

Deconstructing Sydney Anglicanism: Past, Present and Futures

A tetralogy

The Very Revd. Professor Martyn Percy, Oxford



The Very Revd Professor Martyn Percy was the Dean of Christ Church, Oxford from 2014-2022. From 2004-14 Martyn was the Principal of Ripon College, Cuddesdon, one of the largest Anglican ordination training centres in the world. He has also undertaken a number of roles with charities and in public life, including being a Director of the Advertising Standards Authority and an Advisor to the British Board of Film Classification. Martyn writes on religion in contemporary culture and modern ecclesiology. He teaches for the Faculty of Theology and Religion at the University of Oxford, and tutors in the Social Sciences Division and at the Saïd Business School. Martyn is currently an Honorary Fellow at Harris Manchester College, University of Oxford.

Part One: Social and Cultural Notes

Fresh Expressions:

Like most churches, homegrown expressions of Christian faith are difficult to really understand unless you spend time on their ground, and immersed in the culture that is partly responsible for the distinctives that make up this or that local version of faith. Yes, every local version of faith likes to think it is catholic and universal. Every local version of faith can treat others not like themselves as foreign, deviant or worse. Human societies live by labelling. All communities do this too, as must individuals. The human mind is always filtering, ordering, screening, labelling and categorising. What is true, false, dangerous, safe, clean and unclean are wired into our shared worldviews, social functioning and mindsets. Humans cannot avoid making a whole variety of judgment calls – every few seconds.

I am grateful for this opportunity to reflect on what is known as ‘Sydney Anglicanism’. Grateful, because I am not sure it has much to do with Sydney, being Anglican, or even Evangelical. As any social anthropologist will tell you, labels are simultaneously relative, subjective, absolute and objective. At least, that is, to the person deploying the terminology. Very few denominational labels were adopted by

the group they now refer to. Anglican, Baptist, Methodist, Episcopalian – these are all nicknames used by others. The subject just gets stuck with the label. But they rarely help you to understand or accurately categorize a group.

In what follows, I want to see if I can help us to look at what we refer to as ‘Sydney Anglicanism’ in a variety of luminosities. By varying the kinds of light-illumination we shed on a subject, it can perhaps help us to see apparently familiar objects quite differently – sometimes much more softly, or equally, sometimes coming into much sharper focus.

There are not many studies of Sydney Anglicanism. There are a handful of critiques that take the kind of approach James Barr took to his studies of fundamentalism, and the best and most accessible of these are by Muriel Porter. They represent one kind of ‘illumination’ of Sydney Anglicanism. Yet as readers familiar with my ecclesiology will know, I prefer to use a blend of social, cultural and anthropological tools to help us see and comprehend what we encounter. Used carefully, these can also help to explain the theological priorities of a group, and the language, dialect and accent with which a group expresses their faith.

Social and Cultural Lenses:

In the twenty-first century, the emerging dividing lines that separate society and split communities are different to what they were at the turn of the twentieth century. New alloys of belief can be beguiling. For example, left-wing individualism (which can be doctrine in almost any mainstream political party in the developed world) presumes that all people need is opportunity, a level playing field, education and a bit of graft. True, equality should give everyone an equal chance. But it is more complex than that. Factors like wealth, class – social spheres, strata, wealth, poverty and opportunity – still determine people’s lives in the twenty-first century.

As a rule, denominations, congregations and dioceses are not very good at recognizing their visible and invisible classist assumptions. This is strange when one considers how Chapel and Church distinctions in the recent past often pivoted on class as much as belief. Or, for that matter, how early Pentecostal churches and their distinctiveness were earthed in class and ethnicity, not just on emphases on religious experience. H. R. Niebuhr’s *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (1929) was keenly aware of how elite Episcopalians were, in contrast, say, to poorer inner-city. Niebuhr thought that the effort to distinguish churches primarily by reference to their doctrine and to approach the problem of church unity from a purely theological point of view was fruitless, so he turned from theology to history, sociology, and ethics

for a more satisfactory account of denominational differences. His study of the social character of the Christian churches was intended to be a practical contribution to the ethical problem of denominationalism.

