The tragic turn: the logic of resistance

Transcript

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THE TRAGIC TURN:
THE LOGIC OF RESISTANCE

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Before theology and doctrine can ever exist, there must first be stories. They are stories of faith, of course. And before stories, there must be encounters, experiences and reflection. Churches are, moreover, as James Hopewell reminds us, primarily ‘storied communities and dwellings’. Ecclesial communities and their members occupy, for the most part, that pre-cognitive hinterland: a place where lives and norms are not so much governed by formal religious rules and dogma, as by a complex tapestry of stories and affinities that bind believers together. This is true religion: being continually bound together by shared narratives, common interests and particular practices, that turns a group of individuals into a ‘congregation’.

I make no apology for beginning in this way, as I too want to start with a story from fifteen years ago. In many ways it is a simple story. At the theological college I attended for my ordination training (1988-1990), I was walking down the corridor one day, returning to my study. I ran into a fellow ordinand whom I had seen that morning in chapel. It was now afternoon, but there was something different about him. He usually wore a smart jeans or corduroys, well-polished brown brogue shoes, a shirt (sometimes with a tie), and a smart-casual sports or tweed jacket. Except on this day I couldn’t help noticing that his arm was in a sling, and he was trying to conceal his injury. I asked him if he was all right? He replied that he was fine. So I asked him how he came by the injury. He explained that he had been having a discussion that morning with a close friend, who normally shared his theological views. The discussion was about whether or not righteousness was ‘imputed’ or ‘imparted’, but it had developed into a raging argument. So much so, in fact, that the ordinand now standing in front of me had finally smashed his fist into a college notice board in disgust at his friend’s views. The force of the impact had fractured some bones, and he had had to go to the local hospital for treatment. He didn’t seem to be embarrassed by this ‘accident’; the injury he sustained, he suggested, showed just how important the issue was. And with that, he left.

I recall the story for several reasons. First, because of the force, passion and aggression that colours the narrative, coupled to the incongruity of this story being spoken softly, deeply and earnestly by a young man who one would not normally have associated with violence. Second, because the display of violence did seem to reveal a hidden rage for ordering the church and policing its theology. Third, because the display of force was immediately justified: this showed ‘just how important’ the issue was.

I recognise at once that this story is both unusual and atypical in relation to Conservative Evangelicalism. Furthermore, the event took place in 1989, some four years before the formation of Reform. But there can be no doubt that had Reform existed in the late 1980s, my bandaged colleague would have been a member. He was an ardent disciple of the Revd Dick Lucas, then Rector of St. Helen’s Bishopsgate, London; an avid proponent of Read Mark, Learn (Lucas, 1986); a regular mentor to the Christian Union; and a staunch opponent of women’s ordination (on grounds of headship). But at the same time, the story, with its overtones of violence and aggression, reflects a commonly held perception about Reform. Even the secular British media have dubbed Reform ‘the Taliban of the Church of England’. The story, of course, chimes with such sentiments: it points towards the deep and barely controlled spiritual and theological rage that many regard as one of the defining hallmarks of the movement. And, paradoxically, this rage is being expressed by otherwise (normally) ultra-polite and (allegedly) upper-middle-class Christians who mostly hail from the Home Counties, or the prosperous suburbs of larger cities throughout England. In what follows, I want to explore not only the rise of Reform in the Church of England, but also examine some of the reasons why, theologically and sociologically, a movement made up of people who really know how to behave, (I mean culturally, and in terms of manners) has also developed a decidedly aggressive side to its character. And that this has been done within a church and worldwide Communion (or Commonwealth) of churches, who are implicitly bound together by a code of manners (Percy, 2000, pp. 114-125).

After briefly considering the history of Reform – now ten years old – the paper will go on to look at some methodological perspectives, before turning to some of the key issues that define Reform’s agenda. Some further analysis will examine the prospects for denominations (Anglicanism in this case) in a post-modern world, where churches are bound together less and
less by a common form of governance, and more and more by a shared ethos and moral affinity. A conclusion looks at the implications of the relative strength of Reform within the context of the Anglican Communion as a whole. Suffice to say, this chapter is more exploratory in nature, and as much an exercise in testing methodologies within the broad penumbra of modern ecclesiology. The chapter is not intended to be a definitive account or interpretation of Reform. From the outset, I recognise that the movement itself merits far more attention than one academic paper can possibly give it.

