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Churchman

EDITORIAL

A Post-Truth Way of Life?

A few weeks ago the editors of the Oxford English Dictionary announced that their international word of the year for 2016 is ‘post-truth’. They were obviously prompted in this by recent political events in the United Kingdom and the United States, where a referendum (in the former) and a presidential election (in the latter) were won by egregious liars who fed their respective publics with industrial amounts of misinformation, including fake news—and got away with it. But as the analysts of this phenomenon quickly realised, it was not the lies that won the day, so much as a widespread indifference to the facts that allowed the untruths to be expressed with impunity. There was no shortage of people in either country who pointed out that voters were being seriously misled, but the response of many was that they did not care. For reasons that had nothing to do with objective fact, they turned their backs on truth, honesty and common sense, and instead took a plunge into the unknown that their opponents regard as irresponsible, if not downright mad.

These were not isolated or aberrant events but part of a wider social trend that has come to be labelled ‘post-truth’. Hence the new word in the Dictionary. But of course, the thing itself is much older. The desire to believe a lie is as old as humankind, as the creation story in Genesis reminds us. Adam and Eve could not possibly have become like God, but they wanted to—and that was what mattered. That things turned out differently was inevitable but it was too late to go back, and we have all had to live with their folly ever since.

In a more restricted sense, what the Dictionary is now calling ‘post-truth’ has existed and flourished in the Church of England for nearly two centuries. It was in the great age of reform in the 1820s and 1830s that a small and unrepresentative group of churchmen started to panic. In their eyes, the compact between church and state that had dominated England and Ireland since the Glorious Revolution was coming unstuck, and the Church was being subjected to secular forces that were alien to its mission. Few though these distressed churchmen were, they were

committed to rescuing the Church by making it great again, and it was the conviction that they knew how to do it that gave them their power. In their eyes, it was in the medieval period that Christendom had reached the heights of glory, a lost paradise that had been shattered by the Protestant Reformation. Only by eliminating that could their vision be realised, and they set about their seemingly impossible task with a determination sometimes bordering on fanaticism.

The Tractarian movement, as it came to be known from the series of ninety tracts that these zealots produced, was essentially an exercise in what we would now call ‘post-truth’ propaganda. In the fantasy world they created, the Reformation was not so much attacked as ignored—it had never happened. The Church of England had always remained faithful to its medieval heritage, and even the Thirty-nine Articles were compatible with pre-Reformation theology. That odd claim proved to be a step too far, and in the ensuing outcry, John Henry Newman, the author of Tract 90, left the Church and became a Roman Catholic. Some of his friends followed him, but many stayed in the Church and continued the work of hollowing it out from within. A recognisable pattern soon developed. Committed Anglo-Catholic clergy would defy the law by introducing ritual practices that were officially not allowed. Those who opposed them would be driven to seek legal remedies, which in some cases included imprisonment for the offenders. That allowed the Tractarians to portray themselves as martyrs and gained them some sympathy with the wider public, which was largely indifferent to (and often uncomprehending of) the issues at stake. What difference did it make, many bystanders wondered, what a clergyman wore or what ritual acts he performed during public worship?

In the end, although the ritualists lost most of the court cases in which they were involved, and although the pope dashed their hopes by declaring Anglican orders ‘null and void’—in other words, there really *had* been a Reformation as far as Rome was concerned—the Anglo-Catholics managed to carve out a niche for themselves within the establishment. The irony was that in doing this, their desire to restore the Church to its primitive glory resulted in the collapse of its internal discipline. But although their success was limited, they proved that a determined minority could get its way by flying in the face of facts, by creating propaganda that portrayed them in a highly misleading light, and by taunting a leadership that they knew was too afraid to do anything to stop them. Their opponents, mostly Evangelicals but including many liberal churchmen as well, could (and did) protest all they liked, but

they were privately derided and publicly ignored. Even the recent book by Jeremy Morris, *The High Church Revival in the Church of England* (Brill, 2015), while it acknowledges that the Anglo-Catholics did not have everything their own way, says virtually nothing about the opposition they faced, and makes no attempt to present their antagonists' arguments in a serious way. For Dr Morris, as for Anglo-Catholic historians and apologists in general, Evangelicals did not (and still do not) exist. In their eyes, the Reformation never happened, and whatever went on the sixteenth century can be ignored or explained away as an 'emergency' with no lasting impact. For them, Anglo-Catholicism and Anglicanism have merged into one—the declining fortunes of the one are the declining fortunes of the other.