Niebuhr went beyond Max Weber's work in linking particular Protestant denominations to the growth of capitalism. Niebuhr saw that many forms of Protestantism in embracing the development of capitalism had moved to individualistic rather than collective concerns. He was particularly insightful in his discussion of how denominations dealt with the issues of slavery and secession from the Union in the American Civil War (1861-1865). The churches that had begun as 'movements of the dispossessed' with the emphasis on equality of God's children (e.g., Baptists etc) would have been expected to condemn slavery. But in the Confederate south, no mainstream denomination condemned slavery – it was regarded as an economic necessity. All denominations divided in the war, with the Northern churches continuing to condemn slavery (and slave owners) and the Southern churches proclaiming the importance of slavery to protect an "inferior" race. Only when war ended did the denominations patch up their differences – or not, as in the case of Southern Baptists and Confederate Methodists.

More recently, David Morgan (1937–2020) was a sociologist whose first study was on the educational background of Church of England bishops (over sixty years ago when he wrote his doctorate, most were public school and Oxbridge), and whose last book was a study of snobbery. As Morgan pointed out, the ground of our snobbery has shifted in modernity from one of social position to material or cultural possession. We see this at work in religion – high and low church can be snobbish about each other, as can liberals and conservatives. Even religious faith will develop its own 'spiritual snobscape', and that can disavowal of others, or inverted snobbery (pride) in your lack, rather than conspicuous consumption, power and possession.

Snobbery derives from complex micro-cultures, which are often rooted in class, but they can also be glimpsed in ethnicity, gender and sexuality. Snobbery – when practised – is permission for one group to gossip about, patronize and perhaps denigrate another group. In recent times, we have seen this in politics (e.g., pro-Brexit or anti-Brexit), economics (e.g. certain 'bargain basement' retail stores and what they are deemed to represent, or fashions and fads), and society (e.g. class, career, possessions, aspirations, etc).

Sydney Anglicans and a Modern 'Spiritual Snobscape':

The first British ships arriving to colonise Australia in the wake of Captain Cook's "discovery" carried soldiers, convicts, chaplains, explorers, scientists and others. On board Cook's first wave we can count twelve Jewish people, but no Methodist settlers. Methodists convicted of a felony were dis-fellowshipped, so a Methodist convict was an oxymoron. The same was not true for Roman Catholics, who were over-represented in the penal colonies.

The early Australian settlements relied on forms of social ordering, discipline and reform that derived their authority and rationales from either military or religious sources. Rather like New Zealand, much later, cities developed social and denominational characteristics that were more apparent than any counterpart left behind in Great Britain – though Belfast, Liverpool, Glasgow and parts of London provided important indicators of how social and class divisions were rooted in religious identity. Initially, the Anglican churches were the providers and beneficiaries of their quasi-established position in Australia. Schools and social care (i.e., Anglicare) have persisted as significant remainders of just how much social, moral and cultural capital was vested in the dominant denomination. Today, Anglicare in Sydney has 10,000 clients, with a turnover measured in hundreds of millions of dollars, and a property portfolio (e.g., hostels, charity shops) topping two billion.

The first thing you need to know about Sydney Anglicanism is that is very, very wealthy. However, this wealth owes much to the origins of how settlements were established and ordered in Australia. Rather as the Church of England did in the early-late Victorian period, denominations saw it as their duty, calling and opportunity to establish schools, missions, youth clubs, workhouses, hostels, alms-houses and originate social and welfare organisations (e.g., adoption, fostering, midwifery, etc). Australia was hardly very different – just fewer people to begin with, and even fewer constraints – and a penal workforce put together with extensive amounts of cheap or colonised land that made the later accrual of denominational wealth and asset management virtually inevitable. There were fewer churches built, and none of age or historicity that required significant financial upkeep.

Second, and in the last quarter of the 19th in England, the state had begun to take these over. The Church of England could still be found running missions in deprived areas. It continued to have valued representation in chaplaincy (e.g., hospitals, prisons, schools, etc), but it was rarely running these institutions. The same trends were taking place in Australia too, as it moved rapidly from being a colony of settlements (from 1766) to a country (January 1st, 1901). This rapid process of organisation – some might say, wrongly in

my view, secularisation – left Bishops being left in charge of congregations, churches, their dioceses and a handful of schools. All the while, however, their asset base had increased in financial value significantly.