**The Origin and Anatomy of Reform**

One of the surprising aspects of Reform is its size. It currently has approximately sixteen hundred individual members. The number of churches that would categorically identify with the movement is probably less than fifty, and perhaps as few as thirty. It is difficult to be precise about this last statistic, as clergy who lead churches may well insist that their congregation is ‘fully supportive of Reform’, but hard data to back this up simply does not exist. Clergy will often assume that a congregation’s support of them and their ministry amounts to their tacit agreement with his or her theological position. In fact such concord is quit rare, even in the most apparently homogenous congregations. Congregations – even those that may be content to be identified as Conservative Evangelical – are likely to be places of doctrinal divergence rather than creedal concurrence. However, statistics that seem to reveal a relatively low level of support for Reform should not be used to underestimate the scale and importance of the movement. It wields considerable national influence, and also has a significant international profile through links with the Diocese of Sydney (c.f. Jensen, 2001), and enjoys other liaisons in North America.

As a movement, Reform was born on 22nd February 1993. The text of the original leaflet, stating the aims and purposes of the movement, identifies its fundamental doctrinal core, before listing its major concerns:

‘…for some years groups of mainstream evangelicals have met to discuss issues in the church and nation. These issues include the authority of and sufficiency of Scripture; the uniqueness and finality of Christ; the priority of the local church; the complementarity of men and women…[We are] Christians first, Evangelicals second, and Anglicans third…[we have] committed ourselves to unite for action under the authority of Scripture as God’s word…Historic Anglican theology is committed to continuous Reformation of the church. We are committed to the reform of ourselves, our congregations and our world by the gospel…Reform is urgently needed…[because] the gospel is not shaping and changing our church and our society: our society seems to be shaping and changing us. A biblical Christian voice is heard too little in our society. The Church of England seems to have lost confidence in the truth and power of the gospel…To reverse these trends we are committed to change and growth. Such change will be costly…We do not believe this change can come from the denominational centre. The local church must take back responsibility for the denomination…’

The agenda outlined is specific and direct. The leaflet identifies a particular kind of stance as being ‘orthodox’, and implies that the wider denomination has lapsed in its belief, confidence and responsibility. In terms of process, this inevitably leads to a call for financial realignment, and establishing the local church as the primary locus of mission and discipleship. This agenda is, in turn, driven by a broad appeal to the ongoing work of the Reformation. In effect, the leaders of Reform are doing nothing less than eliding their own identity and agenda with that of the original Reformers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Except that this time the enemy is not the papacy: it is modernity and liberalism, which is deemed to have betrayed the historic missiological calling of a national church.

Besides identifying its fundamental life through the usual creedal formulae, it is important to understand the association as a movement of resistance. Throughout Reform’s documents, the themes of correction, confrontation, reformation and reassertion are prominent (italics mine):

‘…[we affirm]…the divine order of male headship, which makes the headship of women as priests-in-charge, incumbents, dignitaries and bishops inappropriate…the rightness of sexual intercourse in heterosexual marriage, and the wrongness of such activity both outside it and in all its homosexual forms…the urgent need for decentralisation at national, diocesan and deanery level, and the need to radically reform the present shape of episcopacy and pastoral discipline…’. (1993, p.1).

Properly speaking, we might say that Reform exists because of concerns with money, sex and power. As an organisation, it is more focussed than the Church Society, and older and more traditional body for Conservative Evangelicals. In particular, Reform seeks to campaign on a specific range of issues, each of which is underpinned by a concern re-affirm the authority of scripture, and the priority of the local church as the primary locus for mission and evangelism. Were it not for the anxieties of Conservative Evangelicals on these matters, Reform would probably not exist.
Within the field of Congregational Studies, a promising perspective from which one can gain some understanding of Reform comes from the work of James Hopewell (1987). Hopewell contends that individual congregations and, more broadly, networks of churches, are united less by creedal formulae and more by worldviews, which in turn are configured through the kinds of narratives that ‘construct’ specific households of faith (italics mine):

‘world views reflect and give a focus to group experience, providing a map within which words and actions make sense. The setting of a congregation is the order by which its gossip, sermons, strategies and fights – the household idiom gain their reasonableness. What is expressed in daily intercourse about the nature of the world is idiomatic, responsive to a particular pattern of language, expressing a particular setting for narrative. Tales in a local church tend to travel in packs: one good story evokes another, one member’s account of an illness, for example, is usually reciprocated in kind. In comradeship and commiseration members top each other’s stories, building up the world setting that they together inhabit’ (Hopewell 1987, p. 85).

