Anglicanism: the last rites?

Does 'The Gift of Authority' agreement script the final act in returning Anglicanism under the authority of Rome?

By Peter C Glover

As momentous events go, the publication of The Gift of Authority, the Anglican/Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC)'s report on May 12, created barely a ripple in the UK national press, or strangely, among the Anglican community. Given that the document urges all Anglicans to accept the authority of the Pope and papal infallibility this is surprising. For The Gift of Authority agreement urges nothing less than the full return of the Church of England into the Roman Catholic fold. Many evangelicals will express little surprise at this rapid turn of events. Sadly, many will care even less. The Church of England has been 'on the road back to Rome' since its refusal to rid itself of the concept of a 'priest'. But, as a former Anglican evangelical now ensconced within the independent evangelical fold, I believe we would do well to put aside all self-righteousness and express some care and concern at this latest turn of events.

The week after the publication of the report the Church of England Newspaper (CEN) posed the perplexing question: 'Since the consequence of last week's document are immense, why did the press ignore it?' Because, apart from a confused account in the Daily Telegraph the day after the report's publication, ignore it they did. We will return shortly to the reasons why the ramifications of this report are indeed immense. For 'why did the press ignore it?' should detain us only momentarily. It is singularly indicative of the liberal climate of opinion and leadership in the Church of England that it has still yet to grasp the debilitating effect of liberal theology and liberal morality. That the national media and the country at large showed a distinct lack of interest in what would just a few decades ago have been a news story of enormous proportions should have revealed to its liberal hierarchy a sobering 'home truth'. Without theology underpinning morality the Church of England is regarded as having little or nothing to contribute to the state of the nation. This fact, the natural consequence of the oft-lauded 'broad church' (some might say 'lowest common denominator') Anglican approach to theology, morality and spirituality, has yet to sink in.

For the theology of the church of Cranmer and the theological clarity of his 39 Articles have in practice been pushed aside in favour of a broad church pragmatism supposedly free of all dogma. But the Anglican church at large has failed to understand that it is not a question of eradicating dogma. The real question is this: 'whose dogma does one adopt?' Theirs is a belief-system which is rampantly tolerant and free of almost any kind of certainty, except one - that anyone who is dogmatic in their theological and moral outlook is intolerant is simply doomed to a liberal intolerance itself. For the modern Anglican Church leadership, lack of clarity and failure to provide any kind of firm theological and moral voice have unfortunately become a way of life. Should we be surprised when no one listens anymore? Clearly the CEN was. Should we be surprised when the national press and its readership are far less interested in a church sowing the seeds of self-destruction, than in the preservation of its 'dreaming spires' across the land?

Yet, The Gift of Authority document is indeed a momentous event for all Anglican Christians, for the 700,000 strong Anglican Communion and, I submit, for all concerned Christians. For The Gift of Authority is the first joint Roman Catholic and Anglican report to formally state the case calling for a total capitulation to, and full acceptance of, papal authority and the infallibility of the Pope. All this it previously held in abhorrence and was detested by Thomas Cranmer, J.C. Ryle and many other godly Anglicans through the years. The document now urges nothing less than early full compliance with the document's proposal by all Anglicans.
ARCCIC’s newly scripted policy of ‘euthanasia’ for Anglicanism, separating it once and for all from its Protestant Reformation roots, without it having gained any concessions whatsoever from Rome, reveals a church today bereft of any influence or moral authority in its own land. Anglicanism is prepared, it would seem, simply to sacrifice itself meekly on the altar of Rome - a Rome steeped in significantly more biblical error today than at any time in its history. The Church of England, having disabused itself of its conservative theology and morality, appears to have ‘given up the ghost’ and decided that now is the right time to hand over to a papacy that, at least, does have something to say - even though much of it is heretical.

That the final proposed capitulation to Rome may well be at the hands of an Archbishop that many erroneously believed to be evangelical is perhaps the greatest irony. Though built on the strongly Reformed foundation of Cranmer’s excellent and biblically crafted 39 Articles of Faith, the Church of England has, however, always prided itself on interpreting those Articles, initially with ‘flexibility’ and ultimately, with liberality. Archbishop George Carey recently revealed how far his understanding had travelled from that of Anglicanism’s Reformation heritage. Urging a ‘trinity of theological virtues’, being ‘Scripture, reason and tradition’, he claimed:

* Sola Scriptura has been consistently rejected by our community, but Scripture has never been rejected as the mainstay of our church...We have consistently rejected a narrow biblicism ...but Scripture remains the heart of Anglican theology.*

How does this square then with Article Six of the church's foundational document that calls for the church to only teach that which is taught in Scripture? Given that this latter-day Scripture defined by church and reason approach is preparing to deliver Anglicans into the clutches of a power long since bereft of biblical truth and spirituality, it is a ‘trinitarian’ system of belief that appears palpably to have failed.

