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Churchman

EDITORIAL

Conformity or compromise?

The summer of 2012 sees the 350th anniversary of the so-called ‘great ejection’ of 1662, when those ministers who could not subscribe to the Book of Common Prayer or minister according to its rubrics were forced into the ecclesiastical wilderness, taking with them whoever was determined enough to follow them. The event is now hailed by the free churches as the beginning of the English Dissenting tradition while the Church of England prefers to concentrate on the positive aspect—the achievement of the classical form of the Prayer Book that is still one of its official formularies today.

To some degree, the controversies of the seventeenth century have now receded into the past to the extent that they can be studied in a more dispassionate manner than was possible even fifty years ago. For example, a commemorative book edited by Alan Sell (*The great ejection of 1662*) contains a number of articles by different scholars who admit that the Dissenters’ claims have been exaggerated. The 1700 or so ejected ministers of legend have seen their numbers dwindle to something like 980, and will probably be fewer still when proper research has been done on all of them. Only about five percent of the population followed them, and many of them kept one foot in the door of the established church. Some famous names departed, but a generation later Dissent was in decline and might have disappeared had it not been for the Evangelical revival which restored its fortunes.

Those who remained in the national church were expected to conform outwardly, but what they thought or preached from the pulpit was largely up to them, as long as it was not seditious. It was certainly possible for faithful clergymen to go on preaching the Gospel and many did so, though it must be admitted that the church’s leadership was of a rather different mind. At the Restoration, King Charles II promised a broadly-based toleration for tender consciences, and would probably have implemented that if he had been free to do so. Unfortunately, some of his most loyal supporters were high churchmen bent on revenge, and the spirit of godly compromise was largely absent from the discussions that took place at the Restoration. One puritan request after another was turned down, and although there were some minor modifications to the earlier liturgy, they were of little overall significance.

Modern students of this process often find it difficult to appreciate what the fuss was all about. Did people really worry about the sign of the cross at baptism, for instance, or about wearing a surplice in the pulpit? Why was it impossible for the contending parties to work out a compromise that would have allowed a degree of freedom in such matters? These modern feelings are all the stronger because in many ways we have achieved that freedom today. The Church of England is a big tent in which clerical dress runs the gamut from T-shirt and shorts at one end to the full Roman regalia at the other. People have their preferences, but the institution survives, so why bother about non-essentials?

It therefore comes as something of a shock to realise that the past is still with us, as Dr Andrew Atherstone has reminded us in his short booklet, *Scarf or stole at ordination?* (Latimer Trust, 2012). Every year a handful of Evangelical ordinands want to be ordained without having to wear the stole that most bishops prescribe for the occasion. The church's official position is that neither the stole nor any other form of clerical dress has any theological significance, but stoles were discarded at the Reformation because of their association with 'popery' and re-introduced in the nineteenth century by those who had little time for Protestantism. Consequently, many Evangelicals are convinced that stoles represent a theological position which they reject and they would prefer not to wear them. This should not bother anyone unduly, and from time to time church leaders have promised that nobody would be denied ordination simply for refusing to wear a stole. Unfortunately, that has not always been the case, as Dr Atherstone points out, and to this day considerable pressure is put on many ordinands who find themselves being asked to wear something that offends their conscience.

It is easy to be critical of the ordinands who make such a fuss, but what is it about stoles that makes so many bishops keen on them? Are they devotees of late Roman aristocratic dress? It seems unlikely. Do they subscribe to the doctrine of transubstantiation in the eucharist? That too is improbable. Do they have any idea why they wear stoles and want others to wear them? Perhaps not. The main reason for insisting on them is almost certainly a desire for outward conformity, so that the 'unity' of the Church will be on public display at events like ordinations.

That in itself is not a bad thing, and Evangelicals who dislike the way it is done might be reconciled to practices they find uncongenial if they were persuaded that the establishment was equally concerned for church unity on more substantial matters, like orthodox doctrine or traditional Christian morality. The knowledge that so many in the episcopate are weak on fundamentals, and often unconcerned with them, steels the resolve of Evangelicals to

show their dissatisfaction by symbolic protests like refusing to wear a stole. It may seem petty to some, but it is the tip of a much bigger iceberg that those who are irritated by the apparent insubordination of the rank and file want to pretend does not exist.

