, the Sydney experiment is relabelled 'the Knox experiment, 163.) An interesting array of sources can be found in the footnotes, but it is rather odd that at some points (e.g. pages 41 and 42) summaries of positions are taken from comments and published work by implacable opponents of Sydney: Duncan Reid from Melbourne provides a summary of Peter Jensen's thinking on revelation and he and Peter Carnley (a previous Archbishop of Perth) provide a summary of Broughton Knox's views. More than odd is the rehearsal of Kevin Giles' widely discredited attack on the theology of the diocese and its leadership. Even Peter Carnley's ludicrous suggestion that T. C. Hammond was Arian is given a re-run (116–7) (one would

have thought that fabrication had been put to bed by David Wright's courteous yet telling rebuttal in the St Mark's Review several years ago).

It is entirely unsurprising that in her treatment of the relationship between the Diocese of Sydney and the General Synod of the Anglican Church of Australia, Sydney is repeatedly cast in the role of the spoiler, who prevents a united and longsuffering majority in the national church from faithfully exercising the ministry God has entrusted to them. The unilateral action of Dowling and Carnley with regard to the ordination of women is presented as a courageous attempt to bring faithfulness and justice in the face of Sydney's intransigence. The use of the Appellate Tribunal to find a way to consecrate women bishops in the wake of repeated failure to persuade the requisite majority of the General Synod that this should be authorised, is also recast as positive, healthy and necessary. The insistence by Sydney that the machinery of the Anglican Church of Australia, including the Primate, act within the expectations of Constitution is considered unreasonable and that constitution itself is described as 'very limited' (78). Porter is willing to suggest that instead of the constitution as it exists, it may have been 'wiser to create a national church that did not include Sydney' (48).

*An Australian church without Sydney, I believe, would have released enormous energy for growth and renewal in the rest of the dioceses, freed from Sydney's relentless negative impact. (48)*

No mention is made of the way on successive occasions the Diocese of Sydney has been openly and vehemently attacked on the floor of the General Synod. Unsurprisingly, there is no mention of the move in 2007 to avoid voting on a motion thanking God for his provision of free salvation in Christ by 'moving the previous question'. Many newcomers to General Synod were distressed by this inability to unite around central gospel truths. No mention is made of the way in which, without consultation with the dioceses who finance the General Synod by their assessments, the administration of the General Synod has been enlarged and the role of the Primate expanded.

Porter's characterisation of the role of Sydney in the wider Anglican Communion is equally innovative. Lambeth 1998, and in particular its motion affirming biblical teaching on human sexuality and rejecting homosexuality as 'incompatible with Scripture' were the result of the conference being 'shanghaied by an astonishingly well-organized and vocal anti-gay lobby' (53). Of the alliance forged between 'first-world conservatives' and 'third world conservatives' (53), she asks

*Is it possible that backroom deals were also done to forge the winning alliance between conservative first-world leaders and their third-world friends? One deal might have been: 'Don't hassle us about polygamy, and we will back you on homosexuality.' (54)*

GAFCON 2008 is almost inevitably painted in a similar light, and she is clearly no fan of the Jerusalem Declaration. She is troubled by Peter Jensen's role in the movement (60-63). Nevertheless, in her view, the continuing problem transcends both the Declaration produced at GAFCON and its current leadership.

*It is not the Declaration that is the problem for the future of the Anglican Communion. Rather, it is the goals of FCA [the Fellowship of Confessing Anglicans, which sprang out of GAFCON] that are quite confronting. There are two goals — the first is 'missional', the second is a 'consequence', as the online document describes it. The first goal, to preach the biblical gospel, includes defending 'the gospel and the people of God against their spiritual adversaries, notably the revisionist theology which has become so prevalent in the West'. The second is 'to provide aid to those faithful Anglicans who have been forced to disaffiliate from their original spiritual homes by false teaching and practice'. The FCA then is a political movement designed to perpetuate and even foster division across the Anglican Communion. (64)*

There is no comment about the way in which faithful men and women have been hounded from their churches for refusing to abandon the historic teaching of the Anglican church. The scandalous use of the legacy of previous generations of Christians to prosecute those who object to the decisions of the hierarchy of The Episcopal Church is passed over in silence. No mention either of the repeated and unheeded warnings sounded by orthodox Christians around the world prior to, during and after the events which have proven to be a catalyst for such decisive action.

