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Churchman

EDITORIAL

A double-minded man

The archbishop of Canterbury's resignation announcement has brought an end to the speculation about his future that had been hanging in the air for some time. It had been widely predicted that he would go after the queen's jubilee and the completion of a decade in office, which is what we now see coming to pass. The return of Tom Wright to academia a couple of years ago set a respectable precedent for Rowan Williams to follow, and few will begrudge him the opportunity that he has been given to make his mark as master of Magdalene College, Cambridge. The post is one of those that England abounds in and that come in useful when prominent people have to be disposed of in a dignified way. It is not a sinecure but neither does it have a well-defined job description, allowing the incumbent wide latitude in what he chooses to do, since everyone knows that it will not matter much one way or the other. It will suit Dr. Williams perfectly and we must hope that he will use the years remaining to him to produce the books that he wants to write. He is at his best as a literary critic and now he will have the time to read and research his favourite topics to his heart's content. His departure from Lambeth Palace should not be seen as the end of a career but as the beginning of a new and potentially fruitful phase of it, and we wish him well.

Those with long memories will recall that when Dr. Williams was appointed a decade ago we at Churchman predicted that his tenure would not be a happy one and that he would have been better off refusing the poisoned chalice of Canterbury altogether. It was not a popular view at the time, and particularly not among those 'open' Evangelicals for whom toadying to the establishment is what believing in the holy catholic church is all about. Now however, we can look back and see that this unwelcome pronouncement was prophetic and that it has come to be shared by a wide range of church opinion. It is a sad outcome for a man who did not deserve the suffering he has had to endure and we must pray that Magdalene will be a place of healing and inspiration for a fresh departure.

The brutal truth is that Dr. Williams was never cut out for the archbishopric, which requires political skills and a common touch that he lacks. Time and

again, his statements have been misinterpreted, his interventions in politics have been misguided and his attempts to lead the church he loves have ended in frustration. It is sadly typical of him that his most memorable statement remains the comment he made that some elements of sharia law should be recognised by the British courts. That was a basically sensible and inoffensive suggestion but it was quickly taken out of context by the press and presented as a major attack on our national way of life from someone whose job it is to defend our most cherished traditions. A more street-wise person would have kept quiet about Islam, particularly in the current climate, but Dr. Williams does not sup with ordinary mortals and that simple truth seems to have passed him by.

Evangelicals have never warmed to him, partly because he is too different in temperament and interests to have much appeal to them, and partly because his views on some things, like the gay agenda, are anathema to any orthodox Christian. To his credit, Dr. Williams attempted to draw a line in the sand by stating publicly that he would not pursue that agenda while in office, but his fundamental convictions are known to all and have made it impossible for him to forge a serious working relationship with the Evangelical constituency either at home or abroad. Given that the Evangelical wing of the church is the one that is expanding the most, this has been a serious handicap that nothing short of a complete change of heart on his part could have removed. That was not to be and the result has been a split in the Anglican Communion that may now be impossible to heal.

Dr. Williams certainly has his friends and admirers, but their behaviour has done him more harm than good. When news of his resignation broke, tributes poured in from left-wing politicians and representatives of other faiths, yet apart from those officials of the Church of England who would be expected to make favourable comments, little has been heard from Anglicans and almost nothing from Evangelicals. The chief rabbi was hyperbolic enough in his praise to say that Dr. Williams has been the greatest archbishop of Canterbury 'in centuries', which makes one wonder how far back he was thinking. As far back as William Laud (1633-45), perhaps? Other admirers have developed the habit of telling the world that Dr. Williams is one of the holiest people they know, even putting him on a par with the Dalai Lama. Considering that the Dalai Lama is the head of a false religion and that his claim to be the reincarnation of his predecessor is scarcely credible, that is perhaps not the sort of accolade that an archbishop of Canterbury should aspire to, but there we are. If his supporters fail to understand the difference between a Christian and a Buddhist

their opinion must be regarded with some suspicion, which unfortunately rubs off on Dr. Williams when such things are said about him.

