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

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

Churchman

EDITORIAL

A Wake-up Call to Evangelicals

On 23rd July 2002 Prime Minister Tony Blair revealed what had, by then, become one of the worst-kept secrets in recent British history, when he announced that the Archbishop of Wales, Dr Rowan Williams, would succeed Dr George Carey at Canterbury and thus become the presiding bishop, not only of the Church of England, but of the entire Anglican Communion. Six months of arduous (and at times malodorous) campaigning had landed Dr Williams the 'top job', thereby fulfilling what had evidently been an old (if perhaps not lifelong) ambition of his. To be fair to Dr Williams, he said not a word during this process, but the critical observer cannot help but wonder just how innocent this silence really was. In January 2002 it was rumoured that Dr Michael Nazir-Ali, the bishop of Rochester, was a leading candidate for the post, whereupon he was viciously attacked in the press for sins and failings of which he was not guilty. In defending himself, Dr Nazir-Ali mentioned that the appointment to Canterbury was not a competition, and that there were many in the church who were far worthier than he was to occupy that see. When it became clear, as it very soon did, that the attacks on Dr Nazir-Ali were designed to clear the way for Dr Williams, the latter could surely have issued a similar statement, disclaiming any unseemly ambition which might see him benefit from the misfortunes of others, but not a word emerged from that quarter.

In the following months, Dr Williams' fan club went to extraordinary lengths, both to praise him to the skies and to dismiss the claims of any potential rivals. We were told that he stands head and shoulders above any other bishop in the church, that he has a brilliant intellect, that he is deeply spiritual, that he alone will turn the church around in the direction which it now needs to go. Mention of the Bishop of London on the other hand, solicited the remark that if he were to be appointed, there would be a mass exodus from General Synod, something which (it was assumed) would be a tragedy for the church! When even Desmond Tutu was seconded to sing Dr Williams' praises on Newsnight, it must have been obvious to all but the most naive that there was a highly organised campaign going on, which would stop at nothing to get its man elected. Dr Williams cannot have been unaware of this, and could easily have disavowed the claims of his more ardent supporters, but again he said nothing,

and when the announcement was finally made, it was obvious from his response that he regarded himself as fully able and ready to do the job to which he had been appointed. Not all pride takes the form of boasting, and Dr Williams demonstrated only too clearly how clever a tactic his own very public silence had been.

When it dawned on the general public that the inevitable was about to happen, a group of leading Evangelicals wrote to the Prime Minister, pleading for a last-minute intervention on his part which would stop the bandwagon in its tracks. To no-one's surprise, the tactic failed, though they did succeed in showing everyone where the main opposition to Dr Williams is likely to come from in the next few years. Between Evangelicals and Dr Williams there is a great gulf fixed, which will not be bridged by any conciliatory remarks on his part (none of which have been forthcoming so far, incidentally), nor even by the usual wobbling on the left wing of the Evangelical constituency, which has already manifested itself in some quarters. The nature of this gulf is theological, but it is also intellectual, psychological, temperamental and cultural. However one looks at it, there is almost no point of contact between Dr Williams and the Evangelical world, and he shows no sign of any desire to establish the kinds of links which would be needed to gain Evangelical trust and support. When interviewed recently in *The Times* (shortly before the official announcement of his appointment), Dr Williams described Evangelicals as people who bang tambourines and sing Blessed Assurance, and let it be known that every once in a while he too feels the urge to join in! One would like to know precisely when he last felt that urge, and even more, where he went to satisfy it, since there are precious few Evangelical churches which match his description of them, but the tone of thinly-veiled contempt which lies behind such remarks comes across loud and clear.

Evangelicals who may have been dismayed by Dr Williams' remarks to the press need to realise that they were mild indeed, compared to what he has published elsewhere. Those who want to familiarise themselves with his overall theological outlook need go no further than the collection of essays which he recently published under the title *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000). There it emerges that Dr Williams' chief guide to things evangelical is none other than James Barr, whose notoriously inaccurate and bitter fundamentalism, Dr Williams seems to take as an obvious statement of fact.

Had the evangelical letter-writers mentioned above read this collection of essays beforehand, they would have found Dr Williams' reply to their approach clearly stated on p 58:

...so far from the literal or historical sense [of Scripture] being a resource of problem-solving clarity, as it might appear to be for the fundamentalist, an area of simple truthfulness over against the dangerously sophisticated pluralism of a disobedient Church, it may rather encourage us to take historical responsibility for arguing and exploring how the gospel is going to be heard in our day.

