

25 July 2008

Is Dishonesty the Best Policy for the Church?

or

The Wages of Fudge

On the eve of the Lambeth Conference, and against the advice of the two archbishops, the Church of England General Synod took a decisive step towards the possibility of women bishops. On the question itself at this point we offer no opinion, nor about the wisdom of entrusting important decisions to a Mussolini-style democracy within a church claiming to be within the apostolic succession. Within the Church of England a wide variety of strongly held opinions is to be found. Whether the sex of a bishop is a theological matter is itself very contentious; also the degree of importance the question of male episcopacy has for the right ordering of the church, for some hold seriously that it doesn't matter much. Some ask what difference it can make when already some of the bishops are old women. These brief remarks are not to support any of these positions, but are about what can be learned of the Church of England from its handling of the question.

The doctrine of *reception* was developed by the Church of England as an aid to resolving the crisis of the 1990s over the ordination of women priests. Though in the considerable body of reports during the last twenty years the possibility was sometimes acknowledged that differences may simply be irreconcilable, the drive has been (as Dr Toon puts it in a lucid survey of Reception in the Church of England) towards "maintaining communion in the Anglican family despite differences over women's ordination".¹ It is fair to say that the Eames Commission and the Rochester Report were predominantly trying to answer a *how* question, not a *whether* or a *why*: how full communion could be retained within a church seriously divided on what some on both sides thought a very important matter.² One of the Rochester Report's conclusions (just before its final recommendation of an eschatological perspective, because no "closure" is to be anticipated before the end of the world) was that "people of differing views will have to be enabled to live together in the highest possible degree of communion, fostering courteous relationships which enable people of different views to continue to pray together and to work together for justice, peace and the integrity of creation."³

Reception in the C of E is unlike the medieval doctrine, when Reception was the process of acceptance of decisions made by higher authority (e.g. about what constitutes the canon of holy scripture), behind which was, perhaps, the concept of the reception by the individual of the baptismal covenant. It is also unlike the more modern "reception" springing from the ecumenical movement, when one church might receive from another, over time, a practice or doctrine thought to be consonant with Holy Scripture and the tradition of the Church. The contemporary C of E *reception* was itself an innovation. The Church recognised division between two convinced parties and so introduced the ordination of women during a *period of reception* as what amounted to an experiment. The will of the Holy Spirit in this matter would be revealed and discerned over an indefinite period of time, during which all parties could keep to their views and live together in full communion (though with some refusing the administration by women of the sacrament of Holy Communion). It was essential to the honesty of the procedure that the possibility be entertained of the failure of the experiment, and this was clearly stated by a number of authorities. The Rochester Report for instance speaks of "the process of discernment by which a development could be either accepted or rejected"⁴ and quotes the Eames Commission, "In the continuing and dynamic process of reception, freedom and space must be available until a consensus of opinion one way *or the other* has been achieved."⁵

Obvious weaknesses of the process were that no criteria were formulated for judging reception, and no timescale was fixed. The process might be of indefinite duration. It was explained to the Ecclesiastical Committee of Parliament that "the safeguards will be there in perpetuity or for as long as they are required."⁶ The suspicion inevitably arose that, with the church bureaucracy committed to women priests and enabled to block the advancement of those opposed to female ordination, the outcome would be decided bureaucratically. One way or another, opposition to female priests was expected to fade away.

The word *reception* itself prejudices the issue by suggesting that something is being received, when it is possible that the something is in process of rejection. And if the whole process is genuinely experimental what

1 Peter Toon, *Reforming Forwards?* Latimer Studies 56/57, 2004, p. 39

2 See *Women Bishops in the Church of England?*, a report of the House of Bishops' Working Party on Women in the Episcopate (the Rochester Report), GS 1557, 2004 and *Report of the Women Bishops Legislative Drafting Group*, GS 1685, April 2008.

3 Rochester Report 8.1.18, p. 234. Let us not worry about what the integrity of creation is or how connected with the point at issue.

4 Rochester Report 3.6.10 5 *Ibid.*, 3.6.11, *our italics* 6 GS 1685, 68, p. 14

is the position of women priests? Ordination can no more be experimental and conditional than marriage, and it would have been unthinkable to tell an ordained woman that after all she was not really a priest. As the Rev'd Rose Hudson was reported to have said, in rebuttal of the argument that female priesthood could be "repugnant to the Word of God", "How can I, and the work I do, be repugnant to the God who has called me to a life of discipleship and service?"¹ Howbeit, the Church of England took the path of Reception, including the possibility that it might have erred by ordaining women priests, and with sufficient seriousness to be able to keep within the fold many members who did not believe that a female can be validly ordained to the priesthood. More than a decade later there has been no general recognition that Reception is complete, and both parties are still entrenched, as are those who wonder what all the fuss is about.

