

A book for the whole Church - *The Integrity of Anglicanism*

The Integrity of Anglicanism

Stephen W. Sykes, Mowbray, London and Oxford, 1978,

Reviewed by **Peter Bentley**

I found myself intrigued by this book from the opening quote from the character Coggan in Thomas Hardy's 'Far from the Madding Crowd':

"There's this to be said for the Church [of England], a man can belong to the Church and bide in his cheerful old inn, and never trouble or worry his mind about doctrines at all."

It was written one year after the union of the Uniting Church, and obviously about a different denomination (or Communion), but I found myself caught at most points thinking how poignant and apt for the UCA in the 21st century. It is also illuminating when one considers the present state of the Anglican Communion. Surely anyone who read this book thirty years ago would have seen the writing on the wall – not as dramatically as Daniel, but this is a book that packs an academic thump.

Stephen Sykes was the sixty-seventh bishop of Ely, and lastly before his retirement, Principal of St John's College, Durham. He has published several reflections on the Church of England over his many years of ministry.

This reflection is a solid and dense study. The book covers the main areas of:

- Anglican Comprehensiveness (The Crisis of)
- The Significance of Liberalism
- Anglican Theology, Method and Authority

There is also a Comment by Paul Wignall on Patterns in Theology, and an Appendix with 3 short items including an illuminating Letter to The Times published 1 June 1977 from the Reverend Professor H.E. Root, an Anglican member of the Anglican/Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC) which deftly looks at the question of

what are fundamentals, and points of necessary interaction in any dialogue.

There are many, almost hilarious quotes in that under-stated English style, which highlight and review the impressions and stereotypes that people have of the Church of England.

For example, Sykes aptly notes that "... it must be said that the Church of England would patently not exist in the form it does exist if all its members were as uncertain and unclear about their beliefs as its most liberal members." (p. 43)

He continually causes the reader to ask about the nature of doctrine and whether a Church can really manage without any doctrinal commitment? Sykes, overall, argues carefully and succinctly argue that his own church has definite convictions and there is thus a basis for a high degree of conformity. He is also clearly at pains to show he is not a narrow conservative wanting to impose a rigid system, but someone who challenges the somewhat then 'post-modern' perception that a Church should have no foundational beliefs. He states "There is thus nothing anomalous in a situation in which a body insists that it has a definite teaching, and also is tolerant of a free discussion of that teaching." (p. 44)

The title itself is indicative of the thesis – what is integrity? It is not only an examination and consideration of honesty and sincerity, but of identity as a whole. Sykes understands Anglican comprehensiveness, because he shows that in order to have this form of comprehensiveness, there must be agreement on fundamentals. Like the Catholic Church today, where for some people the role of the conscience has been reduced to seemingly an almost rampant and unrealistic individualism, Sykes exposes the logical dangers of being all-embracing or to tolerant of everything.

"A Christian church, which is

aware of a wide variety of diverse theological positions and which deliberately decides not to adopt one or other of them, but rather to tolerate diversity, has still to offer a definite reason for doing so and to justify that reason in the face of objection." (p. 6)

He again simply states that the church is not "an open debating society, which would stand solely for the open discussion of any view whatsoever." (p.6) In the chapter on 'The Anglican Standpoint', he also aptly notes in the context of a discussion about the use of the term 'the Christian community', that liberal writers and leaders in many ways demonstrate, "... how substantially dependent that community is upon groups that with positive convictions on the very matters which liberals find so doubtful." (p.44)

The second chapter 'The Significance of Liberalism' is probably the most important and directly relevant for the Uniting Church. The discussion and examination of the historical development of Anglican liberalism is helpful, and reminds the reader of the diverse and somewhat bewildering non-philosophy liberalism actually is.

His conclusion on liberalism is worth considering, and I leave you with this final quote:

"To accept the inevitability of some liberals, does not necessitate the toleration of all. Views are neither right nor wrong by being liberal in character. Only a church which had despaired of the possibility of rational argument about theology altogether could adopt such a stance. And it is my conviction that, tolerant though the Anglican communion has become, it has a standpoint on matters of doctrine which is firmer than seems to be the case on first sight, even if it stands in need of articulation and development." (p. 35)

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