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Churchman

EDITORIAL

A Threat to World Anglicanism?

When the Apostle Paul was told that his critics were preaching the Gospel he rejoiced, not because it made him think any more highly of them, but because Christ was being proclaimed, and it did not matter to him whether those doing it were sincere or not (Philippians 1:15-18). That thought springs naturally to mind after reading Dr. Muriel Porter's book, *Sydney Anglicans and the threat to world Anglicanism* (Ashgate, 2011). Dr. Porter is a well-known commentator on Australian church affairs and a veteran campaigner for the ordination of women in that country. She is well-connected in Liberal Catholic circles around the Anglican Communion, and her views on the main issues of the day are what one would expect from those of her persuasion. There is however, one thing that makes Dr. Porter stand out from the rest. She has a particular animosity towards the diocese of Sydney, about which she has already written one book (*The New Puritans*) and whose influence, real or imagined, she condemns at every turn.

Why does she do this? As a stickler for church order, Dr. Porter will no doubt appreciate that canon 53 of 1604, which may still have some residual force in Australia, specifically enjoins preachers not to oppose one another in open confrontation. Whatever disagreements they might have, and Anglicans have always had plenty, their dirty linen was not to be washed in public. Dr. Porter may think that her status as a lay woman excuses her from having to comply with such a directive, but its spirit ought surely to govern relationships within the church at every level. It is one thing for her to express an opinion in a synod debate and engage in controversy with those who oppose it, but quite another to write a book denouncing members of her own church with whom she disagrees. That is not the Christian way, and Dr. Porter has a lot of explaining to do if she expects others to accept that she has some right to cast the first stone against those of whom she disapproves.

It is no good retorting that Sydney Anglicans also say unkind things about their opponents. That may be true of some of them, but it is not true of them all and

nobody in Sydney, however deeply they may feel about what Dr. Porter has said against their diocese, would dream of writing a counterblast to her tirade. Christians just do not respond in that way, and whatever else Sydney Anglicans may be, they are at least Christians. Dr. Porter can say what she likes, but her behaviour has offended against the spirit of the Gospel and can only discredit what she says.

As far as the content of the book is concerned, Dr. Porter's analysis is a mish-mash of fact and fiction, based to an unacceptable degree on the reports and impressions of her contacts in Sydney rather than on hard evidence. She is apparently unable to distinguish the Evangelical world generally from Sydney diocese in particular, and seems to think that the two are more or less coterminous, with the Sydney leadership in charge of the rest. To her mind, the informal worship style found in most Sydney churches is a local aberration promoted by that leadership, whereas anyone who travels around the world will soon see that it is all but universal nowadays. She does not have to like it, but it is hardly fair to blame Sydney for it! The same must be said for more serious matters, like Sydney's opposition to the ordination of women and its strong stand against homosexual practice. These views are mainstream in Evangelical circles around the world and are in no sense the result of Sydney Anglican influence.

A truly outside observer (that is, someone from outside Australia) will not detect the hand of Sydney in these things, nor will he believe that the growing opposition to the Liberal Catholic agenda within the Anglican Communion is directed from Moore Theological College, as Dr. Porter seems to think it is. Sydney and Moore College have an important part to play and they are playing it well, but they do not dominate the agenda, even in GAFCON. African primates are very conscious of their status and are not going to be pushed around by outsiders, as the Archbishop of Canterbury has discovered to his cost. The Americans listen to nobody but themselves. As for the non-Anglican Evangelical world, it has no intention of accepting the leadership of an Anglican archbishop. On the other side, Sydney Anglicans are remarkably humble in their dealings with others and open to suggestions from many quarters. They are well aware that they are not perfect and far more self-critical than most of their critics are, though the latter are too blind to see it.

Travellers around Australia quickly notice that Sydney Anglicans are unpopular, but they are liable to conclude that the main reason for this is what Australians call the ‘tall-poppy’ syndrome. According to this, anyone who stands out in a crowd must be cut down to size, which in Sydney’s case means bringing the diocese down a very long way indeed. As even Dr. Porter has to acknowledge, Sydney has prospered in a way that is not paralleled anywhere else in Australia. Her notion that the Anglican Church there would have done wonders if Sydney had not blocked its every move cannot be proved, but the evidence suggests that without Sydney the Anglican Church of Australia might only barely exist. Sydney Anglicans have been forced to plant independent churches in other dioceses because their style of Anglicanism is not welcome there, but there are no corresponding Liberal Catholic church plants in Sydney. The reason is simple—Evangelicals grow churches, but Liberals only destroy them. As a result, many Australian dioceses are on their last legs, with the only life there is surviving in the few remaining Evangelical parishes.

