
THE TABLET

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ANGLICANISM'S TOPPLING TRIANGLE

Collisions between immovable objects and unstoppable forces are never pretty, as the Church of England seems anxious to demonstrate. Its General Synod heard a desperate plea this week from Dr Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, to pull back from the confrontation over the ordination of women bishops that could see the Church fragmenting into at least three components. These three – Anglo-Catholic, Evangelical and liberal – are modern versions of the three varieties of Anglican churchmanship that have existed side by side, at times comfortably and at times painfully, ever since the shape of the Elizabethan Settlement emerged in the sixteenth century. Now this Anglican “comprehensiveness” seems to have reached its sternest test.

Having decided to ordain women in 1992, a move to open the Anglican episcopacy to them was inevitable. About 40 per cent of Anglican clergy are now female, and some are as well qualified for promotion as their male equivalents. To cope with those who could not accept female ordination on theological or biblical grounds, special arrangements were made so that such clergy, and their parishes, need never come into contact with a woman priest if they did not want to. Most of those who took advantage of this were Anglo-Catholics, and they expected similar arrangements to be made so that they could insulate themselves from women bishops. But this is proving unacceptable to the proponents of women bishops, for the understandable reason that it seems to establish that such women bishops are not proper bishops but at best second class, at worst invalid.

There is also a strong objection among conservative

Evangelicals, the second of the three elements in the comprehensiveness mix, that the “headship” of women over men in the Church is ruled out by Scripture. Archbishop Williams is probably right that the only way of holding these three elements together is for one or more to climb down. Given that it is the proponents – broadly known as liberal – of women bishops who want to change the way things are at present, the onus is on them. But there is an air of liberal intolerance, not to say triumphalism, about some of their attitudes. It is a characteristic of intolerant liberals that they regard their opponents not just as mistaken but as morally wrong. In this case, the implied charge is misogyny. Arguments about biblical headship on the one hand and the tradition of the Church on the other are dismissed as cloaks for mere prejudice.

As comprehensiveness is at the heart of Anglicanism, its breakdown could produce a fundamental change in Anglican identity. Without a brake being applied by Anglo-Catholics and conservative Evangelicals, Anglican liberals would be free to dictate the agenda – and not just over issues like homosexuality but also, say, over relations with Rome. Such relations would be fundamentally altered if the most Romeward facing section were to leave Anglicanism altogether and take advantage of the papal offer of an ordinariate – which would be Roman Catholic doctrinally but Anglican culturally. Some would say that there was an historical logic at work here, and that comprehensiveness itself was always inherently unstable. But there is a price. Anglicanism as we have known it, as a triangle of balancing forces and a Christian symbol of unity in diversity, would be no more.

WAY BACK FOR THE BANKERS

Unless it is to be left entirely to the vagaries of the free-market system, international finance needs international regulation. That is one of the strongest conclusions to have emerged from the recent financial and economic crisis, a lesson learned at a high cost. A further development of that principle is now being advocated: an international tax on international financial transactions. Indeed, it seems a logical next step, although it was first proposed 40 years ago by the economist James Tobin. Such a tax would generate enormous quantities of funding for worthwhile projects, with relatively little impact on the efficiency of international trade and finance. Gordon Brown has mooted it; various European Union governments have sounded interested; and the United States, having first waved the idea away, seems to have waved it on board again.

Various non-governmental organisations are giving their support to a serious effort to capture public support in Britain and abroad, starting by renaming the concept the Robin Hood tax (robbing the rich to pay the poor). The actor Bill Nighy has launched a feature film, directed by Richard Curtis, that puts the case for the tax in simple language. It is a moral case. Banks and other institutions engaged in international finance have done damage to the world economy on an apocalyptic scale, bringing hardship to millions. The ensuing national debts can only be cleared by draconian cuts to public spending, bringing further suffering and possibly threats to public order – witness what is happening in Greece. Meanwhile, the banks are return-

ing to profitability, and bankers to their bonuses. The Tobin tax would be no more than just compensation, and could go some way towards alleviating the harm done. The tax was initially suggested as a way of damping down international currency speculation, and that would be an additional benefit.

There are three obvious problems, none of them insoluble. It would have to be collected and enforced globally, otherwise traders would simply shift the place where they do business. There would have to be an international body responsible for setting the rate at which it was to be levied – the sort of figures suggested are in the area of one per cent or less. And there would have to be agreement on what the money was to be used for. It would seem reasonable to put most of it towards the Millennium Development Goals, and use some of the rest to relieve national economic problems caused by the financial crisis. Organisations such as the International Monetary Fund or the World Bank would have to take on this extra responsibility, under United Nations supervision. But all this is within the realm of possibility.

It is by no means clear that those engaged in international finance need fear this tax or oppose the campaign for it. They are well aware how unpopular they are, but they are locked inside a financial system from which it is hard to escape. Embracing a tax of this kind would not only change the culture of financial trading and international banking, but public perception of the bankers as well. It is a chance for redemption.