Churchman

EDITORIAL

Crime and Punishment

Rowan Williams is in the wrong job. The events of the past few months must have made that fairly obvious to most people (apart from him, apparently), but Christians are slow to face up to the obvious, particularly when accepting it may be thought to be 'hurtful'. The truth however, is that having done his utmost to hold the Anglican Communion together, Dr. Williams has managed to drive it further apart, not so much by the creation of GAFCON, of which he is the true founder and patron, as by the encouragement he has given to the Americans and others to carry on as they always have, regardless of what anyone else says or thinks. GAFCON owes its origins to the fact that the Archbishop chose to ignore the deadline of 30 September, 2007, set by the Primates of the Anglican Communion at their meeting in Dar-es-Salaam earlier that year. It was generally understood that if the American and dissident Canadian bishops had not mended their ways by that date, they would face serious consequences. But instead of waiting for their response, he decided to seize control of the process and issue invitations to them to attend the Lambeth Conference in July, thereby nullifying the only sanction against them that he had. Many of the Global South Primates felt betrayed, and responded to what they saw as the Archbishop's crime against the Communion by establishing GAFCON. To this day, Dr. Williams has done nothing to explain himself or to mend the damage for which he must take full responsibility, but unless and until he does so, he has no chance of ever reuniting the Anglican world around the see of Canterbury.

Having done his best to raise the profile of the primatial see of the Church of England, Dr. Williams has watched as its dubious authority has been repudiated by one province after another on both sides of the divide currently splitting the church. He has proposed a 'covenant' which the thirty-eight member churches of the Communion are to be asked to ratify, but is now having to face the reality that many of them are constitutionally unable to do so—the Church of England foremost among them, because its establishment status makes submission to an external authority like the Anglican

Communion legally impossible. Dr. Williams sent out about 880 invitations to Lambeth, only to find that more than a quarter of those invited refused to come and—the ultimate humiliation—instead organised a bigger and better conference of their own. Put their Jerusalem Declaration alongside the final statement of the Lambeth Conference and/or the proposed 'covenant' and it soon becomes apparent which one is the work of a Christian body rooted in the Scriptures and traditions of the universal church. GAFCON is a work in progress and is far from perfect, but its start has been nothing short of amazing. Furthermore, even many of its critics have been silenced by the obvious fervour of its participants and the deeply Christian spirit that they have shown at every stage in the process. By contrast, Lambeth was surrounded by controversy, dogged by dissent from within and devoid of anything that would force the world to sit up and take notice of it as a Christian assembly. The march on Westminster in support of doing something to alleviate world poverty was well meant, but it was quickly turned into a propaganda coup by Gordon Brown, who welcomed the publicity provided by what he must have seen as the Labour Party at prayer, in order to get his own agenda across. Far from doing anything to reduce third world debt, the Lambeth Conference ended up creating an enormous debt of its own, with no obvious source of financial relief. GAFCON on the other hand, turned a profit—yet another humiliation to the would-be focus of Anglican unity.

In other areas, Dr. Williams has managed to convey the impression that he supports the introduction of Sharia law into the British system of justice, while at the same time doing nothing to prevent the increasing marginalisation of Christian principles in that same system. The accusation may be unfair, but there can be no doubt that the Archbishop is more at home when dealing with subjects of only marginal concern to Anglicans whilst ignoring issues that affect them directly, like the increasingly secular bias of the public media which has made a star out of a charlatan like Richard Dawkins. Has the very academic Dr. Williams nothing to say about this? Why does he spout the economic theories of the nineteenth-century atheist Karl Marx as if they were gospel truth and ignore the atheists who are barking at his door?

Rowan Williams certainly has his defenders, but they may be doing him more harm than good. For example, it is not uncommon to hear them say that on the homosexual question, he has put aside his own personal beliefs in order to

uphold the stated view of the church as a whole, something which they presented as a remarkable act of self-sacrifice on his part. Unfortunately for those who put this argument, religious leaders are expected to believe the faith they represent. Anglicans do not accept the doctrine of transubstantiation, but if the Pope were to tell us privately that he did not accept it either and was only defending it for the sake of his church as a whole, what would we think? Such a statement would reveal that the Pope was not the man he was supposed to be—in other words, that he was a fraud. So it is with our Archbishop. Not to believe the teachings he is expected to defend is not a sign of superior holiness, as some have alleged, but the very opposite—it is deceitfulness taken to a higher level of deception.

That this is not more widely recognised may be due to an incomprehensibility that even Dr. Williams admits to, which again his supporters offer as evidence of his brilliance. But as anyone who has had a classical education will know, true brilliance is manifested by depth in simplicity, as we can see in the work of great men like Homer, Plato and the Apostle John. 'In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.' How apparently simple, yet how unfathomably profound that statement is! In contrast, the Archbishop's laboured utterances and endless sentences, replete with subclause after subclause, are the sign of a complex mind which cannot reduce its clutter to order and communicate what it is really trying to say, so that those who hear it may understand. In other words, not brilliance at all, but obfuscation—darkness rather than light.