Although Hopewell’s primary interest is in local congregations, his work offers some considerable illumination in exploring and analysing the worldview of Reform. Hopewell, following Northrop Frye (1957), argues that churches are essentially ‘storied communities’, and that these stories can be understood as corresponding to the four basic literary genres, namely irony, comedy, romance and tragedy. This means, in effect, that the main stories that will configure a church or cluster of churches will usually turn out to be primarily orientated towards one of these major genres. However, Hopewell is careful to point out that individuals, movements and congregations, must be properly situated within this ‘quadrupolar analysis’, and are therefore unlikely to be, say, entirely ironic or romantic in their worldview – there will be mixtures and variables.

The literary genre that most closely corresponds to the worldview espoused by members of Reform (and more generally to that of Conservative Evangelicalism) is the ‘Tragic’ – what Hopewell calls the ‘Canonic negotiation’. According to Hopewell, the Canonic negotiation is:

‘Reliance upon an authoritative interpretation of a world pattern, often considered [to be] God’s revealed world or will, by which one identifies one’s essential life. The integrity of the pattern requires that followers reject any gnosis (i.e., knowledge) of union with the pattern but instead subordinate their selfhood to it. Characteristics of the Canonic orientation are similar to Frye’s tragic genre...’ (Hopewell, 1987, p. 69).

Developing this observation, Hopewell exports and converts the basic literary theory into some explicitly theological and ecclesiological conceptualisations. When comparing Hopewell’s basic framework to the Reform Covenant, we can see how illuminating the reading can become. For example, Hopewell claims that the primary narrative motif of the Canonic negotiation is sacrifice, and that its movement is ‘union toward subordination’ (1987, p. 70). The Reform Covenant seems to reflect this: ‘we who subscribe to this Covenant bind ourselves together in fellowship to uphold, defend and spread the gospel of Jesus Christ according to the doctrine of the Church of England...’ (italics mine).

Personally, socially and cosmically, there are specific theological resolutions to certain scenarios. In a personal situation of hubris, the response is generally surrender and the resolution justification. In a social context, a situation of vice is met with the response of righteousness, and the resolution is judgement. Cosmically, principalities and powers are engaged with passion, and the resolution is the arrival of the kingdom. Similarly, Hopewell identifies the cognitive features of this worldview. Authority is posited in God’s revealed word and will; the focus of integrity is scripture; valued behaviour is obedience. Conceptually and typically, God is Father, Jesus the saviour, and evil (or the enemy) is a personal devil. The Bible is the word of God; a Minister a messenger of God; the Eucharist a memorial; church a covenant; and the gospel salvation.

In the Reform Covenant, the articles of faith seem to reflect the Canonic worldview that Hopewell sketches:

‘...specifically we lay emphasis on the universality of sin, the present justification of sinners by grace through faith in Christ alone, and their supernatural regeneration and new life through the Holy Spirit...the calling of the church and all Christian people to a life of holiness and prayer according to the Scriptures...the significance of personal present repentance and faith as determining eternal destiny...the infallibility and supreme authority of “God’s Word written” and its clarity and sufficiency for the resolving of disputes about Christian faith and life...’ (Hopewell, 1987, pp. 60ff).

Hopewell, in his explication of the Canonic worldview, suggests that:
‘in this negotiation, the controlling canon provides integrity...for Canonic Protestants the inviolable canon is God’s word, the Holy Scripture. The Bible in their Canonic eyes is completely reliable and authoritative’ (Hopewell, 1987, p.79).

In other types of negotiation, the self or reason might be deemed to be the arbiter in the midst of life’s complexities. But in the Canonic negotiation, God’s revealed word and will is already pre-determined in the canon of scripture. As Northrop Frye notes, ‘whether the context is Greek, Christian or undefined, tragedy seems to lead to an epiphany of law, of that which is and must be’ (Frye, 1957, p. 79). But what does an ‘epiphany of law’ mean here, exactly? Hopewell answers this question by describing the Canonic outlook in more detail:

‘One is not free and good. One is lost and sinful, and one’s story develops the costly consequences of one’s depraved nature. If the self remains disobedient, refusing to recognise the sovereignty of God, then life continues to deteriorate and ends in hell. If, however, one repents and accepts the lordship of Christ, one takes on a different yoke, of suffering love and obedience’ (Hopewell, 1987, p.80).