A personal testimony

The inexorable decline of Anglicanism was brought home to this, formerly Anglican evangelical writer, when undergoing theological training within Anglicanism, as part of the Anglican Reader (i.e. lay preacher/leader) licensing programme. I was in for some disturbing shocks. The Director of Training for the three-year course was also the course lecturer on the section devoted to ‘Christian Doctrine’. At the beginning of session one, before speaking a word, he simply wrote: ‘Subjectivity is truth’ on the board. ‘Everything I teach on this course,’ he announced triumphantly, ‘will be based on this principle’. So much for the objective truth of Scripture. He was as good as his word. In the entire three-months considering ‘Christian doctrine’, not once were we entreated to open our Bibles (where else can Christian doctrine be found?). Instead, we experienced a litany of existentialist philosophers propounding their human wisdom and sad theories. Coming from decent evangelical churches one or two of us had been warned what to expect. But the thirty or so others in the group came from liberal churches. For them this was Christian teaching. Many of these individuals are now in the full-time Anglican ministry and are passing it all on to unsuspecting congregants somewhere.

All this was far worse than I had been led to expect. My own minister (an evangelical) agreed and urged that I complain to the sitting Bishop, allegedly an evangelical. I did, and got short shrift. His response amounted to ‘this is the way of things, get used to it’. For three years I underwent this and worse in order, as minister and friends put it, ‘to get more evangelicals in the system, so that we can change things!’ This is in my opinion, the ‘myth of philosophy propounding their human wisdom and sad theories. Coming from decent evangelical churches one or two of us had been warned what to expect. But the thirty or so others in the group came from liberal churches. For them this was Christian teaching. Many of these individuals are now in the full-time Anglican ministry and are passing it all on to unsuspecting congregants somewhere.

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Another Anglican evangelical minister urged me to go on to full ordination. But I would only stand a chance he informed me if I obscured my whole evangelical theological approach. He kindly offered to coach me through, to cheat the liberal Anglican Advisory Board for Ministry who were singling out and turning down evangelicals in our London diocese. Had it really come to this, I thought? Did I really want to be a part of a church as desperately sick as this? For me it was to time to go.

Even so, I know there are many current, decent Anglican evangelicals who will view The Gift of Authority with horror. No doubt the Anglican evangelical movement Reform’ will huff and puff, hold lots of meetings and eventually do nothing. Such is their record to date. Though many in Reform will wrestle sincerely with their consciences over this issue, the fear of loss of livelihood and the inherent charismatic ecumenism of many of its members will almost certainly hold sway. Undoubtedly, if the worst happens, some will jump ship and we must do what we can to welcome them when they do.

That the Church of England may capitulate to Rome without Rome moving one iota on any major issue of the Reformation, the cause of the original split, is astounding. In fact, the Rome faced by the Reformers had then still to declare its apostate doctrines of the Immaculate Conception of Mary (1845) and Papal Infallibility (1870). Worse still, Rome is yet to complete the final apostasy, by declaring Mary as co-redemptrix (co-mediatrix) with Christ (see my accompanying article The Age of Mary). This is the reality of the Rome with which Anglicans are dallying and to which Archbishop Carey has consistently gone cap in hand seeking union.
Why?

George Carey and other senior Anglicans clearly believe that all of the problems of belief and practice are overridden by another consideration: the shrinking size and influence of the Church of England in the face of widespread social disintegration. Their answer appears to be that ‘big is best’. Carey has recently repeated his assertion that the world will only listen to a unified church which is ‘able to speak with a common voice’7. If the cost is unification with Rome, then so be it. The biblical mandate of preaching God’s Word boldly and ‘hang what the world thinks’, does not appear to be a consideration for him at all. It appears he does not wish to preside over a church slowly achieving national invisibility apart, that is, from its very fine country steeples. The swallowing of all the baggage that comes with convergence with Rome: papal infallibility, Mary-worship, praying to the dead et al is a price that Anglicanism appears to be willing to pay to appease Rome. For appeasement is the hallmark of The Gift of Authority. That Rome may be on the point of healing its 450 year-old schism with the Church of England, without any cost to itself, interestingly appears to be of minor concern to the nation. But the nature of Anglicanism’s ignominious ‘white flag’ is not at all lost on Roman Catholic observers.

Within days of the publication of The Gift of Authority Margaret Hebblethwaite, a liberal Roman Catholic writing in a national newspaper said:

Knowing from experience that Rome is not ready to compromise, it has gone for appeasement. Everything most obnoxious to Anglicans about the Catholic view of authority is here. The right and duty of the Bishop of Rome to make solemn definitions of faith is commended with the pious hope: ‘We believe that this is a gift to be received by all the church’ 8.

The CEN itself pointed out just how keen the Anglican members of ARCIC are to join their own European union:

The Anglicans on ARCIC appear to have accepted a largely unreformed primacy, even before the Pope accepted them9, 10.

How should independent evangelicals view all this?

Non-Anglican evangelicals may be tempted to simply write off of evangelicals within the Church of England. The fearlessly individualistic outlook of many within modern independent evangelicalism merely reflects a disturbing lack of confessional correctness and a poorly developed doctrine of the (wider) Church. The Reformers would have considered this reprehensible. While there is indeed some ‘popery’ and much liberal thinking at the heart of Anglicanism, it is not however, as yet, avowedly, a formal wing or integrated part of Roman Catholicism. This does matter. There are very many godly Christian and evangelical ministers and members still under the Anglican umbrella. The broad church approach cuts both ways. While much Anglicanism is indeed liberal and some papist, some are evangelical, some strongly so, especially at the grass roots. It is difficult to predict the extent of the ‘fall-out’ of Anglican evangelicals should The Gift of Authority carry the day. But as many independent evangelicals applaud those who abandon the apparently sinking ship (as I once did) we should consider this: What is the nature of the evangelicalism to which Anglicans may be ‘jumping’? We need to be honest about our own failings.