Porter acknowledges that Sydney Anglicans would argue that they are following the teaching of Scripture in their opposition to innovations such as the endorsement of homosexual behaviour. However, she does not believe them.

*So biblical authority alone seems unlikely to be the reason why homosexuality has become the 'line in the sand' in world Anglicanism. I suspect it is respectable window-dressing for the exercise of blatant power politics. (75)*

However, for all the forays into other issues — and the Sydney discussion of lay administration also gets an extended treatment (97-110: its purpose is, according to Porter, ‘to lay the symbolic axe finally and decisively to the root of traditional church order’ as ‘the culmination of Sydney’s relentless drive for Puritan purity’ (109))— the real issue to which Porter returns in every chapter is the difference she has with the decisions of Sydney with regard to women’s ministry. (In addition to dominating every other chapter, the issue is the sole focus of chapter six.)

*If the denial of full equality to women in the church is Sydney Diocese’s ‘great cause’ [really?], then the full equality of women in church leadership at every level is my ‘great cause,’ a Gospel imperative that I believe cannot be denied. (134)*

She ridicules the complementarian position without, it seems, ever understanding it. She suggests that ‘the slogan “equal but different” sounds close to one of the descriptions of the place of women in Islam: not inferior, just different’ (125). She cannot see how submission and equality can coexist.

*And what about the ‘difference’ they claim? This seems to be a matter of ‘distinctive roles,’ though that is not spelt out other than the opaque, nonsensical terminology of ‘loving, self-denying, humble leadership’ for men and ‘intelligent willing submission within marriage’ for women. It is not apparent just what loving leadership means in this context, let alone intelligent and willing submission. It is a rhetoric that belongs to an earlier age ... (126)*

It is often when describing this issue that the book is most disappointing. She repeats comments by others which even she has to admit were and are inappropriate.

*A former Australian Primate, Peter Carnley, speaking in the 1987 General Synod debate on women priests, described opposition to women clergy as as much ‘psycho-spiritual’ as theological. He said he had a ‘funny feeling’ it was psycho-spiritual because such deep emotions were obviously stirred by the debate. He suggested that fear of dominance by women may well be involved. The absence of father-figures during World War II may have left many men then in power in the church with a hostility to women, a result of their mothers’ strong presence in early childhood. Had too many mothers supervised their sons’ baths for too long? he asked. His comments were not well received! But though the point was perhaps not appropriate as a debating tactic, it may well have had some substance. (114)*

The inclusion of these inappropriate remarks by a trenchant critic of Sydney is unsurprising in the end. In an earlier chapter Porter herself suggests the early history of the colony, and later the dominance of women in the perfectionist movement, may be in some large measure responsible for the peculiar stance of Sydney on this issue (chapter 3).

Once again Porter questions the appeal to the plain teaching of Scripture in support of the decisions taken by successive Sydney synods on this issue. She repeatedly points to other interpretations of biblical passages cited, interpretations put forward even by some evangelical scholars, as evidence that Sydney's position is untenable (e.g. 65, 71, 73). This completely ignores other interpretations of precisely this phenomenon: there may be other reasons for a plurality of interpretations, and these need not be indicative of ambiguity or obscurity in the biblical text. Just because a variety of interpretations currently circulate in Christian circles does not mean they should. Not all interpretations of Scripture are valid interpretations of Scripture. All interpretations need to be tested by their faithfulness to the text in question in its context and according to its nature as the written word of God (and undoubtedly this goes for the interpretation or reading adopted in Sydney as much as anywhere else).

Muriel Porter believes the Sydney experiment is faltering. The financial crisis and the absence of a recognised successor to Peter Jensen provide, from her perspective, a sliver of hope that Sydney will abandon its radicalism and join the rest of the Anglican Communion in a bright new future. She declares herself 'hopeful that in time the traditional Anglican penchant for moderation will prevail in Sydney' (164). Evangelicals in Sydney and elsewhere hope for something quite different.

There is very little that is new in this book and the narrative Muriel Porter seeks to relate is undoubtedly as one-sided as she acknowledges it to be. She is a determined advocate of her own views and a powerful polemicist. Sadly, what she has not given us in these pages is an accurate picture of the Diocese of Sydney or of World Anglicanism. What she casts as a threat, many others around the world would welcome as a beacon of hope.

---