Third, differentiated power struggles between classes, ethnic origins and denominations would emerge in the late Victorian period through to the later part of the twentieth century. Rather as with Belfast, Glasgow and Liverpool, Roman Catholics were over-represented in the working classes and amongst the labourers. The emigration of workers to Australia carried residual political and cultural assumptions, perhaps most notably those stemming from tensions in Ireland. Australian military recruitment in the Great War produced explicit forms of identity politics that would play out in various forms of denominational rivalry. Irish Catholics in Australia could be perceived as less loyal to the crown and the empire. Protestants, in turn, were perceived as wealthier, dominant and in favour of the status quo. The end of the Great War saw renewed tensions in Ireland, civil war, and then cession. In many respects, it is not possible to understand the ‘DNA’ of Sydney Anglicans without having some grasp of modern Irish history, as the tribal Catholic vs. Protestant rivalry is rooted in the distinctive cultures that were exported to Australia.

Deconstructing Sydney Anglicanism: Past, Present and Futures

The Very Revd. Professor Martyn Percy, Oxford

Part Two: Denominations Evolve

Denominational Developments:

As I noted in *Clergy: The Origin of Species* (2008), denominations evolve. The major mainstream denominations in Australia have a history of enjoying enormous social influence in an emerging country with few formal social structures. However, and in some respects, their evolutionary story of the last 250 years is one of slow secularisation, marginalisation, fragmentation and disintegration. This is a domino effect. Churches still cling on to their entitlement – especially to speak on social and public matters – and presume that the wider population will be receptive. But just as Irish Catholicism has struggled with successive scandals on forced adoptions, paedophile clergy, the covering up of sexual abuse, and yet opposition to same-sex unions, divorce and remarriage, so has Australian Catholicism.

The scandals of Irish Catholicism are similar to those that also consumed the Australian Anglican churches. This has been of the same order, via their historic involvement in education, welfare, the treatment single mothers, fostering and

adoption; yet also differently in respect of the treatment of indigenous peoples and other groups. As such Australia inherited and incubated similar problematic behaviour patterns that have some commonality with Canadian Anglicanism. Colonisation in lands where the distances between settlements are simply vast meant that the long arm of the law could be thousands of miles away from addressing abuse of any kind. Religiously motivated social control can be highly oppressive, and extremely abusive. Only recently, in an age of inexpensive and fast social networking and communication, does the history of these abuses emerge.

The Protestant-Catholic religious divisions in today's Sydney, however, go some considerable way to explaining the spiritual DNA of its distinctive brand of Anglicanism. But it is not possible to gain a more comprehensive grasp of the dynamics at work in Sydney Anglicanism until the early history of the Plymouth (or 'Exclusive') Brethren is engaged. Plymouth Brethren are a low church and non-conformist Christian movement whose history can be traced back to Dublin, Ireland, in the mid to late 1820s, and in their separatism from established Anglicanism (Church of Ireland). John Nelson Darby was their founder, but they can also trace their origins to Edward Irving. The group emphasizes *sola scriptura*, the belief that the Bible is the supreme authority for church doctrine and practice, over and above any other source of authority.

Plymouth Brethren generally see themselves as a network of like-minded free churches, not as a Christian denomination. They will usually refer to themselves as 'Christian', rather than as Brethren. Meeting informally to celebrate the Lord's Supper from 1825, central figures were Anthony Norris Groves (a dentist studying theology at Trinity College, Dublin) Edward Cronin (studying medicine) John Nelson Darby (an Anglican curate in County Wicklow) and John Gifford Bellett (a lawyer who brought them together). They used no liturgy, and nor did they recognise ordained ministers. For the early Brethren, all were ministers of the Lord. In their view, their guide was "the Bible alone", and so they sought to do it according to their own interpretation of the biblical text.

The first meeting in England was held in December 1831 in Plymouth, Devon. Their meetings were soon simply referred to as 'Plymouth Brethren', although the term 'Darbyite' was also used, especially when describing the Exclusive to distinguish from the 'Open'. The movement spread rapidly throughout the United Kingdom (i.e., Oxford, London, Yorkshire, etc). By 1845 the assembly in Plymouth had more than 1,000 people meeting in fellowship. Overseas missions took place very early on in Brethren history, with the successful establishment of 'meetings' in Switzerland and parts of France. Attempts to plant meetings in Baghdad, Madras

and other cities were failures. Darby made trips to the USA and to Australia (the latter as early as 1852), where these missions enjoyed considerable success.

