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Churchman

EDITORIAL

The world turned upside down

The events which have shaken the Anglican Communion over the past few months are unprecedented, even to those who spend their lives cataloguing each new descent of the Western churches in that Communion into heresy and disintegration. It has long been known that the 'homosexual question' would prove to be more difficult than something like the ordination of women, but few people had predicted either the scale or the nature of the reaction against it. In a few cases, there have been some truly remarkable realignments which may prove to be of seminal importance in the years ahead. For example, although the American South is well-known for its conservatism and no-one will be surprised to discover that many (probably most) of the Episcopal churches there are horrified at the recent election of a practising homosexual as bishop of New Hampshire, the nature of Southern traditionalism does not immediately suggest that they would turn to a place like Rwanda for assistance. But faced with a choice between a white American homosexual bishop and a black-skinned African archbishop, there has been no hesitation—Rwanda has won hands down. The celebrant may look more like the church janitor than like any of the worshippers in the pews, but it does not matter—the claims of truth have succeeded in breaking down a prejudice which years of anti-discriminatory legislation had barely touched.

Nor has the Church of England been immune to this sort of thing. We would expect that conservative Evangelicals would look to Sydney in times of crisis, as they have long done. But the voice of Sydney has been amplified by less familiar tones, from the West Indies, Singapore, Nigeria, South America... Quite literally, the sun does not set on the conservative empire within Anglicanism, though few of its manifestations could pass muster as 'English' in any cultural sense. The surprising thing is that this has not only been accepted, it has been welcomed in England (of all places), and the Anglican Communion factor is now one to be reckoned with in domestic church affairs, in a way which has never before been true. When even Breakfast with Frost conducts the debate between 'liberals' and 'conservatives' by juxtaposing two

archbishops—Sydney and Cape Town (bypassing the more familiar duo of Canterbury and York), you know that something unprecedented is going on.

At last, it seems that the declining churches of the West and the burgeoning churches of the developing world have passed each other in the league tables, and the latter have now taken the upper hand in the Communion as a whole. Some people have pointed out that if the developing countries have the numbers, it is the West which still has most of the money and resources, but this 'advantage', if it is one, is deceptive. Money tends to follow conviction, and there is no reason to suppose that it will not be forthcoming in poor countries if the motivation for it is strong enough. At the other end of the scale, we know that finances will dry up in the liberal West, particularly now that endowments have fallen and the churches are more dependent than ever on the generosity of their members. As the biggest givers are also usually the most conservative, traditionalists have discovered that they possess a weapon with real clout. It may take some time for them to figure out how best to use it, but once they do, the liberal establishments of Britain, North America and Australasia will be running for their lives. Not before time, you may think, but the way in which this has happened is surely a sign of God's wonderful sense of humour. The pride of the West has been humbled from within, and yesterday's catechists now look as though they may turn out to be the saviours of the worldwide communion.

Of course, we must be careful not to read too much into recent developments. One swallow does not make a summer, and it is by no means clear that the current conjunction of forces will survive once the issue which has produced it is defused. Whatever happens over the next few months and years, there seems to be a general consensus that it is the future of the American Episcopal Church which is the most doubtful of all. For many years now it has experienced a steady dribbling away of conservative clergy and congregations, leaving perhaps half a dozen 'continuing' churches which claim the mantle of traditional Anglicanism. If these groups can unite and make common cause with the conservatives who have remained within the mainstream church, there is a real chance that they can create a genuine alternative to establishment Episcopalianism as it is now perceived. But church mergers are not traditional in America—all the history suggests that further fragmentation is more likely to be the end result, in which case the mainline church will scarcely be affected.

The Anglican churches of Canada and Australia are most probably going to fragment into loose diocesan federations, with some equivalent of the English 'flying bishops' ministering to congregations outside the recognised boundaries. Already it seems that the bishop of the Yukon has offered his services to the breakaway dissidents in New Westminster (Vancouver), and Sydney would doubtless do the same for anyone in Australia who might wish to call on its services. In New Zealand there are so few conservatives that they can probably be ignored, and the same may be true of Scotland and Wales. Most of the other churches (including Ireland) are likely to be mainly conservative in orientation, and liberals there may face the same situation in reverse. This leaves the Church of England, still (for historical reasons) the most important church in the Communion and the most difficult one to predict.

The Church of England remains a special case, and what happens elsewhere cannot be transferred here as straightforwardly as some might imagine. There is no way, for example, that any prelate from Rwanda, Nigeria or even Australia can exercise spiritual jurisdiction in this country—the establishment status of the church sees to that. Likewise, the Church of England cannot divide along diocesan lines in the way that other churches can, because no diocese is monochrome in its churchmanship and no bishop has the power to make it become so. The recent embarrassment in Oxford demonstrates quite clearly what the possibilities—and the limitations—are. An English diocesan bishop can appoint anyone he likes as his suffragan, regardless of what the rest of the church might think about it, but if his choice is eccentric there will be a powerful body of parishes which will protest—and in the current financial crisis, such a body cannot be ignored. In Oxford, the objectors were mostly Evangelical, but of course this need not be the case—there could easily be a similar chorus of disapproval if a Reform bishop were to be appointed somewhere else, and an analogous climb-down is not to be ruled out if that should happen. Above all, the English parish clergy can ignore their bishops if they have to, to a degree which is not possible elsewhere, and churchmanship is fairly well entrenched at the local level.

In England moreover, the secular media take an unusual degree of interest in church affairs, probably because the church is seen as a department of state. These media are almost uniformly hostile to the Evangelical position, and in a

country where non-churchgoers like to think they can have a say in its affairs, this may have a considerable impact on church policy. At another level, there is simply no telling what power might be wielded by cliques close to the Prime Minister, or by unrepresentative members of the General Synod, elected by small but committed minorities who know what Synod can achieve if it puts its mind to it. In these circles, Evangelicals remain seriously under-represented, and there is a real danger that they will be forced to take action outside the system as the only sure way of being heard. But that is a weapon which can be used only so often before those who wield it are discredited, and given the fact that others in the church are desperate to make Evangelicals *personae non gratae* in its counsels, care must be exercised in this area. The freedom to manoeuvre is less than might at first sight appear, and English Evangelicals are unfortunately almost as prone to faction and disintegration as Americans are. Particularly dangerous is the English habit of walking out once the going gets tough—a policy which is sure to be as disastrous in church affairs as it has been in the European Union. The French have a saying for this—*les absents ont toujours tort* (those who are not there are always wrong)—but, as we might expect, there is no English equivalent to this phrase. The English simply do not understand just how true it is, and carry on regardless, with the result that the field is left to those who are less principled in their behaviour. But if the conservatives are to win this struggle, they will have to engage for the long haul, and that will mean stomaching reverses as well as celebrating triumphs. For years, we have been accustomed to fighting battles only to lose them in the end, and we have watched helplessly as one position after another has been surrendered to our opponents. Now, for the first time in living memory, there is a real chance that this pattern of defeat can at last be reversed. The world has indeed turned upside down. The question now is—have Evangelicals lost their footing in the process, or can they make the most of this unforeseen opportunity, and win the church back to the Gospel of Christ, for whose glory alone we live and move and have our being?

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