

Rickety Religion (Part Five: Post-Advent Values)

Rickety (adjective) = liable to collapse or come clattering down, first used in the 1680s, derived from rickets (noun) via the notion of weak, unhealthy, feeble in the joints, a disease caused by Vitamin D deficiency, but originally a local name for the condition common in Dorset and Somerset. The Latin name for the disease, *rachitis*, comes from Greek *rhakhis* (spine) was chosen by English physician Daniel Whistler (1619-1684).

Edward White Benson, Archbishop of Canterbury from 1882 to 1896, once preached that the Church of England and all true faith should, supremely, be an expression of what he termed “rickety religion”. Ideally, it should not be so self-sufficient and able enough to support itself, and would to some extent be dependent on others. There was no other way to be, as our frailty, weakness and dependency would leave us open to the grace of God in a way that the safety of self-sufficiency will often deny. We need to live in a constant state of dependency before God, seeking nothing other than the presence of Christ, love, mercy and grace. Only when the light of God pours in through the cracks in the earthenware vessels that we are, and the body of Christ we become together, can the truth of Christ begin to trickle out from within.

Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack, a crack in everything
That’s how the light gets in.

Leonard Cohen, ‘Anthem’ from the album *The Future*, 1992.

The word ‘respair’ has fallen into almost total disuse. The word has a sibling – despair – and we all know what that can feel like. If it gets a grip on a person, community or nation, it can lead to depression, and even suicides. Despairing is to lack hope. Respair, in contrast, is a recovery from despair, and the finding of fresh hope. But in the Church of England, what is there to hope for at the moment?

In our previous articles we touched on Diocesan Newspapers – effectively ‘regional ‘trade journals’ that market the Diocese to itself. They cannot substitute for the absence of bishops, and it is hard to convey on paper or on-line warmth, empathy, care and compassion. The newspapers cannot replace the presence and engagement that local clergy and parishes need. Any more than a parish magazine might substitute for the presence and availability of local clergy.

We have also explored the plethora – explosion, really – of ‘central ministries’ running out of Diocesan Headquarters up and down the land, dealing with anything from discipleship to evangelism, mission to enabling, stewardship to lay education, wellbeing, youth work, pastoral care, and more besides. Sometimes the simplest questions are the best. Will anyone actually care or notice that the Diocese has issued a statement on global warming? No. Might they pay attention if the Bishop says or writes something on the subject? Perhaps. But it very much depends on whether the Bishop has said anything new and worthwhile, or possibly controversial. Otherwise, it is unremarkable. Who needs to know that the Bishop is currently concerned about the environment and other eco-challenges? Few, if any.

The emergence of Diocesan-Central-HQ’s has spawned a self-important and self-consuming culture, that requires more and more money from hard-pressed parishes to feed a fantasy. That fantasy consists of the fallacious belief that if there is some kind of command-and-control bunker in each Diocese, the messages, outputs and identity of the Diocese can be controlled and promoted. However, few parishes pay much attention to what their Diocese says, does or even means. It is, after all, a mere unit of governance, and nothing more. It has no more right to affection, loyalty and respect than people might offer to North Humberside County Council, or South Dorset District Council.

So, ask yourself this. After paying rates (taxes), and otherwise expecting the Council to maintain the roads, pavements, schools and other services, would you be able to name who the Chief Executive of the Council was, or any of the senior staff? Would their views on sexuality or slavery matter much, unless they were outright and highly controversial? And in the light of this, why would a Diocese expect to be more central in the lives of parishes and sector ministries? A Diocese is, after all, just a unit of governance, in which the Bishop exemplifies the office and role of a teacher and pastor to the people. We do not require another layer of governance or administration. Parishes do not need central organisation and control.

In their recent book (*Gen Z Explained*, by Roberta Katz, Sarah Ogilvie, Jane Shaw and Linda Woodhead), the authors collaborate to explore the challenges that those born in and after the 1990's face, and also how they are coping with the world around them, and tackling the tests and trials of the 21st century. The book is a riveting read, and should be read by all Bishops over the age of 40. Because what the book offers is respite: fresh hope. The book focusses on the distinctive ways of being, the values and worldviews shared by most Gen-Zers.

What might you take from the book? Several things come to mind. First, values may be the new 'religion' of the 21st century. By values, we mean integrity, transparency, fairness, justice, truth, accountability, care, kindness and honesty. These are all forms of behaviour, and institutions and organisations that fail to exemplify these are not trusted by Gen-Zers, and they will give them a wide berth. The Church of England fails all tests on this point alone. It will belong to the category of institutions to avoid, since it (in the minds of Gen-Zers) only seeks your money, membership and loyalty. The failure to address sexism, homophobia, systemic opacity, the lack of clear and accountable governance – well you do the maths. They won't join.