In other words, an apotheosis of the self is an anathema to the Canonic worldview. Everything – the self, church and world – must submit to the pre-determined will of God that is clearly and unambiguously revealed. Correspondingly, this personal spiritual programme, when mapped on to a movement and brought into a church or denomination as an agent of transformation, is inevitably and radically insistent on its agenda:

‘The moral fibre of the nation is decaying; families, schools, cities and [the media] are close to disaster. Only by a massive mission can this nation be saved. Churches must become obedient, “Bible-centred, Bible-believing, Bible teaching churches”...’ (Hopewell, 1987, p. 80).

One can compare Hopewell ‘s observation with that of a mainstream exponent of Conservative Evangelicalism. The ‘fit’ is precise:

‘It is the tragedy of much modern theology, and of whatever church life is influenced by such theology, that it has chosen to follow its culture rather than the word of God. It has accepted the negative verdict on the Bible of movements such as the Enlightenment, and has tried to substitute other revelations or other versions of revelation. These must be doomed to failure...’ (Jensen, 2002, p. 274).

Whilst I think Hopewell is entirely correct to emphasise these aspects of the Canonic negotiation, I am less convinced that the full features of Frye’s definition of tragedy necessarily apply to Conservative Evangelicals, or to movements such as Reform. In Hopewell ‘s use of Frye, the suggestion is made that the Canonic negotiation anticipates failure, death and tragedy; in effect, rewards and ‘ultimate happiness is deferred to an afterlife’. But whilst the Canonic Christian life is undoubtedly characterised by submission and obedience, these should be properly understood as disciplines or virtues of empowerment for this life. In other words, the sombre, sober and serious ways in which Canonic Christians approach the church and shape their own spirituality is intended to achieve some measure of triumph in the midst of tragedy. Put another way, Canonic Christians believe that they operate within a tragic world, and they believe in tragic consequences for that world. But the consequences can normally be avoided by resolute obedience and faithfulness. If tragedy continues to afflict a believer who is faithful to this calling, the rewards (usually deferred until the afterlife) will necessarily outweigh the consequences.

In other words, the Canonic worldview is a particularly tight and resilient type of Christian belief. It would see the affliction of the self or the persecution of a movement as confirmation of its value and righteousness. It would see the triumph of the self or a movement as God’s vindication of principled Christian living. Ultimately, those individuals and movements that are shaped by the Canonic negotiation are quite prepared to be defeated; so in contrast to Hopewell, I do not accept that the Canonic negotiation expects defeat. Thus, the Canonic negotiation could more properly be said to anticipate grinding out a gritty, disciplined and ultimately righteous victory, in which falsehood and compromise were comprehensively defeated, and shown to be less than the full gospel. Put another way, Canonic conservative Christians are not to be compared to a latter-day St. Sebastian, tied to a stake of persecution, and stoically awaiting the onslaught of the many arrows of modernity and liberalism to pierce their skin, as they surely await the bliss of heaven. Rather, Canonic Christians are more like St. George (or at least he of the popular iconography and myth), spearing the dragon of error and heresy, and rescuing that fair damsel (i.e., the church) from the suggestive and seductive whisperings of that great tempter, liberalism. In the fight for righteousness and truth, injury, and perhaps even death may be anticipated – but the risks are nothing when compared to the eternal rewards on offer, and the command to go forth and...crusade.
In one way, Hopewell could be said to have already understood my reservation about the actual extent of his narrative theory. In his discussion of tragic tales, he acknowledges that ‘the self in tragedy, as in romance, is heroic’. However, tragic heroes in the Canonic genre are vindicated and saved rather than cured or freed. Only by identifying with God’s revealed word or will can salvation be obtained. So the heroes (or leaders) within the Canonic genre are not necessarily those who embody exemplary suffering. They will, rather, be those who devote themselves to a disciplined and selfless life, in which sacrifice and obedience are to the fore. As Linda Bamber puts it, the Canonic world is one:

‘that is separate from us who inhabit it; it will not yield to our desires and fantasies…this means that tragedy, recognition – *anagnorisis*, the banishing of ignorance – is a major goal…’ [Bamber, 1982, p. 22].