The counter-factual world that Anglo-Catholics created somehow manages to survive in books about Anglicanism in spite of the onslaughts of secular historians who have comprehensively debunked it, and it is the natural forerunner of the post-truth universe in which the Church of England now finds itself. The presenting issue today is not ritualism but homosexuality, but otherwise the current scenario is a re-run of what happened 150 years ago. Now as then, a dedicated minority is determined to impose its agenda on the wider Church. Its leaders are strangers to the truth and will resort to the most extraordinary propaganda in order to gain sympathy. They present themselves as modern-day martyrs, victims of persecution by an unloving group of legalistic Evangelicals who cannot accept their presence in the Church. The Evangelicals can try to counter this with the facts—neither the Bible, nor reason, nor the tradition of the Church supports the gay agenda, and the homosexual lobby does not have a leg to stand on. By every objective measure, the Evangelicals are right, and if truth mattered, that would be the end of the argument.

But there, of course, comes the rub. Truth does not matter, either to those who are advocating the homosexual agenda or to many of the bishops who are expected to apply the Church's discipline. Like their nineteenth-century predecessors, they are often privately unsympathetic to the radicals and one or two have been brave enough to take action against them, but on the whole they run for cover. Either they say nothing at all, or they invent phrases like 'good disagreement' which ends up meaning that right and wrong can happily co-exist. And why should that not be so, if truth is of no importance? I say the world is round, you say that it is flat—so what? What practical difference does it make? As the purveyors of 'good disagreement' would say, the important thing is that

we must get along with one another, and if the facts get in the way, then so much the worse for them.

Not so long ago, reasoning of that kind would have been greeted with incredulity and rejected. There was a time when Christians of all churchmanships wrote books to prove that the Bible is true, that Jesus really did rise from the dead, and that the Word of God speaks to the needs of the modern world. Those who disagreed with that either kept quiet, sought academic posts where they would be free to express their doubts, or left the Church altogether. But times have changed. In 1963, the late John Robinson, then suffragan bishop of Woolwich, was rusticated to Cambridge for his unorthodox opinions. But in 1984, David Jenkins was consecrated bishop of Durham in spite of widespread and very public protests against his open mockery of Christian teaching. After he passed away, he was praised as 'a great Christian' even though, by his own admission, he was not a believer at all. The sad fact is that the truth died before he did, and nobody cared.

All of this helps to explain the nature of the current crisis which the Church is facing over homosexuality. We are not considering how we should relate pastorally to those who identify in that way, despite what some people claim. There has never been any appetite among the orthodox for persecuting those who feel same-sex attraction, and we do not intend to start now. We cannot swear that no homosexual has ever been mistreated by the Church, but if some have, it has not been the result of dogmatic persecution by Evangelicals. On the contrary, they have often been in the forefront of ministering to homosexuals and many have done what they can to help them, without betraying their confidence. In the nature of the case, this cannot be publicised with specific examples, but we know that it is true and it needs to be said. The courage of those who have identified with Living Out and with True Freedom Trust is good to see and their witness ought to be better known and respected than it is.

But if homosexuals should not be persecuted, neither should the lifestyle now commonly associated with them be sanctioned as acceptable, even for those who feel attracted to it. Homosexual practice is a sin in the eyes of God and Christians must avoid it, however 'natural' it may seem. We are all sinners and fall short of the divine glory, but that is no excuse for tolerating sinful behaviour in our midst. The Apostle Paul told the Romans not to be conformed to this world, but to be transformed by the renewing of the inner mind (Romans 12:2). Having the right attitude does not by itself solve every problem, but it is the essential starting point. We cannot accept a situation in which some people approve of wrongdoing

and are allowed to practise it, in spite of the teaching of the Bible and the universal Church. There has to be a single standard embraced by all, and those who cannot accept that ought to resign from their ministry. This is not to condemn them but to exercise godly discipline, without which the Church cannot fulfill its mission.

GAFCON-UK has recently published a list of people and circumstances in which the disciplinary rules of the Church have been ignored. Not so long ago some of the people on that list would have protested that they had been unfairly singled out, but not anymore. What we find now is that some people who have not been criticised are openly protesting that they have been overlooked! They are proud of their sin and want it to be broadcast as far and wide as possible. Clearly they believe that they have sufficient support behind them to cancel out the GAFCON statement, and we may be certain that they will not give up until they have obtained satisfaction. How right are they to think this?