Second, the difference that Gen-Zers will make in the world will depend on new forms of organisation that cluster around the global challenges we face. These include our eco-systems, sustainability, accountability, equality, enabling, justice and freedom from oppression. The emerging protests of the Black Lives Matter movement gives us text-book material for 21st century socio-political organisation and resistance. The movement does not depend on overt political or faith-based sponsorship, let alone patrimony or control. Churches and denominations can participate, but as equals, and not as privileged stakeholders.

Third, the digital age gives Gen-Zers access to communication and mobilisation the like of which – in terms of revolution – we have not seen since the advent of printing presses and mass-production of pamphlets and tracts gave birth to the Reformation in 16th century. Revolutions come around quite often, at least one a century, and the serious large-scale tsunami-like ones every 300 years or so. Think Black Death and the Peasants' Revolt. Think global climate change, famine and the ensuing French Revolution. Shortages of food, water and other basics mobilises populations, and people begin to move. The eco-catastrophes we are already experiencing lead to migrants and refugees. Gen-Zers deal in causes, not just symptoms.

More could be said here, but with these three challenges laid out above, it is clear that the Church of England is a long, long way off the pace. It does not read the signs of the times. It pines for a return to the Good Old Days – hence the Back to Church Campaign – as though reminding people of what they might be missing is a 'good thing'. Actually, Gen-Zers are well aware of what they are missing, and they will remain missing from the pews until the Church of England looks at itself in the mirror, and welcomes the revolution it urgently needs.

But institutions tend not to organise their own revolutions. They will tinker at the edges with reviews and reappraisals. Sometimes, the only thing to hope for – respair – is the End Times, and a collapse. But do not despair just yet. Because decline and fall is inevitable, and what you have to imagine is the new forms that will emerge. They won't be Fresh Expressions, Cell Churches or Church Planting, or another injection of caffeine into the evangelistic bloodstream. Those are all old forms of faith that need to be quietly retired, and allowed to pass way. As all things must pass.

That said, history is sometimes kind and helpful to us. We have, in this series of reflections, essentially been looking at an institution rusting and rotting from the inside out, and top to bottom. Yet within it, of course, the signs of hope were always there: the seeds of revolution and renewal, no less. Just as one example here, let us turn to sexuality, which even now, causes enormous heated exchanges and rowdy ructions in the Church of England, and incoherent stances from our leaders.

Apparently, the Archbishop can censure Anglicans in the USA and Canada for their position on equal marriage and inclusivity. Yet the same Archbishop cannot say boo to a goose to the Anglican bishops in Ghana, who vote for the re-criminalisation of homosexuality. So, he can intervene in one province, but not in another. Gen-Zers are not fooled by the hypocrisy and inconsistency this face shows to the world. They will give the Church of England a wide berth here.

In Simon Goldhill's *A Very Queer Family Indeed: Sex, Religion and the Bensons in Victorian Britain* (2016), he explores the tolerance and forbearance of a bygone age. Edward White Benson was Archbishop of Canterbury from 1882 until his death in 1896. He was married to Mary (better known as Minnie) Sidgwick. To look at his CV, you'd think he was a pillar of the establishment. He went to University at Trinity College Cambridge. He taught at Rugby and Wellington. From 1872 to 1877, he was Chancellor of Lincoln Cathedral. In 1874, he set up Lincoln Theological College. He was appointed as the very first Bishop of Truro, where he served from 1877 to 1882.

Yet Benson came from rather humble stock. His father was a manager at the British Alkali Works near Worcester. He went to grammar school. His roots were in the midlands, and in its industries. As a young man of 23 when he proposed to his 11-year-old cousin Minnie Sidgwick. Benson had been head of his family since his father's death a decade earlier. Minnie was also fatherless. Minnie's mother was unsure of the match, but they married seven years later when Minnie was 18. Minnie had no great attachment to Benson – or indeed to any other man. She “batted for the other side” as the Victorians used to say, and her passions were always directed towards women. With Minnie, the Bensons had six children – all of whom were openly gay. Nobody minded, least of all Gladstone or Queen Victoria, who saw this as no bar to the See of Canterbury.

As Benson rose through the ranks of the Church of England, ending up as Archbishop of Canterbury, Minnie Benson's passions flowered into fulsome relationships, attracting neither abatement or comment. As soon Benson died in 1896, Minnie formed a very intimate relationship with Lucy Tait, the daughter of a previous Archbishop of Canterbury, and apparently lived with her until her death.

