

## A Chat to "The Chap"<sup>i</sup> Can Anglicans be Traditional?

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Far from this being a case of "unaccustomed as I am", I am actually more than accustomed, and yet disconcertingly inhibited on this occasion. This is simply because none of you come here to be indoctrinated but to be charmed and entertained. There is little enough charm to be found any longer in the modern world, and so The Chap has a special 'ministry' to nurture and propagate this now rare quality. Furthermore, we all know that there are few more effective ways to kill conviviality than to introduce the topics of religion and haemorrhoids. Moreover, my church is far removed from the wonderfully social inoffensive "more sherry, vicar?" characterisations so beloved of Ealing Comedies, and thus, no doubt, also beloved of everyone who owns to chapistic sentiments. No, it must be admitted that the obedience to which I belong is very decidedly 'politically incorrect'. Thus, in a bid to settle any jitters, I might at this point dare to propose a more contemporary element of modest audience participation. Should anyone feel that they are being got at or bored, just call out "Steady on, padre!" but if moved by the Spirit to give mild assent, shout "Carry on padre!" If, however, anyone feels that they are in danger of speaking in tongues raise the alarm "He's behind you" to which I shall give the time-honoured liturgical response: "Oh, go on then, but no tongues!" Later I shall also be glad to attempt to do justice to questions.

I hope therefore, that I have already given you a sign that I am not some old sky pilot trying to peddle piety; since many of you may have already had unfortunate experiences with Christians. For none might this be more painfully so than those who have attended one of our august academies or venerable seats of learning, for these are also the haunts of the Christian Union. Its members, individually, are mostly, decent and well meaning types, put them together, however, and the results can be unfortunate. Just before my time at Exeter, certain young women within one particular hall of residence had taken to supplementing their meagre grants in a systematic, time-honoured, but dishonourable manner, allegedly. Certain more militant members of the Christian Union - allegedly - managed to lure a number of these 'entrepreneurs' into a convenient enclosed space and, upon securing the door, proceeded to subject them to hours of exorcism! an interesting use of the term there. A most frightful fuss followed and people were sent down, allegedly. One of the less dramatic duties undertaken by Union members was to call upon every undergraduate to ask them to accept Jesus as their personal saviour. A fellow theology student and fellow Anglo-Catholic - a large presence with a penetrating voice - flung open his door to one such aspirant evangelist who went into his rehearsed lines: "Do you know the Lord Jesus?" My acquaintance paused, then addressed him imperiously: "Not awfully well, no... but I'm very fond of his mother!" The flummoxed missionary recorded the theologian as a 'don't know' and beat a hasty retreat. In order for such banter to become a native tongue a knowledge of Anglican - and especially Anglo-Catholic - history and sub-culture is required.

