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WHAT WE DO MATTERS

By David Phillips

One impact of Tractarianism has been that practices that had not happened in the Church of England for 300 years were reintroduced, tolerated, permitted and now in a few cases almost prescribed. Although evangelicals at first opposed these things as springing from a different gospel, along the way many seem to have become numbed to them and even adopted the practices for themselves. There are many examples we can give of this. I remember for example someone expressing incredulity that a well known conservative evangelical church used a communion prayer with a definite epiclesis as part of it but we will look at just two issues.

Vesture

Some evangelicals are prepared to wear some vestments in order to minister in non-evangelical churches though not all could tolerate this. No doubt with time they will teach people and seek to wean them off the practice. Others stick resolutely to the cassock, surplice, scarf and hood, though my impression is their number is dwindling. Some will not wear, or try not to wear any distinctive form of dress, though they may succumb to pressure to dress up for Communion, to give it more dignity, or baptism for the sake of outsiders. Then again others seem quite content to wear what evangelicals previously opposed as priestly vestments and sometimes argue that they give colour to services, indeed it will be argued that it is not a stole but a coloured scarf, for example.

The following comments are extracted and adapted from a paper by Richard Coates published by Church Society in the run up to the 1950 Canon Law revision:

Coates states: Christian ministers have generally been very conservative in what they wear. This conservatism in the retention of old-fashioned clothes has led to the whole problem of vestments. The distinctive garments worn by clergy, of very different traditions, are all of secular origin and only became distinctive when they ceased to be worn by other members of society. This is the origin of the so-called Mass Vestments that are now widely worn in the Church of England even by some who claim to be evangelical.

For centuries after the foundation of the Church Christian ministers wore the same garments as ordinary people; they had no special uniform to conduct worship. What they wore they wore for covering, convenience and decency. In the fourth and fifth centuries there was a deliberate policy of conducting worship in ordinary attire. Any idea of symbolic vestments comparable to those ordained in the Old Testament was deliberately avoided.

Dom Gregory Dix wrote "All over Christendom ecclesiastical vestments derive from lay dress of the upper classes in the imperial period, and not from any return to Old Testament precedents, such as the medieval ritualists imagined." According to Dix the chasuble, turnicle and alb were all common Roman garments. Dix cites the account of the martyrdom of Cyprian (258AD) when it is said that he removed a red lacerna (chasuble) and a tunica (tunic) and stood in his linea (alb). But these were not marks of any office, they were the common dress of gentlemen of his day. (The Shape of the Liturgy Chapter 12)

It was in the sixth and seventh century when Roman fashions changed to that of the conquering barbarians that the clergy retained their old attire through their conservatism and this gradually became both distinctive and then official and then symbolical. During the middle ages a theology grew up around these vestments attempting to attach particular significance to them as marks of the

office of a priest.

Coates goes on to explore the different approaches after the Reformation. Some rejected all such vesture, most famously Bishop Hooper, along with many of the puritans. Others defended certain vesture so long as it was not associated with the mass because it had a long tradition in the Church. This was the line of Richard Hooker and became the line of the Church of England until the 20th Century. The Canons of 1603 regulated the dress of clergy not just in services, including 'plain nightcaps of black silk, satin or velvet' but they were not as fussy as the earlier 1529 Canons. In services clergy were chiefly wearing what befitted their academic qualification.

From the Reformation to the Oxford Movement Church of England clergy avoided all vestments associated with the mass and medieval theology. The Tractarians re-introduced these vestments and sought to argue that they were lawful, an argument which Evangelicals and a Royal Commission of 1867 rejected. It is not simply that we don't like the fashion, what they signify and have signified is wrong.

To those who argue that vestments simply add a bit of colour Coates has the following:
We know there are many today who use the Mass Vestments but who do not fully accept the Roman doctrine. Some justify their use of vestments on the grounds that they add colour and beauty to the service. If that be their sole reason for their use they show an extraordinary lack of imagination in confining themselves to such a limited selection, and going always to the Roman wardrobe for their millinery.

Perhaps we should leave this subject with some advice from Pope Celestine in 425AD. We bishops must be distinguished from the people and others by our learning not by our dress, by our life not by our robes, by purity of heart not by elegance.

Elevation of the Host

I have not heard of this being done in any Evangelical Church in England but the pictures which circulated the globe showed elevation at the closing service for the GAFCON gathering in Jerusalem. This is a difficult issue because Anglicans in other parts of the Communion do not have the same history and concerns as Evangelicals in England. But there is a serious problem to be addressed sooner or later by GAFCON.

The Jerusalem Declaration, which is very good, upholds the doctrine of the 39 Articles and yet we are forced to ask what exactly that means in practice. We know that Newman in Tract 90 argued that the Articles were consonant with Roman doctrine, but we cannot accept that. The impression gained by some, and which has been set out in some reports, is that GAFCON is adopting, or in danger of adopting a way of reading the Articles which goes against the plain historical sense.

Article 28 states:

"The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper was not by Christ's ordinance reserved, carried about, lifted up, or worshipped." The intention of the last part of this sentence is to prevent the practice of elevation of the host and adoration of the elements. Some will argue that the sentence does not actually forbid such practices but merely says they are not of Christ's Ordinance but clearly if it is not intended to be a prohibition there was no point in putting the sentence in the Article.

What is in view are two medieval practices. W.H. Griffith-Thomas asserts that the practice of elevating the host within the Canon (Eucharistic Prayer) dates from the 11th Century and likewise adoration only began in the 12th or 13th Century. Both practices are linked to the invention of the idea of transubstantiation.

Therefore the concern is that people can say they uphold Article 28 and then do something which is clearly contrary to what Article 28 permits in its plain historical sense. If this is accepted as a valid understanding of the Articles then it will undermine the good work which GAFCON is trying to do because it is equally quite possible for liberals to say they uphold the Articles if they are allowed to specify what they mean by that. Some liberals, for example, are content to uphold the articles much like the creeds as the faith of the Church, by which they mean the Church in the past, without necessarily therefore affirming that they themselves uphold them today. It is a bit like faith without works; words can come easy, but if the words are genuine the fruit of them will be evident.

This is a challenge for GAFCON. If it is to provide a workable way forward for global Anglicanism then it will need a clear foundation. The 39 Articles provide part of that foundation because they are faithful to Scripture, but if everyone is free to interpret the Articles as they wish rather than relying on their plain, historical meaning, then the foundation is insecure and what is built on it will not stand.

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