

JUDITH ROSE

Structure and Spirit

A Response to 'Consecrated Pragmatism' by Martyn Percy

The Archdeacon of Tonbridge defends the Turnbull proposals. Judith Rose highlights the present 'chaos' which the report is designed to remedy and goes on to criticise Percy's reluctance to engage with real issues of management, efficiency, authority and power. She rejects the necessary connection between these reforms and the end of the Church of England's role as a church for the nation.

MARTYN PERCY has obviously given a great deal of thought to the report 'Working as One Body'. He has sought to analyse the theological basis and practical recommendations of the report and is unhappy with what he finds. I am grateful to such theologians who ask the hard questions and invariably highlight some issues that ought to be considered carefully. Since reading the report itself, I have sat through many debates at General and Diocesan Synod, heard several presentations and read numerous papers on the subject, including the latest follow up document, *A Framework for Legislation* (GS 1188). It was with interest therefore that I read Martyn Percy's critique and found that I disagreed with much of what he has written. My comments take into account the amendments to the original proposals although these probably do not significantly alter the matters raised by Dr Percy or my comments on his paper.

Theology and tradition

Percy starts with the assertion that the Turnbull proposals significantly change or dispense with the essential nature of the Church of England as it is rooted in history, and changes its identity. I disagree as I shall try to show in this review. Let me begin by affirming that tradition is important. It has developed as previous generations of Christians have expressed their faith and we enter into that inheritance. However, in my view tradition is not static and unchangeable and there are times when it needs to be challenged. Jesus certainly did this to the tradition in which he was brought up. Tradition should therefore be regarded as something that is living, and therefore capable of adaptation. The extent of any change is a right subject for debate, which is the value of Percy's paper.

Percy criticises the theological introduction to the report. He is right that it does not give an exhaustive theological treatise on either ecclesiology or episcopacy. That is not its intention. Such theological works can be found elsewhere. Rather the report has set out a theological framework. As the recommendations continue to be discussed, amended or implemented a watching brief on the theological

implications is to be kept by a small group under the direction of the Archbishop of York. I hope that Percy's critique might be referred to that group.

The report claims to be a review of the national institutions, not a theology of either ecclesiology or of episcopacy. These theologies are needed to inform any proposed institutional structure, but the two ought not to be confused as Percy's critique seems to do. The report may seek to redefine episcopal leadership, but it does not claim to rewrite the theology of episcopacy. Martyn Percy seems to have either misunderstood or over-emphasised the role of the National Council. (It should be noted that the title has now been changed to the Archbishop's Council, specifically to take note of the fact that this is about the governance of the Church of England. The Church *in* England is not limited to the Anglican Church as our Nonconformist, Roman Catholic and other friends would be quick to tell us.)

Accountability

Percy claims that, 'the National Council is largely accountable to no-one but itself'. In fact it is designed to be accountable to General Synod. The number of elected representatives from the Synod has been increased from that in the original proposals to emphasise the link, though there are those who still question whether the balance is right between the elected and the appointed members of the Council. Percy may be right to alert us to the possibility that the rights of clergy and laity could be eroded somewhat by these proposals. This is an issue that will need to be monitored if the recommendations are effected. It is a risk, but over representation of all parties and factions of the Church is a recipe for paralysis. It raises the question of how far wholesale democracy is the best or the biblical way to govern the Church of Christ. The Archbishop's Council will take the place of the Standing Committee of the General Synod, will be able to co-ordinate decisions and shape policy, but will be answerable to General Synod. At present, decisions are made by a disparate number of bodies who with good will may relate to each other. Direction, if it is given at all, comes from various quarters, be that the Church Commissioners, the individual bishops, the General Synod, the Archbishops, or perhaps reports of boards and councils which receive significant publicity, but are not necessarily owned by General Synod, e.g. *Something to Celebrate*.¹ The recommendations may not be perfect, but they seem to be a great improvement on our present chaos and seek to keep in tension the role of the Synod and that of the House of Bishops.