Here we have an account, developed from the Hopewellian reflections on tragedy, that partially explains why Reform concentrates so heavily on teaching, preaching and instruction to constitute its essential life and identity. It is important to note here that in my discussions with members of Reform about the priorities of Jesus in his earthly ministry, the majority of individuals within the movement propagate the view that Jesus was primarily a teacher. Of course, it is true, the most common title for Jesus used in the Gospels is indeed ‘Rabbi’ – teacher. However, most people I have talked to within Reform go further than this, and suggest that the primary mode of Christ’s teaching was preaching. This is, in itself, contestable. Moreover, even if it were true, little, if any account is taken, of the ambiguity of parabolic interaction, the multi-faceted ways in which parables can be taken and interpreted, what actually constitutes teaching and learning (one suspects a very un-Freirian ‘banking model’ rather than anything shrewd or revolutionary), nor the other ways in which Jesus ‘taught’, such as through specific actions, practices or behaviour.

From the perspectives gleaned so far, the Reform worldview can be properly summarised like this. The world is a sinful place, from which the individual must be saved. The church, in order to fulfil its missiological task as an agent of salvation, must be opposed to the world and its vices, and to any form of accommodation of worldly standards. The virtues of the tragic or Canonic outlook expect that serious, sober and disciplined discipleship is a primary means of ensuring that the tragic nature of the world does not have tragic consequences for those caught within its snares. Ultimately, then, a form of separatism is being advocated, which of course can lead to something akin to sectarianism. However, the purposes of separatism should be properly evaluated within the Canonic worldview. There is no separatism for the sake of it. Its purpose is centred on prophetic condemnation, individual purgation and a sharing in salvation. The Canonic worldview is, in other words, a means by which participants – either individuals or movements – can imagine the re-ordering and cleansing of the church itself. It is a form of systematic post-modern Puritanism; saving the church from itself and the world, and thereby rescuing souls from the inevitable and tragic consequences of disobedience and unbelief. The Canonic worldview is a gnosis of certitude; the faith rests on ‘received facts’ that are sufficient and clear. Those who think otherwise are leading the church astray, and destined for annihilation in this life, or the next.

**Money, Sex and Power**

One consequence of the tragic outlook is that it inevitably tends towards treating the church as an a-cultural entity. Because the gospel is absolute, it must also be expressed, embodied and reified in ways that ultimately transcend culture, and perhaps even subjugate it. I do not propose to take issue with that particular missiological presupposition in this paper. Sufficient to say, such issues have been dealt with perfectly well by a number of theologians over the years, as well as by scholars within evangelicalism, and also by some notable novelists. (One only has to recall Barbara Kingsolver’s recent *The Poisonwood Bible*, or Herman Melville’s *Omoo* and *Tipee*). So my observation is, rather, intended to question the wisdom of a worldview that does not pay proper attention to enculturation. It should perhaps be obvious that, even within a strictly biblical framework of understanding, no-one speaks or learns their Christianity without a distinctly local accent. The story of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost is a reminder – as though one were ever needed – that Christianity has always spoken in the many-and-tillthed tongues of its adherents. There is no type of Christianity that does not bear the trace of its ‘accent of origin’.

Even *Alpha* courses, despite their global appeal, feel and sound like they grew up in Knightsbridge. Roman Catholicism (that great oxymoron), retains its ‘Roman’ accent (a concentrated, imperial and centralised power), despite its ‘Catholic’ (global) claim.

These preliminary observations aside, the focus of this short section is concerned with three key themes that appear to preoccupy the public agenda of Reform: money, sex (or gender) and power. The concerns over these issues are, I want to suggest, not at the heart of the Reform. Rather, they are better understood as symptomatic of the deeper disquiet that accompanies the tragic worldview. It is far too easy, in my view, to narrate Reform as an ultra-Protestant schismatic body that simply wants its own way on certain issues, and will go to almost any lengths to secure their purity, identity and autonomy.
However, the same cannot be said for sex outside marriage, and in particular, homosexual practice. Again, it is important to likely to divide Evangelicals more than it unites them.