Today in Australia, the Brethren have almost 40 independent schools, and well over 50,000 followers. As classic Weberian Protestants, their businesses are estimated to be worth \$AUS 22 billion to the Australian economy. The church encourages participation at meetings by all adult males (i.e., ‘brothers’), but with women (i.e., ‘sisters’) only choosing and announce the hymns. Apart from joining with group singing, women are otherwise required to be silent in church meetings in line with the Brethren's interpretation of *1 Corinthians* 14: 34. Exclusive Brethren do not recruit to their churches, and have strict codes of separatism from the wider world, which is regarded as evil and a source of defilement. Members must remain pure and undefiled; those leaving the movement are regarded as ‘lost’ and apostate.

Over the years, the Brethren have suffered schism (e.g., ‘Open’ and ‘Exclusive’), and also struggled with some of the issues familiar to new religious movements, sects, schisms and cults. These have centred on money, sex and power, order and control, and also included charismatic leadership (e.g., James Taylor, 1899-1970, and his sexual infidelity, as a test of member’s faith and fidelity and the ‘Aberdeen Incident’ of 1970, to the more recent leadership of John David Hales, and his son Bruce Hales, and their expensive taste in private jets).

The Marriage of Sydney Anglicanism and Plymouth Brethren:

The church-world dichotomies that run through every fibre of being in Sydney Anglicanism will often present like some latter-day version of *Pilgrim’s Progress*. There is a narrow, winding path to salvation. Few will be saved. The road to perdition is well-paved with good intentions. John Bunyan’s allegory has made him the poster-boy for extremely conservative approaches to soteriology. Heaven is for a tiny remnant. Hell is for everyone else. If you are not on the right path, you are destined for annihilation. Therefore, it is imperative you be separated from the world in order to be pure. If you leave the Brethren, it would be normal for any remaining family to have little if any contact with you from thereon.

To understand Sydney Anglicanism, one needs to appreciate its similarities to the Exclusive Brethren. These are not accidental, and resemblances with conservative University Christian Unions, which also have Brethren roots, are apparent. Brethren promote what they regard as a ‘traditional’ marriage and family life. Children typically live at the family home until they marry, and are required to marry within the fellowship. Physical contact between young men and women before marriage is

not tolerated, and courting between couples may be chaperoned. In theory there is nothing to prohibit a young Brethren adult attending a university for education, although this will be frowned upon – mixed halls of residence and un-policed free time being seen as likely portals for ‘backsliding’ or ‘falling away’.

The Brethren paradoxes on gender are intriguing. Brethren women can succeed in business and in education on their own terms. Public relations pamphlets will reassure readers their women can take part in all aspects of worship, but in their churches they will be subservient to men, sitting behind them in meetings. Recent debates in certain Sydney Anglican churches have asked if women should be allowed to read the Bible out loud during church services, or teach at Sunday School to a mixed group of teenagers. But the importing of such attitudes into Sydney Anglicanism only make sense when one realises that a women’s place at a Brethren Meeting only permits them to select and announce the hymns, and expressly forbids them to pray out loud or teach. The Brethren women wear a scarf or ribbon in their hair to signify that the man is head of the woman. Sydney Anglican women do not wear such attire, but their recent diocesan report on domestic abuse makes it clear that even in such situations, the man remains the head of the woman, and divorce is probably a greater evil than remaining within an abusive marital relationship. Brethren men will be expected to provide for their families while the women manage the household. Very few people not born into the Brethren will ever become members, and relatively few of those born into the group will decide to leave.

The peculiar culture of Sydney Anglicanism has taken more than 175 years to gestate, and is the result of tribal intermarriage (almost literally) between various Brethren and Anglican families, and a general if inchoate understanding that the interests and outlooks of these two tribes are near-identical. Both groups are socially and politically conservative, and anti-progressive-liberal. On some battlefronts, therefore, Sydney Anglicans will join forces with their Roman Catholic counterparts (e.g., on opposing the legalisation of same-sex-equal marriage). Doctrinally, however, the Brethren-Anglican alliance will decisively reject Roman Catholicism, and vice-versa. These mutual doctrinal denigrations can be quite vehement.