The report is based on the concept of the Church of England being episcopally led and synodically governed and grapples with the concept of bishop-in-synod. Our history and allegiance to scripture has led us to this position. The Church of England functions with neither an authoritarian model, like the Roman Catholic Church, where decisions are made by the bishops, nor a wholly congregational model, in which power lies with the laity. We seek to keep together the notion of a priesthood of all believers, and therefore the authority of the laity, with the notion of an ordered leadership. Holding these two in tension is not easy, with a tendency

1 Synod took note of this report but to take note is not the same as receiving a report or agreeing with its contents.

for the emphasis to swing from one to the other. Turnbull spells out this tension and recommends structures in which the emphasis may have changed somewhat, without in my view undermining the basic biblical theology. Percy continually describes the Archbishop's Council as the 'Head' of the Church. I agree with him that this is not a biblical concept as the NT makes it very clear that Christ alone is Head of the Church. To use the headship argument in terms of Christian leadership is not biblical and is not the terminology used in the Turnbull Report, neither does the report suggest that the Archbishop's Council is superior to the rest of the body. It may have a different function, as does the ordained ministry, but that does not make a council or a priest superior to others. Such a line of argument is not helpful, or true to the ethos of the report.

Restructuring for Mission

The Turnbull proposals for the restructuring of the National Boards and Councils is a way to enable the Archbishop's Council to co-ordinate the wide variety of work undertaken by these bodies, and for these bodies to be represented on the Council. Percy describes this as swallowing up long established committees. Any committee structure needs clear terms of reference if its work is to be effective, but there is bound to be overlap at the edges as life, and indeed the kingdom of God, is a whole and cannot be departmentalised. Departmentalism is a device to enable specific work to be done, and providing there is co-ordination and cross-fertilisation the disadvantages can be overcome. Grouping various specific committees could enable this to happen, e.g. education and social responsibility are part of the mission of the Church. To locate them within the remit of a Resources for Mission Board, will emphasise this point and will help to focus the work of these boards and councils in that direction. The Secretary of State may not understand what the mission of the Church is all about, but as a church we ought not to be ashamed or coy about, for example, seeing our work with schools and colleges as part of the mission of the Church. Mission needs to be defined as something broader than evangelism. The Church's interest in the well-being of society is surely part of the mission of God.

There has been concern about the time-scale for the implementation of the recommendations of the report. In fact the process has now been somewhat delayed in the light of these criticisms to allow further time for reflection. However, General Synod is aware of the effects of these proposed changes on the staff at Church House and at the Church Commissioners. A long period of uncertainty will undermine morale. It is therefore in the interests of the Church that those who serve its structures should not be left in this uncertain period for longer than necessary. Discussions at staff level are in hand and need to be handled well. Whether much more would have been achieved if these proposals had been formally referred to dioceses and deaneries is a matter of opinion. The original report was publicised widely and many dioceses have submitted their responses. The recent initiative of producing a briefing paper to be distributed widely is an attempt to keep the whole church informed and therefore able to respond as the recommendations are discussed, amended or implemented. There has been some criticism of the first of these briefing papers, but hopefully the standard will improve.

It is difficult to see the basis of Percy's contention that the proposals in the report will tend towards the undermining of bodies such as the Anglican Consultative Council or lead towards the office of the Archbishop of Canterbury imitating a form of papal leadership. The strength and probably the weakness of the Anglican Communion is the independence and yet the interdependence of the Provinces, enabling the Anglican Church in each part of the world to order its affairs in a way it feels most helpfully enables it to proclaim the gospel within its own culture. I see no reason why the proposals to restructure the governance of the Church of England should hinder relationships across the Anglican Communion.

Power talk and exercising leadership

Percy is very critical of words such as leadership, authority, management, efficiency, strategy and accountability, as though these words of themselves were inappropriate to use in the context of the Christian Church. What he could rightly criticise are unchristian styles of leadership, management and efficiency that do not enable the Church to be the servant church and aim for the priorities that Christ has set. I see no scriptural warrant for inefficiency or mismanagement. There is plenty in the NT about leadership and authority. Percy himself notes Jesus' words from Mark 10 where Jesus explained that the exercise of authority among Christians is not to be authoritarian, but after the style of Jesus' own leadership. The Church needs to do more thinking and to have much more practice at styles of leadership which focus on a servant-like authority, a model which Jesus set for us but which we find difficult to follow. We need to encourage these styles of leadership within the Church.