In contrast, I have found that in my interviews with Reform members and leaders, there are more measured views to be harvested. For many, if not most, the central concerns are the authority of the bible, and the priority of local mission: clashes over money, sex/gender and power are simply identified as prominent obstacles that can impede the effectiveness of the local church, and undermine the authority of scripture. But the obstacles themselves do not constitute a ‘cause’. Nor is it the case that ministers of Reform see themselves as ‘congregationalist’, turning their backs of the obligations and opportunities of parochial ministry. On the contrary, such ministers seem to be deeply engaged in parish or ‘local-contextual’ ministry, and seek to draw in significant numbers of people that reflect the culture in which their native ministry operates. Increasingly, a number of churches in the Reform penumbra see ‘church planting’ in other parishes as an extension of that missiological strategy. They have perceived – correctly, to some extent – that a parish church will not appeal to all its parishioners. So they do not seek to undermine the parochial framework, but rather see their activity as complementing a ‘system’ that no longer works as comprehensively and deeply as it once did. In that respect, they are merely demonstrating a nascent prowess: to develop an effective missiology within a consumerist, post-modern and post-institutional world. For Reform members, the demands of the gospel and the call to repentance must supersede any ‘man-made’ regulations about the ordering and governance of the church. So any rigid appeal relating to ‘parish boundaries’ that impedes a wider mission and ministry will simply be interpreted as yet another obstacle to be overcome, for the sake of the gospel.

Strictly speaking, the issues of money, sex/gender and power belong together in any assessment of Reform. Analysts tend to treat them as separate foci of concern, whereas in reality these issues form an interrelated nexus of problems that Reform addresses itself towards in a particularly systematic manner. Moreover, as we have noted before, the issues are merely deemed to be the presenting ‘symptoms’ that riddle a sick body (the church). The deeper malaise is, from the perspective of the tragic worldview, disobedience to God, and a failure to honour the authority of scripture. Thus, David Holloway writes:

‘…[we] met in London to discuss, think and pray about financial issues in the Church of England. [We] were discussing the right way forward for “net-givers” in responding to the ever-larger financial demands for central church funds – “the quota”. Huge sums of money are now subsidizing work that Evangelicals often believe is frustrating the gospel…The context is increasing theological liberalism in the church at large; and growing bureaucratic centralism especially at the Diocesan but also at the General Synod levels. As a response some mainstream larger Evangelical churches that are “net-givers” are already capping their quotas...The goal of this action is not merely responsible stewardship, financial competence and long-term viability but mission. The needs of the nation are seen as more important than the comfort of the church. The conversion of England in our nation’s desperate spiritual and moral condition is a priority…’[Holloway, 1993, p.1]

In this narration, it is the wider church that is being written-up as ‘deviant’. Withholding income from central funds is therefore ‘responsible’, and a foundation for reconstructing a more faithful form of mission that is less centred on the ‘comfort’ of the church, and more on evangelism and the moral renewal of the nation. It therefore follows that Reform members would see themselves as acting correctly, prophetically and creatively rather than obstructively. Thus, Holloway notes that ‘many mainline Evangelical churches are no longer willing to pay for a combination of ineffectiveness and doubt at the centre’ (Holloway, undated, p.2).

Reform’s concern with sex and gender are, perhaps surprisingly, a little more difficult to access. On the matter of gender, Reform continues to assert ‘the divine order of male headship’ as an important article of faith. But privately, many leaders within the movement acknowledge that there are considerable differences of opinion and varieties of practice within Conservative Evangelicalism. Some openly admitted that the issue of women priests was now ‘water under the bridge’. Thus, although some Reform churches are ‘Resolution A’ parishes, and would therefore not welcome a female incumbent, there was little sign of real opposition to the ministry of women priests in general. Some had no real difficulty with women preaching and celebrating the Eucharist. Some went further, and indicated that women bishops would not necessarily be a divisive or decisive issue for them, nor perhaps even a crisis. In that respect, Reform seem to have already anticipated that a campaign against women bishops is likely to divide Evangelicals more than it unites them.

However, the same cannot be said for sex outside marriage, and in particular, homosexual practice. Again, it is important to...
report that in my interviews with Reform leaders and in conversations with other Conservative Evangelicals, all were concerned to emphasise that they were not ‘obsessed’ with the issue; that they were not homophobic; and that they were not seeking to make the issue into a litmus test of orthodoxy or unity. Such claims seem to be reasonable when one considers that there are far fewer publications from Reform on sex and gender when compared to the volume that address money and power. Whilst the nomination of Jeffrey John and Gene Robinson as bishops of Reading and New Hampshire respectively has pushed the ‘gay issue’ to the fore, Reform seems to have put relatively few resources into addressing homosexuality. The reason for this, I suspect, is that Reform needs relatively few ‘formal’ religious statements on the matter, given that coherent opposition is widespread within the culture of ‘operant’ Evangelicalism. For example, R. T. France’s recent A Slippery Slope? (2000), a rather slight publication in many ways, seems to be characterised more by reassertion than by argument.