### **Potted Histories (Anglican)**

The worst impression that I could give is that the Traditional Anglican ("Continuing") Church itself had been invented by a few disgruntled fogeys as a hobby, or as a rude gesture towards an increasingly touchy-feely establishment (cathartic as rude gestures may be in such cases). In various guises - in a sense - a 'continuing mentality' has existed since the seventeenth century. What came to be called Anglicanism is complicated because it has within it several schools of thought, of these it is the more decidedly Protestant and Catholic schools that are likely to produce a "continuing mindset." Depending upon historical circumstances, some traditional Anglicans have withdrawn from a confused Nationalised body in order to maintain duty or identity. More specifically Anglo-Catholicism has taken many forms throughout the years, like a sort of collective Lord Blackadder<sup>ii</sup> within Anglican history. Immediately before Cromwell seized power the traditionally minded Anglicans were enjoying a brief ascendancy. When, however, the Cromwellians (i.e. non-Anglicans) were the national religion some serious Anglicans avoided their parish churches and went underground. Even after Anglicans got their churches back<sup>iii</sup>, in the second half of the seventeenth century further troubles arose as to which king allegiance was owed - James II or William of Orange. An obscure point, but serious religion is not bound by political convenience. Thus the Archbishop of Canterbury, along with eight other bishops, had to quit; these were the Nonjurors.<sup>iv</sup> The Vicar of Bray was not only a satirical ballad, he was a real person who was the exact opposite to a Nonjuror. Apart from that ballad, this slice of history is usually overlooked. Over time some Nonjurors drifted back to the establishment, whilst George III granted a pension to the last of the Stuarts (a Roman Cardinal deprived of funds by wars in Europe<sup>v</sup>) and the oath of allegiance issue was closed. Others were not so easily appeased: the principal founders of Methodism, John and Charles Wesley, had close relatives who were Nonjurors, whilst John, reputedly, even used their order of service.<sup>vi</sup> Quite quickly, however, Methodism became very Protestantised, later it became very liberalised. Another, far more avowedly Protestant, group withdrew in the 1840s to become the Free Church of England<sup>vii</sup>. I mention them not as exemplars, but as an instance of how some perceived that - for varied reasons - an avowedly traditional expression of Anglicanism was both necessary and possible. This Free Church of England still exists (just) even though the Nonjurors do not. The Nonjurors, however, had often been great scholars, and their influence lived on in their writings which were re-read, almost by chance, by an historically minded group of Oxford dons in the late 1820s, and thus the Tractarian or Oxford Movement emerged.<sup>viii</sup> Once more this group also clashed with the prevailing wishy-washy Church of the day, and some of the original members - notably J. H. Newman - withdrew, (over the period 1845-1855) not for continuing Anglicanism, but for Rome.

Those who remained began to fight extraordinary battles embracing, almost by accident, a massive practical programme of social reform. They built churches in the slums, suppressed prostitution, began rehabilitation schemes, founded convents, and later monasteries, and generally made a nuisance of themselves. It is tempting to over-sentimentalise the slum priests; practically speaking they often had little alternative but to found their own parishes in those areas where no one else would venture. If, that is, they wanted to practice what they understood to be the full faith in an Anglican form. Their dedication and determination, however, was extraordinary by any standards. Their inner vision was to beautify and - so to speak - clarify public worship. Many ancient customs were reintroduced, not, as was supposed, for ostentation, but in solidarity with the very earliest Christian practice. It was not usually a matter of "smells and bells" at this early period (c. 1855-1875) but almost invisible customs such as mixing a drop of water with the wine in Holy Communion, since this was a near universal custom deriving from our Blessed Lord Himself. Even such inconspicuous customs proved so controversial that -ever the opportunist - Disraeli introduced into Parliament, as he put it, "a bill to put down the mass in masquerade." Anglo-Catholics, wholly unable to deflect the Church of England from submission to the (increasingly secular) state and from escalating theological drift, now occupied themselves with defying these usurped Parliamentary powers. Mobs could be bribed by low-church activists to disrupt worship and destroy church fittings. Again, the exact opposite of the Anglican "more sherry, Vicar" stereotype. Often police had to be called to try to restore order. Yet surprisingly, at last, Anglo-Catholics had found a fight that they could, and did, win. Five priests actually went to prison. Although imprisoned priests are still all too familiar, we are unlikely to class even the most offensive liturgical deviations as criminal. The first to be incarcerated was Arthur Tooth<sup>ix</sup>, whose liturgical practice had (for this period) been "advanced" with facing east<sup>x</sup>, lights, incense and coloured vestments. His church, just behind Goldsmiths College in New Cross, still stands, but now functions as a dance studio. These prosecutions attracted sympathy and few people had the stomach for them, the newly invented law quickly became a dead letter. In some respects c. 1880-1910 saw an Anglo-Catholic golden age because, for the first and last time, they had gained moral and tangible victories. Many lives had been transformed, the movement even made some impact upon literature. Moreover, they had acquired church interiors of outstanding beauty from the creative powers of Pearson, Bodley, G.O. Scott, Comper, Tapper and F.C. Eden, surely some of the most beautiful interiors in the entire history of art. Of course these traditional minded Anglicans (who, mostly, remained within the Church of England) had won significant battles. They could not, however, win the war, the war against theological popularism and relativism. The post-war drive to unite different Christian bodies divided the faithful! Traditionalists, effectively, found themselves voting against 'motherhood and apple pie.'