Here again, Sydney has more in common with Glasgow, Liverpool and Belfast than it does with any other modern city in the 21st century. Religious divisions run deep, and are hard-wired into the DNA of the culture. Unlike their British counterparts, Sydney’s divisions have seldom required any kind of close physical proximity to the ‘othered’ neighbour who is deemed to be following an entirely different faith. Those who puzzle over how Sydney manages to be multi-faith, multi-cultural, rainbow-tribal and highly diverse – and yet also host a version of Anglicanism that has more

in common with the Exclusive Brethren than any other expression of Christianity – need only develop a cultural-spatial understanding of the city. It isn't really a city in the way many Europeans use the term. It is more like a series of connected districts, with quite local-tribal loyalties, which in turn have detectable social, political, religious, ethnic and demographic aspects.

Culture, opined Peter Drucker, will consume strategy for breakfast. To really understand Sydney Anglicanism, one needs to grasp the separatist DNA-coding that makes this body of ecclesial polity quite so distinctive. For example, Thomas Chatterton Hammond (born in Cork 1877; and died in Sydney 1961) was one of the first modern Principals of Moore (Theological) College in Sydney. T. C. Hammond was an Irish Anglican cleric whose work on reformed theology and Protestant apologetics has been influential among evangelicals across the Commonwealth. He was also Grand Master of the Grand Orange Lodge of New South Wales, and a fierce critic of Roman Catholicism. His *In Understanding Be Men* (IVP, 1936) was still required reading for members of Christian Unions when I was an undergraduate.

Sydney's ecclesiology is the church as God's people meeting around God's Word. This leads to church meetings being centred around the public reading, explanation and response to God's Word. Anglicans in Sydney generally identify themselves primarily with their local congregation rather than a denomination or institution. In other words, their ecclesiology and theology is more akin to that of the Exclusive Brethren than anything else. It is not Anglican, or even especially Evangelical.

Deconstructing Sydney Anglicanism: Past, Present and Futures

The Very Revd. Professor Martyn Percy, Oxford

Part Three: The Formation of Character

Dressing Up and Dressing Down:

Our brief observations on Irish Protestant identity go some way to explaining Sydney Anglicanism. It accounts for the blending of anti-Catholicism and yet the same social conservatism that is resistant to same-sex unions. It explains the tribalism, and also the 'spiritual snobscap', which is elitist and classist. In their time, Irish Protestants were the wealthy minority, and at home in the upper echelons of the British class system. Thus, charming, mannered, fiscally secure, public school (boarding) educated, and with extremely strong ingrained attitudes to gender – the right kind of masculinity (muscular, rational) and the right place for women (submissive, and in the home) – and an abhorrent fear and loathing of male same-sex relations.

One can easily mistake the behaviour of Sydney Anglicans as a kind of neo-Puritanism. In fact, it has a much more subtle and sophisticated calibration, and as we shall see, the preferred doctrinal priorities, worldviews, attitudes to scripture and church order are all symptoms of the underlying culture. Put in more biblical terms, the gospel is always the seed: but what is the soil like in which it takes root, and what kind of plant does this synergy produce?

We have noted the Orange Order credentials of T.C. Hammond, and the quasi-Masonic elements of Grand Orange Lodge's merit some mention. They are male-only affairs, as with the Masons. Many Freemasonry traditions survive in the Orange Order, such as the organisation into lodges. The Order has a similar system of degrees through which new members advance. These degrees are scripturally sourced in the Order (something Freemasonry does not permit). There is ritualism of higher degrees such as the Royal Arch Purple and the Royal Black Institutions have specific dress codes – sashes, aprons, gloves and distinctive tailoring.

In terms of belief, the Order differs from Freemasonry on explicit expressions of religion in rituals, and also overt political campaigns, the Orange Order being permissive of both, and also active. Again, if one wants to understand how it was quite so easy and obvious for the Sydney Anglican hierarchy to contribute one million Australian dollars to the “no to same-sex legislation” campaign in that country, the Orange Order roots provide the template for a public demonstration and intervention in the interconnections of politics and religion, in a way that Freemasons would not ever countenance.

The Irish Orange Order have always considered the Fourth Commandment to be sacrosanct, which forbids Christians to work, or engage in non-religious activity generally, on Sundays. Even to the extent that when the Twelfth of July falls on a Sunday, Orange Day Parades are held over to the next days. held the next day instead. Even in the 21st century, the Orange Order has opposed agricultural shows held on Sundays, and of course regards shopping, sports and entertainment on the Lord's Day. Such Sabbatarian approaches survive amongst some Chapters of the Gideons (also male-only). Apparent relaxation of the rubrics for belong to the tribe need careful discernment. The tribal elders are savvy. For example, previous rules specifically forbade Roman Catholics and their close relatives from joining the Order. More recent drafting of the rules adopts wording to exclude those of any “non-reformed faith”. instead. Converts to Protestantism can join but must appeal to Grand Lodge. Some branches of the Order will make public assurances that Roman Catholics can join. However, given that swearing an oath not to enter a Roman

Catholic Church is still a condition of admission to the Order, potential Catholic applicants will find themselves in a quandary.