In some of my interviews with Conservative Evangelicals and Reform members, I pressed the question of what it would take to establish a conversation on the ‘gay issue’. With more or less uniformity, interviewees could not foresee a conversation with ‘practicing’ gay Christians taking place at all, since they regarded the practice itself as sinful. Dialogue with bodies such as the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement (LGCM) was also seen as fairly pointless, as, in the words of one commentator, ‘both sides seem to regard the other as intransigent, shrill fundamentalists’. But for Reform members, the foundation for any dialogue on the issue would have to respect the authority of scripture on such matters. Correspondingly, the kind of agenda laid out by Jakobsen and Pellegrini (2003) in their recent book on sexual regulation, and arguing for freedom and tolerance, is the very antithesis of a Reform-type position, which would argue that such freedom and tolerance amounts to a rebellion against and a rejection of God’s sovereignty (c.f. Jensen, 2002, pp. 266ff; Higton, 1987, etc).

But the issue of sexuality is not quite as closed as it may seem on the surface. In one interview with a Reform member, I mused on the fact that what the dialogue needed was another Michael Vasey – an ‘out’ gay priest who would not let go of his mainstream Evangelical identity, but who published one of the few good hermeneutical books on the issue in recent years, Strangers and Friends (1997). During one interview, a Reform leader spoke regretfully about the Revd Roy Clements, a Baptist minister who had been a close mentor to and supporter of both Reform and the Proclamation Trust, and had been a senior figure in the Evangelical Alliance. But Roy left his pastorate in Cambridge when, after twenty years of marriage, he became ‘reconciled’ to his homosexual nature, and went to live with a male partner. He now works independently as a minister, and has some involvement with LGCM. The Reform leader said that he still could ‘not understand this’, and that their parting was a cause of deep grief to him; but he could no longer see how they could dialogue anymore. This was a genuine ‘tragic’ story, and narrated by the Reform member in classically tragic terms: a stalwart of the gospel who had lost his way. Or put in more Bunyan-esque terms, the Vasey-Clements stories are akin to Pilgrim’s Regress.

Finally in this section, we turn to power. As an issue, it is closely related to money. As we have already suggested, it is a mistake to conceive of Reform as schismatic or ‘congregationalist’. Members and leaders are not against parish ministry and prosaic. Neither are they necessarily intent on working against the Dioceses in which they minister. They are, rather, radically attempting to re-position the local church as the primary locus of mission and evangelism within a community. In Reform’s understanding of the church, the local is the catholic. Correspondingly, excessive centralisation is seen as a threat to ministry, by being a drain on resources. Reform, contrary to what its critics say, does not want to withhold money. Rather, it wants to exercise some degree of choice in how it is spent, and in particular, to see that it is spent effectively. In that regard, Reform’s position on money and power can be interpreted as ‘mechanistic’ in Hopewellian terms, with its focus on effectiveness, evangelism and results (Hopewell, 1987, pp. 22-24). That said, there is also a sense in which the argument for the local church to define itself and self-govern has a long tradition within mission history. Evangelical missionaries such as Henry Venn, Henry Wright and James Johnson were at the forefront of Victorian missiology, arguing for the independent ‘native church’ as a controlling objective (c.f. Williams, 1990). So it really cannot be very surprising that such ideas, once nourished, have now spread from their colonial seedbeds and returned to their churches of origin. Moreover, Anglicanism itself can be properly said to have promoted a ‘self-governing, self-supporting and self-extending’ ecclesiology (Sachs, 1993, pp. 241-244).