Here we enter the realm of the unknown. It is probable that most of the secular media will support their cause, but they may also conclude that the Church has a right to defend its 'backward' policies and that those who are more 'enlightened' would be better off outside it, just as the opinion-formers in the media are. The bishops will be divided in their response, but if past performance is any guide they will be asked to maintain a silent neutrality. What that means, as we know by now, is that the majority will say nothing while one or two mavericks will loudly attack the doctrine they are sworn to uphold and may even 'conscientiously' ignore it in practice. Others will keep quiet in public but subvert the rules when nobody is looking—upholding the letter of the law while denying its spirit. If this judgment sounds harsh, we can only reply that it is happening already, and GAFCON (to its credit) has had the courage to say so.

GAFCON-UK and its supporters will doubtless think that it is necessary to continue to fight for Biblical principles at the intellectual level and they are right to do so, but they should be under no illusions that this tactic will cut any ice with their opponents. This is where the reality of the post-truth universe kicks in. There may well be people who agree with the arguments put forward, or at least accept that they are consistent, but who will then conclude that it makes no difference. Whatever anyone says, the real issue (as far as they are concerned) will be determined by their notions of 'love' and 'compassion'. In other words, whatever the homosexual lobby wants, the homosexual lobby will get, because that is the 'loving' response to them. Anything less than that will be an expression

of ‘homophobia’, a useful smear word that can be applied to anyone who tries to defend the truth. The official reply of the Church of England will be that the orthodox defenders of its doctrine are right in most of what they affirm, but that their appeal to such things as Lambeth Conference resolution 1.10 has no legal force and that the application of discipline lies with the bishops.

This is, in fact, what William Nye, the Church’s secretary-general, has recently stated in his reply to the GAFCON representations. In practical terms, this means that little or nothing will be done to arrest the current trend towards acceptance of this particular form of immorality within the Church, and that attempts to change that by legal means will be frustrated. Defenders of orthodoxy must also be prepared to point out that offering pastoral sympathy to homosexual people does not mean that cathedrals should host Gay Pride events, or that bishops should go out of their way to participate in events of that kind. That gives an air of approval to something that the Church does not sanction and those in positions of authority ought to make sure that they do not give the wrong impression in such matters.

Of course, we must accept that Evangelicals are not perfect and can be inconsistent in their application of Biblical principles. Here we are more vulnerable than we perhaps realise and we must be prepared to repent and mend our ways. One obvious area of weakness is the way that we are often prone to excuse a heterosexual sin like divorce and remarriage, despite the fact that this was explicitly condemned by Jesus himself (Matthew 19:9). We must be sincere in our desire to uphold the discipline of the Church even if we find it awkward or disagreeable at times. If a cause is right, then it must be pursued in the right way, within the structures available to us. In fairness, Evangelicals have usually done their best to be law-abiding, though they have often been unwilling to stand up and be counted when their principles have been flouted. Here the witness of the bishop of Maidstone is to be applauded, and we must hope that others will follow his example. We do not have to resort to the tactics employed by our opponents, but we should not simply stand back and let them walk all over us either. If a bishop attacks GAFCON publicly, and some have, he should be called out on it and made to realise that he cannot say whatever he likes with complete impunity.

Meanwhile, Evangelicals must continue to contend for Truth—not just *the* truth (in the sense of a set of facts or propositions) but Truth as a concept, with objective content that is expressed in Scripture and in the teaching of the Church. We have not invented this Truth, nor have we

configured it to suit ourselves, despite what some of our critics may say. We are open to correction if it can be shown that we are wrong, but in this case the evidence from both the Bible and the laws of creation is too overwhelming to be denied. The pseudo-spirituality of the homosexual lobby must be challenged—praying about sin before committing it is no excuse for carrying on regardless. Those who have adopted the habit of using the language of Zion to justify themselves in this way must be exposed and their abuse of pious-sounding language must be condemned for the hypocrisy it is.

Standing up to be counted will not be easy, but then, carrying the cross never is. What is at stake here is far too important for us to remain silent. The Bible warns us that those who build their house on the sand will come to a bad end, and there are plenty of examples from history, both inside and outside the Church, to prove the truth of that statement. The post-truth world into which we have stumbled cannot survive for long—it is not a way of life. The Old Testament prophetic books are full of warnings about the impending destruction of Israel because it had forgotten God, and we are seeing the same thing now happening in our midst. Rich and privileged as no generation before us has ever been, we have succumbed to the big Lie in both public and private life. The truth is that Western society has by and large rejected God, and the Church will not escape its impending destruction. When Jerusalem was finally taken by Nebuchadnezzar, the temple was not spared—the priests went into exile with the people and Solomon's glory was laid in the dust. This is the fate that awaits us, and it may come sooner than we think. May God grant us the strength to be true witnesses for him in this our crooked generation, and may he have mercy on us all.

GERALD BRAY