As someone who has experienced both Anglicanism and independent evangelicalism it should be made clear that the state of the latter is today dominated or tainted by charismatic revivalism and is too often tribal, disparate, ad hoc and generally so independently sectarian that any ‘doctrine of church’ is totally obscured. British evangelicalism, in particular, does not reflect the powerful doctrine of the church held by the Reformers or reformed theology. While British evangelicalism is indeed sound in some of its parts it is also badly fragmented10, with much of it theologically so removed from its confessional Reformational heritage it is almost unrecognisable.

At least for the moment, Anglicanism has not completely sold its soul for a mess of Roman pottage. We would perhaps do well to pray that it does not do so and pray also for many evangelical Christian brothers and sisters who will have much heart-searching over what may be coming. Anglicanism may be a broad church but, added to the network of the immensely powerful, political Vatican ’beast’, replete with its nest of monstrous heresies, it would vastly strengthen Rome’s hand overnight.

Archbishop burning

During February 1555, a former Archbishop of Canterbury, now stripped of his office and having spent three years in prison with the death sentence hanging over him, wrote a recantation of his earlier refusal to accept the authority of the Pope. The Roman Catholic Queen Mary and her advisors had in any event long-determined to murder Thomas Cranmer, architect of the strongly Reformed Anglican Articles of Faith. Realising his impending doom Cranmer, bitterly regretting his earlier weakness, decided that the hand which wrote the recantation, would perish in the fire first.

On March 21, 1555 Cranmer was asked to read aloud his recantation at his own public execution. Completing his address Cranmer succeeded in further enraged the Catholic churchmen present by speaking these words:
And now I come to the great thing that troubles my conscience more than anything I ever did or said in my whole life, and that is the publishing of a writing contrary to the truth, which now here I renounce and refuse, as things written by my hand contrary to the truth I believed with my whole heart, written because I feared death. Since my hand offended, it will be punished: When I come to the fire, it first will be burned. As the Pope, I refuse him, as Christ’s enemy and antichrist, with all his false doctrine...11

As the fire approached him Cranmer duly put his hand into the flame and held it there until it burned before the flames reached his body. He finally called out, ‘This unworthy hand!’ before giving up his spirit to his Lord.

Archbishop Carey might do well to ponder his forebear’s plight and his refusal to accept the authority of a wickedly errant Roman papal authority, a papacy far less heretical than that which now resides on the seven hills. Before he, or any subsequent Archbishop, should contrive to deliver the Anglican Church, built originally on Reformation principles, into the hands of Rome, he might do well to consider the unbiblical nature of much of Rome’s teachings. Archbishop Carey, or his successor, may yet have cause to wish they could place their own hand ‘into the fire’, rather than be the instrument by which the Anglican Church is delivered into the dark power and spiritual tyranny of a papacy steeped in heretical and occultic beliefs. The defiant words of Anglicans of a former age, Cranmer, Hooper, Latimer and Ridley, faithful martyrs for the Word of God, should today echo loudly in the corridors of Lambeth Palace. For their blood still stains the hands of a Rome which has indeed changed, but only for the worse.

1 My comments here refer to the national Anglican leadership and to the more visible Anglican groups and not to the many Anglican evangelical ministers who, while still remaining in an increasingly duplicitous church, personally faithfully minister with the Word as their supreme authority in their local communities.
2 The Evangelicals and Catholics Together documents (ECT I and II) were only informally agreed between evangelicals and Roman Catholics in the US and did not go anywhere near as far as The Gift of Authority report.
3 Euthanasia, not suicide, is the right term as, if their is compliance with this report, Anglicanism will not be taking its own life but will allow the Pope to snuff out the last vestiges of spiritual life.
4 Archbishop George Carey, Church of England Newspaper, April 16, 1999
5 Soren Kierkegaard, a Danish existentialist philosopher coined this expression.
6 Reform maintains a much more evangelical tradition than the liberal-dominated Anglican hierarchy. There are many good ministers and people in Reform. Unfortunately it is a structurally disparate, group. Sadly, whilst it contains many who are evangelically reformed a large proportion of Reform is evangelical charismatic and thus endemically ecumenical. The former has yet to realise the debilitating influence of the latter when hard theological issues are at stake. Their record is good on identifying the key issues, but poor on actually doing anything about them.
7 George Carey, CEN Special Report, May 21, 1999
8 Margaret Hebblethwaite, Guardian, May 15, 1999
9 CEN Special Report, May 21, 1999
10 I consider the ecumenical Evangelical Alliance, with the absurdity of being headed by a non-evangelical Pentecostal as an example of the problem, rather than giving any semblance of an evangelical view of the church.