But the focus on power also has another side to it: the efficacy and righteousness of its bearers. Reform’s call for ‘godly leadership’ is a cipher and a trope. It is an attack on liberal-Catholics in positions of authority, who betray the heritage of the church and abuse its resources: ‘we believe this liberal-Catholic drift is destroying the church’ (Holloway, 1993, p.3). In this light, the unprecedented campaign against Jeffrey John should be understood as a focussed attempt to draw attention to what Reform perceives as being a wider malaise, in which the appointment of Rowan Williams is also implicated. In talking to Reform members, they are unhappy with the appointment of the Archbishop generally; not simply because of his views on sexuality. It should also be said that some Reform members were not entirely happy with George Carey’s tenure as Archbishop either, as they felt he made too many accommodations to charismatic renewal, and to ‘unsound’ initiatives such as Alpha courses. Put
more sharply, anything that takes away from the primacy of propositional faith – the revelation of God, expressed clearly and unambiguously through scripture, and most especially the gospels – is seen to be, at best, a form of heterodoxy (c.f., Jensen, 2002, pp.257-269), and therefore dangerous.

Summary:

This last remark leads us, finally, to return to the question of authority. In many ways, an understanding of the sources and purposes of authority has been shown to be the key to understanding Reform. As we have noted previously, the movement is not primarily preoccupied with money, sex and power. These issues are simply symptomatic, and point to the deeper and most contested issue: the authority of the bible. Paula Nesbitt, in her reflections on the Lambeth Conference of 1998, shows how the Anglican Communion has been unable to avoid being gradually split: caught between increasing cultural diversity on the one hand, and the need to provide coherence and identity on the other. She notes how successive Lambeth conferences have moved sequentially from being grounded on traditional authority (i.e., the establishment of churches and provinces during the colonial era), to rational authority (which presupposes negotiation through representative constituencies for dominance over meeting outcomes), to (finally) negotiated authority (but which normally lacks the power to stem the momentum of change). She notes that these kinds of authority, when pursued through the four ‘instruments’ of unity in the Anglican Communion, are usually capable of resolving deep disputes. They enable complex inter-action and conversation, but they do not lead to clear and firm resolutions. Correspondingly, Nesbitt argues that a new, fourth authoritative form has emerged within the Anglican Communion, which has in some senses been present from the very beginning, and is now tied-up with the identity of scripture. She writes of this authority:

‘[It] could be used to countervail the relativism of cross-cultural alliances without affecting their strategic utility: symbolic authority. The symbol, as a locus of authority, has a tangible and timeless nature. Where the symbol is an authoritative part of the institutional milieu, either traditional or rational authority must acknowledge its legitimacy…scripture is an authoritative symbol…’ (Nesbitt, 2001, p.257).

Nesbitt points out, as we noted earlier, that the symbolic authority of sacraments may create shared bonds and enhance communal cohesion, but they are normally unable to regulate or negotiate conflict. But in contrast,

‘Scripture, when canonized as complete or absolute, becomes symbolic of a particular era or set of teachings and beliefs. However, unlike sacraments, the use of scripture as symbolic authority can be constructed and constituted according to selecting those aspects or passages that address an issue at hand. Furthermore, scripture as symbolic authority can be objectified or absolutized, which transcends cultural boundaries in a way that other forms of authority can less easily do. The appeal of scriptural literalism provides an objectification of authority that is independent of the influence or control of dominant perspectives, social locations, and circumstances. As symbolic authority, it can be leveraged against cultural dominance as well as provide common ground for cross-cultural alliances…’ (Nesbitt, 2001, p.257).

In other words, with scripture raised almost to the level of apotheosis, a cross-cultural foundation for authority exists that can challenge the dominance of rational authority, which is normally associated with highly-educated elite groups from the West or First World. Scripture, given symbolic authority, becomes an important tool in the hands of Southern (non-elite) Christians who are seeking to counter-legitimate more Conservative perspectives. Of course, this strategy not only plays directly into the hands of groups like Reform: it can actually be resourced by them. As Nesbitt notes, ‘scriptural literalism as symbolic authority represents the easiest and most accessible form of counter-legitimation across educational or cross-cultural divides’ (Nesbitt, 2001, p. 258).

And as Lambeth Conferences, like the Anglican Communion itself, have become increasingly diverse in their cultural expression, symbolic authority has risen to the fore. So at present, the only contender for being a focus of symbolic authority is the bible, since cross-cultural negotiation only leads to sterile relativism: and so long as this situation continues, the dominance of Reform within the Church of England looks set to continue. We should note that the only other alternative to the bible – the Communion itself becoming or attaining the status of symbolic authority – has so far failed, mainly because the very resourcing of that requires a looser, more elastic view truth-claims, and a necessary tolerance towards competing convictions. How the future will unfold is almost anyone’s guess.

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