

## IN PRAISE OF DEBATE

### *An essay to inaugurate Anglicans Together Online*

With this essay Anglicans Together launches its electronic journal, *Anglicans Together Online*. We see a need for an alternative debate within the Diocese of Sydney. Such a forum will address topics relevant both to the diocese and to the wider church, nationally and internationally. It will be open to contributors from within the diocese and outside. Whilst adopting a critical stance, it will be a forum in which dominant views can be both attacked and defended. The criteria for publication will be the quality and timeliness of the offering.

In the first instances, of course, the papers will be those that we have commissioned. In time we hope to attract papers from voluntary contributors. For this reason it is important to indicate the direction of the initial commissions.

At each synod the Anglican Church League holds a dinner with a speaker. The 2001 dinner was addressed by the Rev'd Phillip Jensen, Rector of St Matthias', Centennial Park. Mr Jensen is a leading former of diocesan opinion and an active promoter of the dominant view. On this occasion he addressed church planting and the plight of evangelical clergy in hostile environments. Our first commissioned paper by the Rev'd Canon Dr James McPherson, Rector of St Mark's, Granville, is an examination of the arguments Mr Jensen developed in this paper. A significant section of the paper concentrated on the alleged law-breaking behaviour of nineteenth century Tractarians and their effect on the Anglican Communion. The Rev'd Dr Rowan Strong of Murdoch University will later give a more detailed examination of this argument in its historical context.

In his inaugural presidential address to the 2001 Sydney synod, our Archbishop, the Most Rev'd Dr Peter Jensen, touched on two significant themes. The first was the response of Christianity to the challenges of the modern and postmodern world. Dr Jensen distanced himself and, by implication, the diocese, from two extremes of response, fundamentalism and liberalism. Coming so soon after the events of 11 September 2001, his self-distancing from fundamentalism had added significance. This in itself should immediately direct our attention to the slippery terminology that is available to identify the various strands of theological response. Whilst nobody would or should seek to identify the Diocese of Sydney with the extremes of fundamentalism so shockingly evident in recent events, the archbishop's attempt to move away from the historical trend of Christian fundamentalism needs close examination. The diocese rejects this term as a self-description but, as the archbishop himself recognised, the historical links are apparent. A similar slippery terminology attended his more successful distancing from liberalism, characterised by Bishop John Shelby Spong. Of course, nobody even imagined that the archbishop or the diocese would have any truck with Bishop Spong. The term 'liberal', however, covers many views not consistent with Spong's that were swept up in the archbishop's comments.

In the middle ground that he sought to occupy the archbishop placed 'classical Christianity'. His use of this term brought immediately to mind the description that our Primate, the Most Rev'd Dr Peter Carnley, gives of his position, 'progressive orthodoxy'. A juxtaposition of these two claims for an appropriate contemporary theological stance heightens our awareness of the difficult position of Christianity in a postmodern context. As far as the Archbishop Jensen is concerned, the effectiveness of classical Christianity was more asserted than demonstrated. One can hardly criticise the archbishop for this. A presidential address can only raise such questions. His claim deserves serious consideration. In the second half of 2002, the Rev'd Dr Stephen Pickard of St Mark's, Canberra, will present a paper examining the issues raised by the archbishop in this part of his address.

In another part of his address the archbishop discussed the debate on homosexuality at the General Synod meeting of 2001. He drew attention to differing views of the role of the reader in interpreting biblical texts. The role of the reader in the interpretation of texts, particularly biblical texts, is of crucial importance, not the least in a diocese where the Bible is regarded as highly as it is in Sydney. The context in which the archbishop raised the role of the reader is also significant. It seems as though the interpretation of the biblical texts commonly used in the debate about homosexuality has become a touchstone of conservative orthodoxy in the Anglican Communion. Thus the issue has more than passing interest. We hope to publish on this issue as well.