In other words, what the Bible says is not authoritative for us today. Rather, what the ancient text does is provide a locus of theological conversation, a challenge to our minds to work out how we can and should experience the divine in our own historical context.

Readers familiar with the development of academic theology since the Enlightenment will see that this is a clear, indeed forceful, statement of the most deeply secular theology imaginable. In traditionalist terms, it is justified on the basis of the incarnation of Christ, a belief which states that the divine is fully involved with, and revealed in, the everyday life of the world. Of course it is necessary now, as it was then, to penetrate beyond superficial details and discover the essential heart of the mystery. Those who call themselves Christians continue to believe that Jesus is the most helpful guide in this respect—the fullest expression (so far at least) of what it means to be truly human. Nevertheless, Christians must always be open to hear the voice of those who are unable to find the deepest meaning of life in the person and work of Jesus, and to proclaim their solidarity with all who are trying to make sense of their universe, as long as they display the appropriate degree of intellectual maturity and integrity in doing so. From this perspective, Iris Murdoch and John Hick are fellow travellers in search of the meaning of life, while John Stott or Jim Packer are not even on the radar screen.

In Dr Williams' world, Evangelicals simply do not measure up to his criteria of what a theologian is. They are not mature, because they turn the Bible into an idol and worship it, instead of using its resources to plumb the spiritual depths of the human heart. They are not intellectual, because they are always trying to

simplify things for general consumption, instead of creating sentences of labyrinthine complexity which tread a fine line between subtlety and obfuscation, and which may (in the end) not say anything at all. Worse still, Evangelicals lack integrity, because although they have been fully exposed to the bright lights of modern social, psychological and philosophical theories, they have chosen to ignore them. Opinions which were acceptable for an Athanasius or a Thomas Aquinas, who lived before the age of Enlightenment, are impossible for a modern person, and Evangelicals who persist in thinking otherwise are flying in the face of known facts—proof (if any were needed) of their lack of integrity. A community which thinks of John Stott and Jim Packer as spiritual guides, while ignoring or disparaging the likes of Iris Murdoch and John Hick, is not a fellowship in which Dr Williams is likely to feel at home, and we must not be surprised if he stays away from it as much as possible.

Dr Williams' appointment to Canterbury is nothing less than a wake-up call to Evangelicals in the Church of England. For a generation, we have fondly imagined that increasing numbers would mean greater influence, and that over time the Church would move in our direction. Instead, what we see is an institution which has fallen into the hands of pressure groups whose interests lie about as far from Evangelical concerns as it is possible to get. There should be no misunderstanding about this; Dr Williams' fan club is heavily infiltrated by feminist and gay activists, who have a very clear agenda for the kind of change in the Church which they wish to bring about. In the normal course of events, Dr Williams may be with us until 2020, long enough to see a number of women bishops in post, and long enough for the opposition to the ministry of practising homosexuals to have withered away. Dr Williams is known to favour both these causes (doubters, please read p 289 of the above-mentioned book) and although the first will require a painful process of legislation which may be interrupted by the insensitivities of off-message traditionalists, the second will easily emerge by stealth. Bishops who are prepared to ordain practising homosexuals are now free to do so, since it is inconceivable that Dr Williams will try to discipline someone who will be doing no more than what he himself has already done. A critical mass of such people will quickly build up, and without a word being said by anyone, the climate of opinion in General Synod will have changed beyond recognition before the wider public has even noticed.

The Crown Appointments Commission already has a gay activist in its ranks, and it is not hard to imagine what the next round of episcopal appointments will look like. The ideal candidate, in fact, will be an 'open' Evangelical who can claim to represent that wing of the church while at the same time bending to the gods and goddesses of political correctness on everything that really matters. Two days after Dr Williams' appointment was announced, Bishop Gavin Reid (a well-known 'open' Evangelical and formerly suffragan bishop of Maidstone in the Canterbury diocese) was writing to *The Times* saying that Dr Williams' move to Canterbury may be a sign that it is time for us to rethink our position on homosexual practice! If Bishop Reid were thirty years younger, he would be a leading diocesan in no time, and there will certainly be enough men of his calibre to fill the depleting episcopal ranks over the next five to ten years. Evangelicals must wake up. Whether we like it or not, the battle for the Church of England's soul will be fought out in General Synod, not least in the 2005 elections, where Dr Williams' troops will be out in force. Will we develop a counter strategy to defeat this, or will we simply bury our heads in the sand yet again, and let the forces of post-modernity subvert and destroy what is left of the Christian faith revealed to us in God's holy Word? This is the stark choice which we face, and we may perhaps be grateful to Dr Williams and his supporters for making us face it as clearly as we now must.

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