The *Report* of April 2008, GS 1685, differs from earlier reports not in explicitly discarding Reception but in its conclusion in bold type that "**the moment for making choices has come.**"² In effect, and as the Synod vote went, this means the abandonment of Reception, but as a side effect, not a considered judgement.

The relevant part of the motion moved by the Bishop of Gloucester and passed by sufficient majorities without emendation reads "That this Synod: (a) affirm that the wish of its majority is for women to be admitted to the episcopate."³ The following clauses about arrangements for those who in conscience cannot accept the authority of female bishops are *not* in the spirit of Reception. For them "special arrangements" will have to be made by a "code of practice". No possibility is mentioned that the Church may be erring in a way that in future will have to be corrected.⁴

Women bishops are to come, and there's an end on't. But the process of reception of women priests has not been formally terminated, and numbers of Anglo-Catholics and a few conservative Evangelicals are still within the Church of England on the understanding that Reception continues. GS 1685 conceded that "Those who perhaps expected to see a steady contraction in the constituency of those theologically unable to accept women's ordination will have been disappointed."⁵

But what if Reception is continuing, and the ordination of women priests is judged to have been rejected by the whole church? Would the newly consecrated female bishop have to resign because her priesting was invalid? This is *of course* unthinkable: but the inescapable conclusion is that the doctrine of reception was wrongly named. The outcome was never in doubt and was not in fact experimental. The doctrine of Reception has been shown retrospectively by the Synod vote to be the doctrine of Deception.

The doctrine of Reception, itself an innovation, should itself have been subject to a process of reception, with clear criteria and a timetable. That it was not was itself a sign of playing politics with a concept not in the interests of the Body of Christ but in order to keep together a ramshackle earthly organisation.

It is quite possible that any present muddle is caused by feeble-mindedness. A "vast majority" of the same 2008 Synod recognised that "this was the greatest issue confronting the church".⁶ The *this* was not women bishops, nor, as might perhaps have been expected, the fading of Christianity from English life and loss of countless souls. It was *climate change*. "Feeble-minded" because only a Christianity in the last stages of feebleness could take our stewardship of the earth to be the very centre of the gospel, and only delusions of grandeur could explain the belief that the Church of England can make any even infinitesimally small difference to climate change.

There is nothing to prevent dishonesty getting embodied as feeble-mindedness. Not all deception is deliberate. Quite likely some of the proponents of Reception were not Machiavellian schemers but adopted Reception without much thought. They *should* have thought hard; not to think hard was the insincerity of the occasion. The present deplorable state of the Church of England is a righteous judgement on its possibly absent-minded flirtation with the Father of Lies. The *practical* failure of Reception is that an idea intended to avoid schism now looks certain to lead to schism.

The Prayer Book thanks God that those who have received the spiritual food of the most precious Body and Blood of our Saviour Jesus Christ are assured thereby of being "very members incorporate in the mystical body of thy Son, which is the blessed company of all faithful people". Can deceit be a good basis for the maintenance of communion? Whatever the rights and wrongs of female bishops, they are certainly an innovation. The change will be in the established church, not in those who secede. But if it is not possible any longer to see the Church of England as the local part of the Body of Christ, the underlying reason is not so much its innovations as its dishonesty.

1 *The Church of England Newspaper*, 11 July 2008. This clearly offers experience as authority. Traditionally the Church of England has recognised the authority, in descending order, of the Bible, the other formularies, the ecumenical councils, the fathers and reason, but not experiment. 2 Para 47, p. 11

3 Why the wording was altered from the published draft, "That this Synod: (a) reaffirm its wish for women to be admitted to the episcopate . . ." is unclear. The version passed is odd in that the question what the majority wishes is one of fact not resolution, and whether any ecclesiastical lawyer will be ingenious enough to argue an interpretation of the motion not as affirming anything but reporting an opinion remains to be seen. In grammar a good case could be made, though the intention of the General Synod seems to have been otherwise.

4 The detail of the debate is hard to find. If there is a Synodical equivalent of Hansard we have not discovered it. The Synod website offers audios of the sessions when the question was considered but when we tried them they were not working.

5 GS 1685 21, p. 4 6 *Church of England Newspaper*, ed. cit.