Such a concentration on the brothers Jensen is simply the product of the coincidence of their significant addresses. Other issues are also on the agenda. In the February 2002 issue of *Southern Cross* the Rev'd Dr Robert Doyle of Moore College discussed the doctrine of election, particularly insofar as it might be said to dampen our enthusiasm for evangelism. Dr Doyle rejected that argument. The doctrine of election is important not only for its possible consequences for evangelism. It relates centrally to our concept of God and God's relationship with the whole creation. We hope to be able to contribute to this debate.

Whilst the promotion of debate should, in principle, not be contentious, why does Anglicans Together think a new medium is needed? Surely the diocese is full of debate and discussion? From our point of view, however, the diocese presents many obstacles to the kind of debate we have in mind.

The Synod of the Diocese of Sydney is often described as a forum in which there is lively debate. Members debate vigorously the issues before the synod: legislation, local policy and public statements. Some of the synod debates are, however, quite different and distinctive in character. These debates are often against an absent opponent. They take the form of a call to endorse a theological principle or set of principles and are usually a response to alleged heresy somewhere else in the Australian Church or in the Anglican Communion. Favourites amongst the objects of these motions are the Episcopal Church of the United States, often embodied in the person of Bishop John Shelby Spong, and the Australian Primate, regardless of who he happens to be. These opponents are not present to defend themselves and it is important that they are not.

The reason for these debates is not to engage the supposed opponent. It is to reinforce within the diocese the feeling that, possessing the truth, it is under attack. Identifying an external opponent is a standard way of reinforcing domestic solidarity. These motions serve a tribal, not a debating, function. These debates, in which theological questions predominate, are not usually marked by vigorous difference but by statements of solidarity.

It is, to a certain extent, unfair to criticise a synod for failing to engage in serious theological debate. After all, such debates are better suited to the academy, the journal and the conference. Rather, the synod illustration serves to characterise the situation in the Diocese of Sydney: much talk but little debate. The prevalent theological style is declaratory rather than exploratory. Its dominant purpose is to show the orthodoxy, as internally defined, of the speaker. The stakes are, after all, high, a reputation within a diocese that is essentially isolated from the outside world.

Theological education is in the monopoly hands of Moore Theological College. Three of the four Australian-born archbishops (who are all the archbishops since 1966) have come from the faculty of this college. Almost all senior diocesan appointments are made only from within the diocese. No new theological leadership in the diocese has come from outside within the experience of most of its members. The appointment of another insider, the Rev'd Dr John Woodhouse, as the next Principal of Moore Theological College demonstrates that the diocese has, once again, failed to show the maturity necessary to confront difference, renewal and change. This essentially incestuous situation is unhealthy. It is a principal restraint on debate.

The emphasis of the prevailing theology on the Bible, not in itself a bad thing, has led to the identification of theology with biblical exposition. This is part of the issue, raised earlier in the essay, about the role of the reader in the interpretation of texts. If theological discussion is tied so closely to a text and if the interpretation of the text is almost the sole sign of orthodoxy, discussion is inevitably constrained.

It is not that there are no publications within the diocese. The teachers at Moore College publish continuously. The diocese has a newspaper, *Southern Cross*, the Anglican Church League has its journal, *The Australian Church Record*. The two latter are linked to the dominant theological discourse of the diocese. Matthias Media has its long-standing journal *The Briefing*, also a major organ for promoting the dominant view.

A significant problem for theological debate within the diocese is that most of the talk is carried on in code. The use of such codes allows those within the mainstream to identify each other and detect the unorthodox. One example of this code is that the theological term 'atonement' means the penal substitutionary theory of the atonement, not a more general reference to the process by which humans are reconciled to God and which may be described in various ways. The appropriation of language in this way makes discussion a difficult and potentially dangerous exercise.

We launch this electronic journal in this context. We assert that there are respectable and alternative views to the dominant theology of the Diocese of Sydney. We assert that such alternative views are within the bounds of Christian orthodoxy as historically conceived. We know that many faithful members of the diocese hold such views. This is their forum, but not theirs alone. It is open to all sides of the debate. It is open to outsiders as well as insiders.

We invite you to join us in promoting an alternative debate around the issues that arise in the Diocese of Sydney, the Anglican Church of Australia and the Anglican Communion.

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for  
The Editorial Board