The structures of the Church need not of themselves mean authoritarian leadership any more than does the existence of the freehold, which Percy defends. By whatever structures the Church chooses to govern itself, the challenge to those in authority is to have the servant authority of Jesus. The Church can even talk about productivity and success so long as success is evaluated by the standards that Jesus set. Success for Jesus included a cross and death! Paul had his aims and objectives. He claimed not to run aimlessly and specifies his objectives. (1 Cor. 9:26) He spells out his aim to, 'present everyone perfect in Christ' (Col. 1:28) and to encourage the Christians to be built up in unity, faith and knowledge and to become mature (Eph. 4:12-13). The danger of using these words is the connotation put upon them by an economically driven society. If the Church is to use these words we must be quite clear that our objectives are to be of a very different order, but there seems to be no particular value in having no objectives at all. I am not sure why efficiency and an humane approach have to be set over against each other. True pastoral care is more than saying nice things to clergy regardless of their 'performance'. I have seen too many congregations who have been crippled by ineffective clergy, and parishes where the church has little impact in its area because the lay people are hindered from being the church by their clergy. Such situations are in a minority, but it would seem that the imperative of the kingdom demands that the leadership of the Church call such men and women to account. This is surely a biblical principle.

A Church for the nation?

There is no necessary reason why these changes in structure proposed in the Turnbull Report should affect the ministry that the Church of England has to the nation nor the important role that Christians have in the society in which they live and work. I reject the link Percy makes between the implementation of the report and disestablishment or loss of role of the Church of England within the English nation. Rather the recommendations aim to make the Church of England more effective within the nation for the sake of the gospel. The report seeks to discern what ought to be done centrally and what is better done locally. This may not save money, for what is saved at the centre may have to be spent at diocesan level, but the primary purpose of the report is in any case not financial. Percy notes that the Church of England has recently experienced a shift in transforming its sense of mission and become more sharply focused. He notes that this runs the risk of alienation from society. This may be true but surely the Church needs to be clear about the gospel and the mission imperative and yet continually be relating to the society in which it is set. The temptation to be a privatised religion must be resisted. This could happen whatever structures are in place. I am surprised that Percy believes the report is based on an impoverished notion of mission. Surely we are a church that is an offering church and a church that has something to offer.

Percy criticises the report for being, 'a rationalising document, it is not a document of faith'. It may be true that it is a rational document, but what is wrong with that, if it rationalises that which is chaotic and complex and therefore hinders the work of the kingdom of God? I am not sure what he means when he says that it is not a document of faith. If it encourages the Church to have a structure which will better enable the Church to fulfil its God-given purpose then surely it could be called a document of faith. Whether the proposed structure will fulfil that purpose only time will tell. In the mean time those responsible for its implementation need to discern whether it is likely to do so. Clearly, Percy thinks not.

In his critique Percy sees a shift in 'governing power' from theologians to bishops and now to the Archbishop's Council. Many would be worried to know that the Church had been governed by theologians! We need theologians to inform and question the Church, but the tradition we have inherited is leadership by bishops while recognising that the Holy Spirit of God inspires every believer. This brings us back to the phrase episcopally led and synodically governed. A synod is by definition a meeting of bishops, clergy and laity. It is to this body that the Archbishop's Council will report and on whose behalf it will give a lead. Although it is of course true that the Holy Spirit leads individuals and local churches, if we are to function as a national church we surely need some structures. These must be enabling structures rather than the multi-headed organisation we have at present. Percy believes that the Turnbull Report suggests replacing one structure by another less efficient structure. He likens this to the replacement of his Morris Minor with a scooter, but perhaps if restoration is impossible these proposals are more like replacing such a vehicle with a new Rover 400 series which will use less petrol, carry passengers more comfortably and save time in travelling in order to give more time to the reason for the journey.

Without a vision?

Percy's paper does not claim to be an argument for maintaining the status quo. However no real alternatives are proposed. The second part is entitled, 'Some Alternative Visions', but a vision that cannot be rooted in reality is a figment of the imagination and not the sort of vision that is from God. e.g. the vision of the Messiah in the OT became the reality of the Incarnation. Percy recognises the need for structural reform, but then seems to deny the need for any structures let alone proposing appropriate ones. Of course, structures are not ends in themselves, but they are necessary in any society. What is important is that the structures enable that society to fulfil its function. The present structures do not serve the Church as well as they should, and hence the reason for the Archbishop's commission which has resulted in the Turnbull Report. Although we cannot control the Spirit we should surely seek to have in place structures which do not hinder the Spirit of God and then be prepared to change those structures as the Spirit moves in new ways. Is it not possible that the Turnbull Report is the result of the Spirit challenging the Church of England to look carefully at these structures that have grown over the years and are now in need of some radical renewal or repair?

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