It is not for outsiders to pronounce on the complexities and vagaries of Australian church politics, which are recounted in numbing detail by Dr. Porter. Those with the courage to persevere will learn how the Liberal Catholics have been ‘forced’ to bend the rules to get what they want, a practice that Dr. Porter defends when her side does it while at the same time lambasting Sydney for going in a different direction. Suffice it to say that the legal wrangling that has surrounded the women’s issue and the trickery by which women were admitted to the episcopate in 2008 leave a bad taste in the mouth and make it impossible to believe that these things could have been the work of the Holy Spirit. By their fruits you shall know them, says the Bible, and the fruits of the Spirit are love, joy, peace, perseverance—things that are remarkably absent from Dr. Porter’s account.

In her concluding chapter she predicts the imminent demise of Sydney Anglicanism in its present form, claiming that it will be brought down by a combination of financial mismanagement, the failure of the current leadership to ensure an equally committed succession and the general fatigue of Sydney lay people, who apparently want their diocese to look more like Perth or Melbourne. It is perfectly true that Sydney is approaching a time of change, and that Peter Jensen’s successor will not enjoy the respect and authority that he has, if only because there is nobody of his stature and experience who can

take over. Whoever becomes the next archbishop will need Dr. Jensen's blessing and support, a fact which is likely to ensure that the man who is elected will follow his approach and policies. It would be irresponsible of the diocesan synod to choose anyone of a notably different outlook, and most of them must realise that. There is nothing to be gained from changing direction, not least because that would split the diocese and end whatever influence it has in the wider Anglican and Evangelical world. Dr. Jensen and his colleagues have laid a foundation for others to build on, and if those others are wise, they will do that and not seek to turn their diocese into another Adelaide or Brisbane, which is apparently what Dr. Porter would like to see.

What is remarkable about this book is that it indicates how much the Liberals in the Anglican Communion feel that they are suddenly on the defensive. For many years, Evangelicals have been content (more or less) to let them prance around in fancy dress and deny basic elements of the faith, as long as they themselves were left in peace. The push to ordain women wrong-footed Evangelicals, some of whom were foolish enough to support it. They failed to understand that what to them is a secondary issue is of primary importance to its supporters, who are quite prepared to unchurch anyone who objects. The sad fact is that opposing women's ordination is not just a matter of disagreeing about something indifferent; it is also about insisting that such a thing is not the Gospel issue that its proponents insist it is. Evangelicals also failed to see that on the back of the women's issue would come that of homosexuality, which adds moral degradation to canonical irregularity. People like Dr. Porter profess to be astonished that Evangelicals can be accommodating towards polygamy (at least in the African context) and supportive of diaconal or lay presidency at the eucharist, while standing firm against the ordination of women and of practising homosexuals. What she cannot grasp is that the Old Testament tolerated polygamy in certain circumstances (without approving of it in principle) and the New Testament says nothing about who should preside at holy communion. On the other hand, it does say that women should not exercise authority over men and condemns homosexual practice.

That Sydney Anglicans (and by extension, Evangelicals generally) might be guided by the Bible in these as in other matters is simply beyond Dr. Porter's grasp. To her way of thinking, everything is either psychological or political. She even claims that Sydney Anglicans oppose women's ordination because they

have a deep-seated fear of women that goes back to the First Fleet of 1788, where the imbalance of the sexes was such that women were virtually forced into prostitution. Needless to say, it never crosses her mind that the same logic might be applied in reverse. What would she say if someone in Sydney were to suggest that her attitudes were due to a psychological inability to relate to men? She would be outraged, of course, but cannot see that those whom she accuses in this manner have every right to feel equally aggrieved by her unwarranted speculations about them.

Why this book was ever published is a mystery. It is part of a series entitled ‘Ashgate Contemporary Ecclesiology’, which is edited by Martyn Percy, principal of Ripon College Cuddesdon, Thomas Hughson of Marquette University in the USA and Bruce Kaye, who is actually a Sydney Anglican of sorts. How did such a slipshod piece of work get past them? Dr. Hughson may be excused, but Bruce Kaye should have known better (if he was consulted), as should Martyn Percy. Dr. Percy wrote the foreword, in which he hints that things are not as simple as Dr. Porter portrays them, but after warning people not to use the word ‘fundamentalist’ as a description of conservative religious believers, he then proceeds to ignore his own advice and launches into Sydney Anglicans as if they were archetypal examples of the phenomenon.

It is a disturbing and discreditable performance that will do nothing to advance the Liberal Catholic cause which both he and Dr. Porter champion. Perhaps we should be grateful for that. The Apostle Paul let his critics do their worst, but in the end it is his legacy and not theirs that has come down to us. Persecution is the lot of faithful believers and always has been, but the God whom we serve is greater than the forces ranged against him and we have Christ’s own assurance that the gates of hell will not prevail. Far from being threatened, world Anglicanism is slowly recovering its roots in the Gospel, and in that recovery the diocese of Sydney is playing a part for which those in less fortunate circumstances can only be eternally grateful.

GERALD BRAY