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Churchman

EDITORIAL

Mind over Matter?

There is now no escaping the fact that we are heading into a profound clash in the Church of England, as well as in the wider Anglican Communion, over what has somewhat euphemistically been called “issues in human sexuality.” Those agitating for change in the Church’s official teaching have been doing everything they can to get attention, to put people sympathetic to them in key positions where they can influence events, and to give everyone the impression that it is only a matter of time before their opponents, variously labelled as “conservatives” or “traditionalists” (now that “homophobes” has been politely banned) either give up or push off elsewhere.

The Primates’ Meeting in January appeared to be a defeat for the self-designated “progressives,” when it was decreed that the American Episcopal Church (TEC) would have to face “consequences” for dissenting from the common mind of the Anglican Communion, but subsequent events have shown that they need not have worried. The Americans turned up in force at the meeting of the Anglican Consultative Council meeting in Lusaka and more or less got their way. The incoming chairman of the ACC is from Hong Kong, one of the most liberal parts of the Communion, and the next gathering will be in Brazil—another bastion of extreme “progressivism.” The task force that has just been set up to monitor the implementation of the Primates’ resolutions contains nobody who could be regarded as representing GAFCON but it *does* embrace the Presiding Bishop of TEC, whom most people would have thought was meant to be excluded. The Church of England, meanwhile, is about to welcome a suffragan bishop in Liverpool who is not only a woman from TEC who will not be residing in the diocese, but who has come out in print supporting the homosexual agenda in her own church. Given that her expressed views on this subject are directly contradictory to the official position of the Church of England, this appointment can only be regarded as a provocation, though (naturally) such an obvious conclusion has been denied by those responsible for it.

Meanwhile, the Church's official teaching is being quietly relegated to the sidelines. No bishop has come out in defence of it, even though a good many of them believe it. Why not? Most of the attempts to discipline clergy who have defied the House of Bishops and contracted same-sex marriages have been thwarted by various legalistic devices and there is no sign that the one who was elected to General Synod last year will be ejected as unsuitable to sit in such a body. The only surprise is that he has not been nominated to the task force meant to oversee the "consequences" imposed by the Primates on TEC.

Of course, it has to be said that those who are concerned to defend the Church's teaching have done themselves no favours. Instead of uniting in a common front, they have divided over tactics and secondary matters that ought to be parked for the duration. Courageous people like Melvin Tinker and Andrea Williams are just as likely to be attacked for their forthrightness by people who are supposedly on their side as they are by their declared opponents, who might as well just keep quiet and let the others fight it out among themselves. There is no common strategy, despite many meetings that are supposedly framing one, and we suspect that when the crunch comes, many in the leadership will do what they do best—run and hide (or as they would say, "pray about it"). Spinelessness has long been the mark of the true Evangelical, and we must expect that it will be just as much in evidence this time round as it has been in the past.

When the debates finally get underway, we can be virtually certain that they will be heavily laced with feelings and emotion. Those who claim that they have been traumatised by ill-considered attempts to cure them of homosexual tendencies will be given every opportunity to vent their hurt in the hope of winning the sympathy vote of those who are as yet undecided. It will not damage their campaign that almost none of the claims they will make can be verified, since everything they will say happened long ago, far away and in secret. We shall simply be expected to take them at their word, knowing full well that any attempt to question such "evidence" will be regarded as unkind, unloving and—pardon the expression—"homophobic."

Those on the other side will counter this onslaught in a less emotionally charged way, citing statistics that claim to show that children are better off with parents of both sexes and so on. The trouble is that counter-evidence to this sort of argument can always be cited. There are some same-sex couples who are good parents and plenty of heterosexual ones who are not, so what do statements like that prove? Once again, there is no way to verify the claims being made in a scientific manner,

and few people who are not already persuaded of their truth are likely to change their minds. Some people realise that this is not the way to argue the orthodox case, and believe that they must appeal to the Bible, but they lack a coherent theological framework for doing so effectively. Instead, what we are likely to see is a few verses, some from the Old Testament, pitted against such platitudes as “God is love” or “in Christ there is neither male nor female,” bandied about by the “progressives” with a complete disregard for their Biblical context.

What we need to recognise is that ultimately the debate is not about how particular people feel, nor does it have much to do with experiences that can be interpreted in different ways. The root of the differences goes much deeper than this, and it can be traced back to ancient times. To put it simply, what we are seeing right now is the most recent manifestation of the centuries-old struggle between various forms of Platonism and the Judaeo-Christian worldview expressed in the Bible. Platonism (or “idealism”) is essentially a mental construct that imposes itself on matter. This can be done in different ways, but they all start from the premise that what we see around us is a corruption of some ideal “reality.” That reality exists only in our minds, but it is no less important for that. The principle is that we have a mental image of something like a table, and then make material objects conform to it. Such conformity is never perfect, but this is because matter is fallible and ultimately unable to reflect the ideal with complete accuracy, so that the tables we see around us are not all alike.