The fairest characterisation of Sydney Anglicans engaging with other Provinces in Australia and the wider Anglican Communion, is deliberate *disassociation* from the Anglican tradition, coupled to intensive missionary endeavour. Here, it closely follows the pattern of the Brethren ‘meetings’ of the mid-Victorian era onwards. Indeed, Sydney Anglicans will use the term ‘meeting’ interchangeably with ‘service’. Many churches in the diocese do not use a prayer book or a liturgical form of service. Few churches sing canticles and responses.

Even where no formal liturgy is used, some elements of Anglican liturgy may still be used for congregational participation, such as a corporate confession of sin, the saying of creeds and some corporate prayers. Lay participation in Sydney churches also occurs through Bible readings, leading intercessory prayer, leading the meetings, testimonies and interviews, singing and playing music. In many parishes alcoholic communion wine has been replaced with grape juice. Usually, the reason given for this is to be sensitive to people for whom alcohol may cause a problem.

Brethren rubrics also surface in the wearing of vestments. Or rather, not wearing them. The anti-Catholic and anti-Ritualistic Evangelical-Brethren DNA of Sydney Anglicanism has banned the wearing of the chasuble. This is a legal prohibition and was originated by Archbishop Wright, an English Evangelical, who did so on the basis that the vestment was deemed illegal, relying on decisions of the English ecclesiastical courts as finally upheld in the Privy Council in *Read vs. Edward King*, the Bishop of Lincoln (1892).

The main objection to chasubles in the mind of Sydney Anglicans is the association with the high church idea of a (Romish) ‘sacrificing’ priesthood. Archbishop Wright’s practice is codified in synodical ordinance, which makes Sydney the only diocese in the entire Anglican Communion that bans the wearing of chasubles. Paradoxically, perhaps, the cope was never banned, and is often worn at the (small) number of Sydney Anglo-Catholic churches where the celebrant at the Eucharist would otherwise wear the chasuble. Most clergy in the diocese, however, dispense with robes or any clerical attire, conducting church services in street clothes ranging from a suit and tie to smart-casual attire. As previously noted, Sydney Anglicanism has more morphological resonance with the Plymouth Brethren (and its Irish sectarian expressions) than any other denomination. If you can close your eyes and imagine an upper-class Australian version of the Revd. Ian Paisley (pre Good Friday Agreement), you will have captured an essential essence of the leadership of the

Diocese of Sydney. Their motto, or perhaps mantra, is: Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you. 2 Corinthians 6:17, *King James Version*).

Theological Character and Local Horizons:

As any student of congregational studies, anthropology or ethnography will confirm, generalisations can only be made after extensive and intensive grounded fieldwork. Immersion is key. There are some high-quality anthropological studies of Sydney Anglicanism now beginning to emerge, and here I will simply mention a few of the key observations from those conversations, as well as my own interactions with clergy and laity in the Diocese.

First, the local Sydney Anglican congregations are diverse in character and composition. Members of congregations I spoke with personally talked quite freely about pushing the clergy to preach for 8-12 minutes, and would regularly or frequently tell their clergy that 20 minute sermons tended to be flabby and repetitive. Clergy I spoke with thought that anything less than 20 minutes was “merely) a homily, and so not proper teaching”.

Second, most of the laity I spoke with thought that subjects such as women and sexuality were not issues that concerned them, but rather something that consumed the minds of the clergy. Many laity reported that they disliked being told (every week, I was assured by several of them), that they were “sinners”. They spoke longingly for hearing a message that was hope-filled, inspirational, relevant to their actual lives and wise. Despite this, laity spoke appreciatively of their clergy, and expressed affection for them – though clearly not agreement with them.

Third, one anthropological study was intrigued by the mode of pedagogy that was used to teach laity. Sermons – often lasting 30-40 minutes – would frequently be reinforced with PowerPoint illustration, with questions (and the ‘correct’ answers) flagged in relation to the subject being addressed. Attendees are often given handout sheets for the sermon, comprising headlines, questions to follow-up, with blank spaces provided to fill in the answers.

