

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

The See of Canterbury

STEPHEN NEILL

THE ARCHDEACON OF WESTMINSTER is well known for his humane, indeed urbane, historical scholarship. I can think of no one, except perhaps Canon Charles Smyth, who could have produced so engaging a panorama of a hundred archbishops of Canterbury.*

Dr. Carpenter has wisely resisted the temptation to string his archbishops out on a line—to make a hundred brief biographies interesting would overtax the resources of the most skilled historian and writer. He has depicted a number of them in groups. Even so the Anglo-Saxons remain shadowy figures, and few of the medievals are really interesting. When we come to the Reformation, it seems to me that Dr. Carpenter has not fully understood the greatness of Cranmer, has been a little too kind to Pole, a little indecisive on Laud. And I do not know how anyone could make the Georgian bishops interesting; they were on the whole a poor lot, and the best of the bishops of that time, Joseph Butler, never attained to the primacy.

As we approach modern times the sketches become more individual and more alive. Dr. Carpenter is very good on Tait and Davidson, good on Benson and Lang, a little weak on the two Temples. I judge it to have been a mistake to include Geoffrey Fisher—the time has not yet come at which it will be possible to see in perspective that enigmatic figure. His remarks on the present holder of the office are thin and unrevealing.

So a more than competent job. My real question, however, is whether the Archdeacon was put by his publishers on to a really rewarding enterprise. The archbishop of Canterbury is not a pope. It matters very much who is pope; in a very real sense it does not matter very much who is archbishop of Canterbury. When the unfortunate George Abbott ceased to function and when William Wake sank into senility, the Church of England managed to get on

**Cantuar: The Archbishops in Their Office.* Edward Carpenter. Cassell. viii + 562 pp. £4.20.

remarkably well without an effective occupant of Lambeth Palace. I doubt whether it is possible to present a satisfying picture of Anglican history in terms of Canterbury and Lambeth alone.

In the past century the Church of Rome has had eight popes and the Church of England has had eight archbishops of Canterbury. It may be of interest to compare the two lists. Here they are:

Pius IX: in his old age moody and bitterly intransigent

Leo XIII: an elegant scholar and a skilled diplomat

Pius X: godly but muddle-headed

Benedict XV: wholly inadequate to the iron age in which he had to rule

Pius XI: a real scholar, authoritarian and given to 'sacred rages'

Pius XII: a highly skilful diplomat, but once again inadequate to the demands of the Hitlerian epoch

John XXIII: great neither in scholarship nor in diplomacy, but in the warmth of an outgoing Christian personality

Paul VI: devout, humble, but cautious to the point of timidity.

Now for the Anglicans:

Tait: outstanding in almost every way, but not always wise

Benson: learned and pious; a scholar who grew to be a statesman

Frederick Temple: a towering giant, but 75 is too late to come to Canterbury

Davidson: wise and humble, perhaps the greatest statesman of the twentieth century

Lang: brilliant and eloquent, but with feet of clay

William Temple: perhaps the greatest Christian of the century

Fisher: an excellent head master and general manager of the Church of England

Ramsey: a polished orator, but with limited gifts of leadership.

On balance the Anglicans have it. The Romans have had no man as learned as William Temple or as eloquent as Lang, and several of the Anglicans were at least the equal of their opposite numbers in diplomatic skill. Yet, whereas each of the popes left a mark on world history, of the archbishops only William Temple has left an enduring legacy, and that rather through his ecumenical work than in his purely Anglican capacity.

But now the situation is changing. The archbishop like the pope is head of a world wide Christian fellowship, and though the Anglican communion is much smaller than the Roman, the second Vatican Council did not err when it said that the Anglican Communion holds a special position in the Christian world. What will future archbishops make of this new situation? It has been suggested by cynics that the United Kingdom might consider joining the Commonwealth. In the same way it may be suggested that the Church of England might think

of joining the Anglican Communion. It has shown few signs so far of doing so. To an astonishing extent the English provinces seem to think and act as though they were the Anglican Communion, and have failed to realise that the provinces of Canterbury and York are the most provincial and backward of all the Anglican provinces. They have only just secured the synodical government which New Zealand has had since 1852, and have given little indication of a capacity to use it now that they have it.

Since 1523 the Roman Catholic Church has had nothing but Italian popes. Italy has an astonishing capacity for throwing up really great men; but there is a widespread feeling in the Roman Church that this tradition of more than four centuries should now be abandoned. Is it likely that we shall always have good archbishops of Canterbury, if the choice is limited to the holders of English sees? In 1928 either Gregg of Armagh or Foss Westcott of Calcutta would have made a better archbishop of Canterbury than Cosmo Gordon Lang, but I have never heard that either of them was even considered—no doubt because Gregg had had the good fortune to be born an Irishman and Westcott because he had committed the cardinal error of spending long years in the service of Christ in India. But, if the present incumbent of the post were to decide tomorrow that the time had come to take his well-earned rest, it should be possible to name seven or eight prelates outside England who have at least as good a claim to election as the holders of English dioceses (some of these of course would be English by birth). It might seem odd if an American were to become the first subject of the Crown after the royal dukes, but the Church of England has found solutions to much more difficult problems than this. And if the Anglican Communion is to become genuinely a world wide communion, surely some provision must be made, as in the Church of Rome, for international election. Dr. Carpenter does, in the closing pages of his book, take some not very adventurous glances towards the future; but I am of the opinion that far more radical thinking is needed than is fashionable in the cloistered world of English churchmanship.

I should be unthankful if I did not end by saying that this book contains a great deal of extremely interesting information, most of it unfamiliar to the author of *Anglicanism*; I am deeply indebted to a writer who has taught me so much.