In modern times, Marxism was a Platonic philosophy that projected a certain vision of the human race and its destiny on historical fact and proceeded to alter the material universe accordingly. The result was the monstrosity of “communism” which destroyed millions in the pursuit of an ideal (and to its devotees, inevitable) perfection. It failed, of course, but in its heyday it attracted quite a number of gullible intellectuals, including many who thought that Christianity had finally come to achieve its own prophetic vision in the atheism of the new society. There were many, including a number of prominent church people, who disregarded the evidence to the contrary and continued to laud this fated experiment until its dying day, and even now there are a few who long for its return.

Closer to home, we have just witnessed the celebrations of the 1916 Easter Rising in Dublin, in which seven unlikely idealists wreaked havoc in the name of the Platonic ideal of an Ireland that had never existed, and that still eludes those who are foolish enough to buy into the cult. Thousands of lives have been sacrificed, often by people who have professed a form of Christian piety, in a search for the unobtainable.

Disillusionment with this has surfaced from time to time and its falsity has been courageously exposed by a few truly enlightened souls like Ruth Dudley Edwards and the late Conor Cruise O'Brien, but their critique remains a minority belief. As the recent centenary has shown, a majority of people in the Republic of Ireland continues to subscribe to the fantasy, even though many of them protest bitterly that their goal is as far away as ever.

These examples are very different from each other, but they remind us of the protean nature of Platonism and of its power to seduce even those who are officially committed to the very different worldview of the Bible and the Christian tradition. Those who claim that their gender identity is a mental construct divorced from biological detail are effectively Platonists. They are certainly not Christians, who are committed to the view that God created us in his image—as both male and female. We have not chosen which sex we shall be, but have been assigned one, which it is our duty and privilege to express and fulfill to the best of our ability. This has nothing to do with any supposed superiority of the male over the female—the Bible insists that both are equal, while respecting their differences. We are not judged by our sex, but by the faithfulness we show in living according to the plan that God has set out for us in this world.

The biological reality is clear. Male sexual organs complement female ones, as God designed them to do. The procreation of children is not possible otherwise, as even same-sex campaigners have to accept. But so blind are they to this reality that they advocate surrogacy instead of the natural copulation of a married couple as if the two things were exact equivalents and the artificial alternative is nothing but a matter of personal preference.

It is true that some people are more attracted to others of the same sex, but this should be seen in context. That men and women often prefer each other's company is a well-known fact of life. Go to any social function and it will not be long before the men are off in one corner discussing something like sport, whereas the women will be thrown together to chat about something more practical—like children, perhaps. This phenomenon is virtually universal and there is nothing wrong with it. Sexual intercourse never comes into this kind of interaction, nor should it do so. Sex only intrudes into same-sex relationships when natural human desires have become introverted. We do not always know how this happens, nor is there an obvious way of straightening it out that will work in every case, but the fact of introversion is incontrovertible.

What has happened in that case is that sexual desire is in conflict with biology. The same-sex campaigners of our time have embraced this as normal, at least for them, and are insisting that the rest of the world must treat it as such. In their minds, individuals must be free to express their sexuality in whatever way they choose, and if they decide to cross over from one gender to the other, then their choice must be respected. It is a question of mind over matter—the very essence of Platonism.

Against this there stands the Bible. Male and female were created for each other, partly for companionship and partly for procreation. The purpose of God is fulfilled when the complementarity of the sexes is recognised and realised in what we call marriage. There have been times in the past when the pattern of “one man, one woman” found in Genesis has been violated, but this has always been in the direction of polygamy, not homosexuality. In the Old Testament polygamy was tolerated, if not really approved of, often in circumstances where the procreation of the human race would otherwise have been in jeopardy, but this ancient custom died out in the course of Israelite history and is not found in the New Testament.

Heterosexual monogamy is by no means the only form of social interaction that the Bible approves or regards as desirable, but in terms of social cohesion and the preservation of the human race it remains fundamental to our existence. Everybody has a biological mother and a father, and to deny that is to spit in the face of reality. The Platonic vision of a world in which material facts do not stand in the way of realising an ideal dream is deeply hostile to the Christian view of the world as it has been revealed to us by God. In saying this, we are not being nasty to people who want to find fulfillment by living out their fantasies. We are simply telling the truth. Furthermore, we are protecting the vulnerable against the same kind of devastation that other forms of Platonism have wreaked on generations gone by.

We should not be surprised that men and women claiming to be Christians have fallen for this false understanding. It has always been so—from the Gnostics of the early church to the fourth-century heretics influenced by Neoplatonism, to the “liberation” theologians of the 1960s who supported terrorist movements in the quest for universal peace and justice. What we are called to do in our time and in our circumstances is to bear witness to the truth as God has revealed it and as the simple, unclouded vision of everyday life makes obvious to us. This is not a matter of personal preference or prejudice but a question of honesty in the face of objective fact. Sooner or later, the truth will prevail and future

generations will look back on us, as we look back on the Marxists of the 1930s, and wonder how anyone could have been so gullible. Far from being “conservatives” or “traditionalists” bucking the trend, we are the ones who are on the right side of history, and it is up to those who are privileged to speak in our name to bring that truth home to a Church which is afflicted by the fairytale world of transgenderism. This emperor has no clothes, but where is the child with the courage to say so?

GERALD BRAY