But the thing which proves more than anything else that Dr. Williams is in the wrong job is not to be found in his policies or statements relating to the Anglican Communion, but somewhere else altogether. At the height of the crisis of 2007 the Church Commissioners (the true governing body of the Church of England) agreed that Dr. Williams could have several months of sabbatical leave to work on something totally unrelated to it. It was as if Winston Churchill had been allowed to go to Skye to paint during the summer of 1940, or if Admiral Nelson had been sent on a Caribbean cruise instead of to Trafalgar. The men themselves might well have benefitted from the break—Nelson in particular—but that is not what was expected of them at the time. On the other side, Louis XVI went hunting the day the Bastille was captured but caught nothing—his diary entry for the day says only 'rien' (a fitting

epitaph for the Lambeth Conference) and we all know what Nero was doing when Rome was burning. (Those who like unusual historical parallels might reflect that there is a curious link between the fire of Rome and the meltdown of the Anglican Communion. In both cases, it is the Christians who have—quite wrongly—been blamed!) Dr. Williams resembles this second type of person more than he realises, and should take note before he suffers the same fate that they did.

Having said that, there is no doubt that the Archbishop used his sabbatical wisely and has produced a very good book out of it—a study of the great Russian writer *Dostoevsky* (London: Continuum, 2008), which everyone who enjoys his novels should read. In it, Dr. Williams has come as close as any twenty-first century Western man can hope to do, to the spirit that animated Dostoevsky's literary genius. This is no mean achievement, and it is fair to say that in this apparent avocation Dr. Williams has found his true métier. The sooner he steps down and gets on with what he is really interested in—and good at—the better it will be for everyone, including himself.

Dostoevsky not only tells us a great deal about its Russian subject; it also provides some intriguing insights into its Anglo-Welsh author. For one thing, it shows us that Dr. Williams is not really an Anglican at all. This comes across in a number of different ways, beginning with the fact that he wrote the book in the Jesuit community at Georgetown, in Washington, DC. This is not the sort of place members of Church Society would be likely to find themselves in, but the reasons for that are probably misplaced. Far from being the fire-breathing papalists they were originally meant to be, today's Jesuits have undergone a radical transformation not unlike that of the American Episcopal Church, which coincidentally happens to be the local manifestation of Anglicanism in Georgetown. Rowan Williams comes across in the book not as an Anglican but as a liberal Roman Catholic, most obviously at home in the company of men who have maintained the forms but abandoned the substance of their professed beliefs.

But this is by no means the only indication of Dr. Williams' innate Roman Catholicism. Some of his most pointed criticisms of Dostoevsky are of the latter's aversion to the Roman church, which a Protestant is unlikely to react against to the same degree. At various points in the book he refers to more

recent and sometimes contemporary English novelists, all of whom are Roman Catholics. You would never know from him that there is an equally strong tradition of Anglican and Protestant writing because he does not refer to it—as often happens in Roman Catholic writings, what is outside the True Church is simply ignored. When Protestantism does appear in the book, it tends to be misrepresented, as when Dr. Williams injects the word 'Calvinist' as a synonym of 'fatalist', which shows that he does not have any idea of what Calvinism is (p. 55). This particular confusion is one that is often found among liberal Roman Catholics, especially laymen who do not know their theology, but for the head of a Protestant church whose official doctrines can reasonably be described as 'Calvinist', it is inexcusable. No wonder that Evangelicals, with their Calvinist roots, do not trust him.

The crisis in the Anglican Communion that Dr. Williams wants to resolve is beyond his capacities because he does not understand the essence of Anglicanism, which to him is simply a form of liberal Catholicism. Anyone approaching our church from that perspective is bound to come unstuck sooner or later, because the facts do not fit the theory. Not the least of GAFCON's merits is the way in which it has called us back to the study of Anglicanism's true theological foundations in the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion, the *Homilies* and the Book of Common Prayer, none of which has much place in Dr. Williams' intellectual make-up. He is not alone in that, of course, but if he is ever to succeed in the task he has appointed for himself, weakness in this area is a sure recipe for failure sooner or later. He will be wasting his time trying to communicate with GAFCON, and his efforts to build bridges with other parts of the Communion are liable to be seriously misunderstood as well.

All this sounds very negative, and no doubt some readers will think that our criticism of Dr. Williams' recent behaviour as Archbishop is unduly harsh. Would that they were right! Unfortunately though, the criticism is deserved—it is the punishment that fits the crime of trying to usurp and short-circuit the procedures which he, along with the other Primates, put in place to resolve the problems of the Communion in the first place. Crime and punishment—Dostoevsky had something to say about that, too! Dr. Williams has many valuable gifts, and his book shows that he has a real contribution to make in the study of nineteenth-century literature, much of which was taken up with

questions of faith and doubt. That is what he should spend his time doing, and leave the affairs of the Anglican Communion in the less-able but hopefully more focussed hands of someone more suited to the task of being a spiritual leader in a time of unprecedented crisis. We wish Dr. Williams well—but in his cell at Georgetown as the liberal Roman Catholic he really is, and not in the corridors of Lambeth Palace, where he is so clearly out of place.

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