But the worst of Dr. Williams' friends have been those who have sought to use him to push their own agenda. First in that particular queue was Richard Harries, the former bishop of Oxford, who used the occasion of Dr. Williams' appointment to advance the career of a mutual friend, Dr. Jeffrey John. Almost before anyone knew what was happening, Dr. John found himself somewhat surreptitiously named as the next suffragan bishop of Reading, a post that was then in Dr. Harries' gift. If anyone thought that God's watchmen could be caught unawares they were soon disabused of that belief. There was a grassroots revolt at the prospect that a well-known gay activist might be named a bishop, and the end result was an embarrassing climbdown that was humiliating for all concerned. Ten years later the affair still rankles in liberal circles and it has even been suggested that Dr. John might sue the church for failing to appoint him! The responsibility for this fiasco must rest squarely with Dr. Harries, who knew exactly what he was doing and obviously thought that he could get away with it. With friends like that, what need did Dr. Williams have of enemies?

Another person who belongs in this category is Ms Schori, the presiding bishop of the American Episcopal Church, whom Dr. Williams did his utmost to win over, but to no avail. In dealing with Ms Schori and her colleagues compromise is not possible, and whenever Dr. Williams suggested it, it was thrown back in his face. At one point Ms Schori even went around the world trying to drum up support for an opposition movement to the archbishop, a tactic which failed but which demonstrates just what a wonderful person she is to work with.

Closer to home, Dr. Williams' attempts to steer the Church of England towards a middle course on the consecration of women bishops were clearly (and even rudely) rebuffed by the activists in General Synod, who used every procedural tactic available to scupper any deal. At the time of writing, the final outcome of this catastrophe is not yet clear, but whatever it is, Dr. Williams' authority within his own church has been destroyed. That is clear from the rejection of the Anglican Covenant, a project dear to his heart but alien to the Church of England. The Covenant proposes that no member church of the Anglican Communion will adopt innovations in its polity without the consent of the others, which is sensible enough. Had such a procedure been adopted in 1958 it might have saved us a lot of heartache, but now the horse has bolted and locking the stable door seems to be a pointless exercise. The truth is that the Americans (and others

allied with them) have no intention of backing down on their openly declared apostasy from the Christian faith and the other churches of the Communion will not have fellowship with them as long as they persist in their sinful ways. Trying to pretend that this impasse can be resolved by ongoing dialogue is nonsense and only discredits those proponents of the Covenant who suggest that it can.

The shipwreck of the Covenant brings us to the heart of Dr. Williams' long-term failure as archbishop. He sincerely wanted to keep the Anglican Communion together but believed that he could do this by political compromises that ignored the fundamental truths of the Christian faith. We are back to what Sir Humphrey said twenty-five years ago in "Yes, Prime Minister"—'The Church of England likes to keep the balance between those who believe in God and those who do not.' Sir Humphrey knew what he was talking about—in real life, he too was a gay activist. Alas, Christian truth is not decided by balancing acts or majority votes but by the teaching of divine revelation. As Dr. Williams knows only too well, Arius had the majority of the church on his side, but he lost out to Athanasius and the orthodox because he was wrong and his opponents were prepared to suffer for the truth. That was a long time ago, but the basic principle still holds good. Church councils can vote for whatever they like, but if they are wrong, the people of God will rise up in protest, as the emergence of GAFCON has shown.

Those who do not submit to the Word of God will pay a heavy price and harm the church more than they know. This, sadly, must be the final verdict on Dr. Williams as archbishop of Canterbury. As the Apostle saw so clearly, a double-minded man is unstable in all his ways (James 1:8). Dr. Williams' instability has brought the church to the point where the Anglican ship of faith is about to capsize. His successor's first task will be to steady it by tossing the Americans and their ungodly allies overboard, and by setting its course firmly towards the Morning Star that is Christ, who alone can give us light. Whether that will happen only time will tell, but the agenda for the next Archbishop of Canterbury is clear. The spiritual renewal of the church will come at a price, but without it the Anglican Communion is doomed. We must pray that those charged with making the appointment will be aware of this and be prepared to do what is necessary to ensure that there is at least some hope for what is bound to be a turbulent future.

GERALD BRAY