#### **Potted History (Mine)**

Undeniably I am from that Anglo-Catholic tradition. My mother was raised opposite the church of St. Benet & All Saints in Kentish Town which her mother had not entered for fear of priest-craft and who knows what! Despite such family fears, my mother began attending it with a school friend from the age of seven. From infancy I was nurtured within much the same faith and order. As I grew up, however, (in an age of shameful decline - in which large swathes of fields and woodland were concreted over, and such like) I became both more involved with and yet more critical of the Church of England. The greatest crisis of faith came when it established its own Parliament, known as the General Synod. I could not see what might stop it from deciding upon divine truth by mere majority votes.<sup>xi</sup> People were quick to assure me that this could never happen (as many are quick to assure me now that it has not happened), but I was worried, and I was not (quite) the only one. Now I do not expect agreement upon the following point, I merely invite you to discern implications... Eventually, in November 1992, this church parliament voted to ordain women as priests. Again, some rushed to assure me that this was no change to belief, only an extension of the Church's ministry. I would love to have believed them, I really would. I would suggest, however, to them and to you, that one cannot just move the thrones around in the kingdom of heaven, even for what might appear to be practical purposes. The kingdom of God may suffer violence (Matt. 11:12) but should it also be pliable to argument? It could be argued (admittedly not very practically) that baptism would be so much grander in wine than water, so let us now permit choice in baptisms.<sup>xii</sup> Yet water is the stuff (the 'matter') of baptism, the priesthood's stuff is men (God help us). There is no other precedent for us to follow, we are otherwise left to our imaginations. I have focussed on this issue only because, historically, it was the trigger for my departure. As a touchstone of orthodoxy, opposition to women priests, in itself, is worse than useless. If this were my only conscientious objection, I could probably be subjected to tons of psychological manipulation and be induced to accept it. There are not, however, enough days remaining in my life to repeat such a process for all the other unfounded inventions within Anglicanism, whereby the Ten Commandments have become ten suggestions. Changing the priesthood had also provided the catalyst for traditional Anglicans in North America during the 1970s. As a result a traditional bishop had been brought out of mothballs to consecrate four new traditional bishops who would act separately from and in opposition to the liberal, or at least acquiescent, majority. Eventually, in 1994, an American bishop ordained me deacon for our English equivalent.

This then is the charmless and politically incorrect story of my faltering pilgrimage. Before leaving the Church of England several people insisted "We are right behind you, Michael." But when I turned to look back over my shoulder a cloud of confusion and indecision had received them out of my sight. Many lay 'traditionalists' appear to occupy themselves in the Church of England by redrawing lines in the sand.<sup>xiii</sup> The choice between the faith or the church furnishings was over-influenced by the artistic, rather than theological, legacy of the likes of Bodley and Comper; yet ironically, those great churchmen would have emphatically repudiated the accolade. I venture that those visionary souls would have sooner torn down their own creations with their bare hands than see them more esteemed than the very faith that these edifices were intended to enshrine. So I have "carried-on-regardless-padre" and have attempted to keep God's design as I found it. I have resisted the reformers' determination to shift items around in His kingdom. But, in the process of conserving God's 'furniture,' I have forfeited many of my own aesthetic/spiritual 'comfy chairs.'