One of Minnie's sons (Fred, the novelist E.F. Benson), wrote about his mother and Lucy sleeping together in his *Mapp and Lucia* novels. None of the Benson children ever married. Everyone seems to have known about this lesbian liaison and many others. Nobody seems to have been bothered.

You could be forgiven for thinking this is all just an argument for Christianity passively accepting the cultural values of its age. But it isn't. Christians in every age have to weigh up what is to be accepted, and what is to be rejected. All in the name of Christ, for truth, justice, humanity and hope. Earlier in this series of reflections we mentioned the Danish Lutherans. Their stances in the 20th century offer the Church of England an interesting and instructive model for being an authentic national church in the 21st century.

Danish Lutherans, like the Church of England, have the Head of State (monarch) and Parliament to keep them in line. Yet the Danish Lutherans were able to take a lead from King Christian X in 1933, who became their first monarch to openly visit a synagogue. When war broke out, and Denmark was all but occupied by Nazis, hardly any Danish Jews were deported to camps or perished. The stance of the monarch and the church was that all Danes were citizens. There is even an urban myth that King Christian X wore a yellow star throughout the war. Most Danish Jews were smuggled or evacuated to neutral Sweden.

Danish Lutherans were amongst the first denominations to have female clergy. In 1948, the Minister of Ecclesiastical Affairs was asked by a parish if they could have a female priest. As Denmark already had full gender-based equality, the Minister ruled there was no legal obstacle. A 2011 poll of the Danish public found that 75.8% of the population approves of same-sex marriages being performed by the church. The figures for the population of England are now very similar.

In Denmark (pause, deep breath), the change duly happened, and by 12th June 2012 the Minister for Equality and the Minister of Ecclesiastical Affairs had introduced a bill approving same-sex marriage, which was passed in parliament. Parliament also approved the wedding ritual with liturgy. The first same-sex couple was married on 15th June (not long to wait after June 12th!). Anyway, Danes had long been used to same-sex unions being blessed in church since 1989. It perhaps goes without saying that gay and lesbian clergy exist in Denmark (hardly breaking news), but their sexuality is regarded as a purely personal issue, and business of the Bishop or others.

Parish Councils in Denmark are central in selecting and employing new priests, including interviews with candidates. Note, these are Parish Councils, not PCCs. This means that the local population – not just folk drawn from the congregation – have a hand in choosing their minister. Because the new minister will be for everyone, not just the faithful or actual church members. Conceivably, a local Rabbi or Mullah could be part of the interview panel. Indeed, why ever not?

Once employed, parish priests are public servants and must serve all their parishioners, irrespective of faith (or none). Clergy cannot be discharged except for neglect of duties, which might operating a partisan, exclusive church, which should be free to all. So, no parish priest is kicked out for being married, gay, lesbian or otherwise. This does seem pretty sensible and certainly civilised. Indeed, something like a proper national church, serving all the people. Locally.

So we have reached the end of our Advent Reflections on Rickety Religion. Knowing that our national church is pretty rickety is an epiphany of self-awareness that the Church of England has yet to arrive at. It may be – probably will be – that the post-pandemic era causes the revolution that the church needs in order to be reformed, and fit once again for national service.

In the meantime, hang on to your respair. There is a long way to go yet, but as Emma Percy's fine poem (*The Oil of Gladness*) has it, we still have hope, and we are not alone. The holy balm of Jesus' birth, the perseverance of the wise men and the faith of the shepherds remind us all that our service and churches are a nativity for everyone, just as Jesus is. We give thanks for that, and as the poem says:

When setting out on a journey
I pack a phial of precious ointment.
This is the oil of gladness,
a gift given me by the good angels at my baptism.
It is distilled from the love of God for frail humanity.
Perfumed with the sound of the dawn chorus, babbling brooks
and the giggles of contended children.
It has miraculous powers.

When the way is uneven and unclear
When the water is choppy or tempestuous
When my body is weary and aching
When my mind is fearful and depressed
A few drops can lift my spirit,
soothe my soul and restore my strength.

Like all Holy gifts
it is not diminished by usage.
It is remarkable.
There is no use-by date.
The perfume does not fade nor the oil decay.
It is in fact replenished through being shared.
In worldly terms it costs little
and can be had for the asking.
So I urge you to get yourself some.
All you need is an open heart and a capacity for joy.

Emma Percy, 'The Oil of Gladness'.

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