There is nothing new in this, of course. As Blair Worden has recently pointed out in his essay on the Earl of Clarendon, who was largely responsible for administering the 1662 settlement, those in charge were mainly interested in outward conformity and had little time for theology. (See 'Clarendon: history, religion, politics' in *God's instruments*, Oxford, 2012). To a man like Clarendon, John Owen, Richard Baxter and John Bunyan were just being obstreperous, which he thought was a sin even worse than their unwillingness to subscribe to everything in the Prayer Book. As far as he was concerned, they deserved their punishment, which probably should have been even more severe than it was. Mercy and compromise were not his style.

The fracturing of the Church of England that resulted from such intransigence has been long-lasting and has harmed both the church and the nation more than the men of 1662 could have imagined. High Anglicans refused to compromise even in 1689, when it was plain to all that the real danger came from Roman Catholics allied with foreign powers. In the nineteenth century, battles between church and chapel led to a secularisation of the state from which both now suffer. There has been some progress on the ecumenical front in recent years but not much, and the decline of the old free churches makes them unattractive partners for the Church of England, which has to struggle to keep its own ship afloat and cannot rescue others in distress.

But in spite of the dire situation in which we all find ourselves today, the desire within the Church to impose conformity in outward matters has not gone away. Quite apart from such things as stole-wearing, it has had a new lease of life in the ongoing debate about women bishops. It is now clear that sooner or later, women will be consecrated to the episcopal office, and that this move will be greeted with dismay by a large and varied number of church people. Attempts to include these dissenters in a broadly comprehensive settlement have been made, somewhat half-heartedly perhaps, but they have been rejected by the majority in General Synod. Indeed, some of those who are campaigning for female consecration get positively hysterical at any suggestion of compromise, because to them it means that women are being treated as second-class.

Opponents of women's ordination think differently, of course, but their leaders have made it clear that they do not want to stand in the way of those who desire women

bishops. What they want is the freedom not to have them, because in conscience they cannot square the practice of ordaining or consecrating women with the teaching of the New Testament. But even the most generous concessions from the other side insist that the opponents must accept consecrated women as genuine bishops. All the dissenters are being offered is the possibility that they will not have to be subjected to them. The provisions will not be set in stone but relegated to a code of practice, the ultimate fate of which is anyone's guess. Evangelicals now know, thanks to Dr Atherstone's research, that in the past the bishops gave assurances that nobody would be forced to wear a stole, and look what has happened to them. Ordinands opposed to ordained women can theoretically opt for a separate ordination service, even for a separate selection conference, but how often do the authorities try to nullify these rights? The arguments against them are distressingly familiar—we have to preserve our 'unity', it is too much trouble to cater for every individual preference, the time and money involved in making exceptions is not worth it... and so on.

Those who have heard the assurances before are not going to believe the bishops when they are told that nobody's conscience will be violated, because (in their eyes) many bishops are violating them already. The choice of stole or scarf may seem trivial, but behind it there lies a real gap of trust and understanding that somehow needs to be addressed and overcome. No Evangelical clergyman will ever confide in a woman bishop, even if he gives outward consent to her consecration. Women, who are usually more sensitive in such matters than men are, will be quick to pick this up and are unlikely to view the recalcitrant with kindness. There is trouble ahead, and a real risk that the great ejection will recur in our own time. If that happens, the fallout is liable to endure for centuries and produce lasting mistrust and division.

The men of 1662 did not have the same historical perspective that we have and perhaps they believed that their intransigence would defeat the opposition over time. Today, with the knowledge that hindsight can give, we know better but all the signs are that we shall fall into the same trap all over again. In this year of commemoration should we not consider what happened then and draw back from the abyss? A little tolerance and understanding in non-essential matters can go a long way, but as the ongoing dispute about stoles reminds us, there is no guarantee that it will be found. Let us hope and pray that those who have to take the decisions and those who then have to implement them will be guided by a better spirit than the one that dominated in 1662 and that now seems to be animating a new drive for conformity and the suppression of dissent.

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