### **Questions**

The quality of the questions was very high, although regrettably (in my view) they focussed upon women's ordination. One point was that women in ministry often used more traditional worship, rejecting guitars and giving serious sermons. Reply: this was good, but as much as we might deplore "happy-clappy" elements in worship this would not actually "invalidate" it, unless one's view was that worship's main purpose was to induce piety or a certain disposition in the worshipper. A traditionalist, however, although aspiring to an excellent standard in worship will acknowledge that neither very poor quality (nor the sinfulness of the priest) can, in themselves, hinder the rite's efficacy, even if they leave the worshippers shattered. Most of my time as a layman was spent at a church with a minute congregation, poor music, miserable vestments, and rough ceremonial, though they did their best; but the old rites were observed as was the traditional teaching. In this sense 'quality' and 'authenticity' (or faithfulness), are two distinct categories, although they should coincide. The worshipers, ideally should not depart in a state of disgust.

- i This is a slightly augmented form of a talk which I was invited to give at the excellent Sheridan Club on 5th October, 2005.
- ii An allusion to a cult B.B.C. comedy in which the fortunes of a 'black sheep' from a noble family (and his descendants) are charted throughout history. Edmund Blackadder remains a consistently conniving character, but his historical circumstances and fortunes vary.
- iii Roman Catholics might object to my use of the word "back" here, they would argue that the buildings belonged to them.
- iv Years later this body sought to be in communion with the Eastern Churches, although the negotiations came to nothing. Ironically, they bore fruit later with more cordial relations between establishment Anglicans and Eastern Churches, especially the Russian and Romanian.
- v He and James III, "The Pretender" are buried in the crypt of St. Peter's Rome, there is also a monument above in the main basilica adorned with exaggeratedly effeminate angels.
- vi This was the order of Holy Communion of 1718, a form of liturgy using Cranmerian English but based on Eastern Orthodox liturgical forms. Specialists in this field tell me this was J. Wesley's practice, but I do not know if it was his invariable or occasional use, and I cannot cite documents.
- vii This began in a small way in 1843 when James Shore, curate of Bridgetown, Totnes fell out with (excellent) Bishop of Exeter. In 1863 they became allied with the Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion. Later Episcopacy was restored to them through G.D. Cummins, formerly assistant Bishop of Kentucky.
- viii It is significant that the first distinctive utterance of this group - John Keble's 1833 sermon - was a denunciation of the government's reforming control of Church administration in Ireland. It is actually quite a dull exhortation with which we would struggle to sympathise, and which in no sense changed government policy. These themes, however, are in direct succession to the Nonjurors.
- ix This talk was accompanied by modest visual aids, one of which was the famous cartoon by "Spy" that appeared in Vanity Fair. It pictures Tooth behind bars at Horsemonger Gaol in the long clerical coat over his frock coat, complete with clerical hat; his resigned, long face further darkened by a layer of 'five o'clock shadow.'
- x Much controversy still rages as to which direction a priest should face when offering prayer and the Eucharist. The east is the direction from which Christ is expected to return in glory. The Prayer Book seems to require facing south. Nowadays most clergy (though not this one) replicate the school assembly by sitting and glaring, or grinning, at the congregation.
- xi If majority votes were good enough for the historic Church Councils why should we object when adopted by Anglicans? Several points occur: Certainly the first three Councils could be taken to represent the totality of Christendom, the Church of England cannot. The Councils' history is not edifying, why emulate its worst features? It was not the majorities (incidentally usually overwhelming rather than merely two thirds) so much as the wishes of various emperors that determined their deliberations, cf. Article XXI of the 39 Articles The only way a Council can be reckoned 'Ecumenical' is if it upholds the orthodox faith, so we have a sort of 'chicken and egg' riddle within Church history. A decisive majority may exist in the 'democracy of the dead' (G.K. Chesterton's definition of Tradition) but majorities that are merely local in time and scope can never overturn the unbroken practice of the Church of God.
- xii No church known to me does this, it is an analogy. Mithraism, an ancient rival to Christianity, used to baptise in bull's blood, messier by far than wine.
- xiii I emphasise lay people here because many traditional priests have families to support and to deprive these families of income would not necessarily be the right course. Priests may remain out of duty to their flock, but this is less well founded, assuming, by extension, that they would never retire or die.