

Piercing Lambeth

by David Wilbourne

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It had been a difficult decade, to say the least, for the Church of England. In 1859 Charles Darwin published his *On the Origin of Species*, which not only blew apart the creation chronology outlined in Genesis, but in Newman's words, 'increased vastly the territory of the natural at the expense of the supernatural.' Then just a year later came *Essays and Reviews*, with Benjamin Jowett's 'The interpretation of Scripture,' introducing the reader to the most radical German Biblical scholarship, which fatally undermined many traditional doctrines, such as substitutionary atonement. His wasn't the only controversial essay; 'Tendencies of Religious Thought in England 1688-1750' by Mark Pattison, a disillusioned Tractarian, penned a warts-and-all view of recent church history and its prevailing philosophy. Those who reeled from the loss of the six-day-schema for creation and the infallibility of Scripture couldn't even find solace in a former golden age of the Church.

Lest this be thought as nothing more than a university spat waged by Oxford men, enter one colonial bishop who provided a heady additional ingredient for the fray: sex. John Colenso, Bishop of Natal, had a lenient approach to polygamous converts - he didn't insist they set aside their wives following their baptism. Such approach was driven more by pastoral concern than a liberal agenda: had the former wives been divorced, then they would have been forced into a life of prostitution.

Not that Colenso was devoid of liberal agendas. A former maths fellow at St John's College, Cambridge and maths tutor at Harrow School, he brought his love of maths and logic to bear on biblical scholarship. His *The Pentateuch and the Book of Joshua Critically Examined* drew out the inconsistencies and sheer ridiculousness of the temporal and spatial dimensions glibly set out: people just did not live to be 900 years old; Moses could hardly have been the author of a book which describes his own death; there are no timbers on earth which could have born the stresses and strains inherent in the dimensions of Noah's ark – the thing would have collapsed in dry dock, let alone at sea for forty stormy days. All rather obvious stuff, making you wonder why no one had spotted the flaws before. But Colenso, in his *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, let slip his dogs of maths on doctrine: if Love really didn't keep any score of wrongs, what was substitutionary atonement playing at, where never mind a score, wrongs are kept by the mega-gross?

All this did not go down well in a Church already under attack on several fronts. Colenso's superior, Robert Gray, attempted to depose and excommunicate him, only to find his action overturned by the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council. Gray, the pioneering Bishop of Capetown, had resigned his see in order to establish the new see of Natal in 1853 with Colenso its first bishop. Gray was then reappointed bishop and metropolitan, but since Colenso's appointment technically preceded his, he had no authority over him. Legal technicalities abound, but an important principle was emerging, that the canonical control that the Church of England exacted over its clergy by virtue of its Established status could not be automatically deemed to apply to colonies under constitutional rule.

Gray, along with the 1865 Canadian Synod of Bishops, called on Charles Longley, the beleaguered Archbishop of Canterbury, to convene the Anglican bishops to a conference to establish orthodoxy. Whilst Gray's deposition of Colenso was supported by the Upper and Lower Houses of the Canterbury Convocation (where the debates, according to the Dictionary of National Biography, 'did not give a very high idea of the intellectual power of the bishops'), that Convocation was not too keen to devolve its powers to define true doctrine to a pan-Anglican conference of Bishops. Nevertheless, a loosely defined gathering of 76 bishops did take place in 1867, the very first Lambeth conference. Longley, described as a thoroughly uninspired ecclesiastic, ended the conference with an Address to the Faithful – but by then most of the disillusioned bishops had caught the boat home, like supporters of a hopeless team leaving the match early. Probably the highlight of the conference was its hymn, *The Church's One Foundation*, specially composed by Samuel Stone, a crony of Gray, with Colenso the ill-concealed target of a third verse (mercifully toned down in later editions):

The Church shall never perish!
Her dear Lord to defend,
To guide, sustain, and cherish,
Is with her to the end;
Though there be those who hate her,
And false souls in her pale,
Against or foe or traitor
She ever shall prevail.

When the hymn was sung at the 1888 Lambeth Conference, it had such a powerful effect that the singers 'felt weak at the knees, their legs trembled, and they really felt as if they were going to collapse.' With apologies to William McGonagall, I wonder whether this modest addition to the above hymn would have the same effect in 2008:

Though rife with same-sex partners
and liberals galore,
straight saints above still hearten us
upon heaven's orthodox shore.

A heady cocktail of Africa and sex and liberalism may loom once again,
but certainly the agenda facing Rowan Williams seems small-fry
compared to that faced in 1867.

But why do I, a vicar in the southern shadow of the far-away North York Moors, have such an interest in this stormy period of Anglican history? Simply because Robert Gray's son, Charles, was vicar of Helmsley from 1870 until 1913, and following his father's death in 1872, worked out his grief by setting his ultra-orthodox stamp on the place. Even a century after Charles Gray's death, there are still folk around here, the grandchildren of Gray's churchwardens, who defend his stance and oppose any change. 'You may seem just to want to introduce after-church coffee,' one of these stalwarts lectured me recently, 'but you'll be marrying homosexuals next!' I, a latter-day Colenso, shuddered as I heard Gray's voice booming at me across the centuries.

Vicar Gray daubed the walls of the church here with bold paintings, charting the triumph of English Christianity, in its soundest incarnation. High on the transept's east wall the battle between good and evil is depicted as a fight unto death between a white Christian knight on a charger impaling a fierce pagan dragon. Fortunately the artist got one over on Gray and had the last laugh. The knight is colourless, pale and anaemic; the dragon on the other hand (though doubtlessly bearing Colenso's face), is full of colour, 20 feet long, magnificently breathing fire and smoke. Though grievously wounded, he is clearly going to see off the knight who will soon pale into invisibility.

Beneath the dragon in that cluttered chapel is a huge Calvary, half-life sized, which Gray brought back from Oberammagau (they must have been far more indulgent about excess baggage in those days!) Christ, impaled by the orthodoxy of his day, looks rather lovingly at the impaled dragon above him. I guess he's signalling that the verdict of history ultimately rests not with those who trumpet their orthodoxy, but rather with impaled victims throughout the ages, the ultimate origin and goal of a species which is none other than Christ's.

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