Fourth, the anthropological reflection on the ‘sermon slot’ notes how the approach to teaching adults has more in common with Sunday School or kindergarten, with take-home sheets to fill-in, and mutually reinforcing patterns of authority, ensuring (literally) that everyone is on the same page. The communal reinforcement of the sermon’s message is explicit – “turn and share with your neighbour what you have just heard”.

Fifth, the attitude to scripture that is a form of pseudo-science. Or, is perhaps better understood as a specific mode of congregational engineering. The Bible is read as a ‘manual’, and applied to the breakdowns, repairs and maintenance in the life of a Christian. Thus, if facing the prospect of a divorce (family or friend), you may hear “turn to chapter X and verse Y of Book Z” as the answer and the means of resolution. The Bible is therefore akin to some car-repair manual.

Sixth, Sydney Anglicans – clergy and laity I spoke with – were decidedly lukewarm to the new ‘Province of the Southern Cross’, with some openly expressing cynicism and disinterest. Likewise, GAFCON was a subject that meant very little to the people I spoke with, some of whom suggested that this might be an ego-trip for the leadership, but nothing to do with the clergy and congregations of the Diocese.

Seventh, both clergy and laity I spoke with expressed profound dis-ease at the declining numbers of young people engaged in church life. They were divided, however, on the causes. For example, the largest university church in the city (St. Barnabas Broadway) saw the students threaten revolt and secession over the stance of the Diocese on same-sex unions. They compelled the Rector to make their views known, and he (reluctantly?) obliged.

Eighth, numbers from recent census data indicate that Millennials and Gen-Z are unpersuaded by the Gospel According to Sydney Anglicanism. This mirrors the current situation of churches in Ireland. The authority of the clergy and church hierarchy has been eroded and rejected due to revelations of abuse and malpractice. Yet the church still presuming to instruct the population on what to vote for and against. The people vote with their feet.

Deconstructing Sydney Anglicanism: Past, Present and Futures

The Very Revd. Professor Martyn Percy, Oxford

Part Four: Worshipping the Bible

Pelagius Down Under:

According to the sociologist David Martin, the condition of much British Christianity can be characterized as a form of “sweaty semi-Pelagianism”. Pelagius (354-418) was an Irish-British monk, whose teachings stressed the role of human choices in salvation. Concerned about the moral laxity of Roman Christianity, Pelagius (contra Augustine) stressed personal rational choice and strict moral rigidity as vital ingredients for attaining salvation.

Sydney Anglicanism is quite Pelagian in character. In theory, it is committed to salvation by grace alone. In practice, like many forms of sectarian Protestantism, it is intensively driven by works as one of the main ‘signs’ that signals an individual is saved. The more intensive and extensive the works are, and visible too, the more signage a believer possesses that their salvation is authentic and true. A ‘lazy believer’ is virtually an oxymoron. If you are not working hard for the Lord, you are probably back-sliding, distracted by the world, or worse, losing your salvation. ‘By Grace Alone’ may be said and sung with great gusto. But the reality for theological worldview of many that hail from the Exclusive Brethren and Sydney Anglicanism is that works matter far more than such believers may wish to concede

One can go further here, and state that for those who adhere to the theological construction of reality within Sydney Anglicanism, salvation is definitely not by grace alone. Terms and conditions apply. Your salvation may be withdrawn for any number of reasons, including apostasy, sexuality, divorce or the nefariously slippery term, ‘back-sliding’. Moreover, if you don’t work very, very hard for this salvation, you may well find that God is very, very angry with you, as God tends to be with the rest of the world.

The rendering of John 3: 16 for Pelagians goes something like this: *“For God so hated the world that he killed his own son, what whomsoever does not fear this divine wrath being visited upon themselves at any point will certainly perish, and be subject to eternal damnation”*. In other words, disobey at your peril, and make sure you have enough loyalty points to get your bonus, which is eternal salvation. Sydney Anglicans will be regularly reminded that many churchgoers don’t have rewards cards, as they’re not proper members of God’s eternal-rewards-scheme.

But the Good News is that Sydney Anglicans are paid-up members. They can earn credits for being good and loyal, no matter what the cost. And please note again, for the avoidance of doubt, that you can lose all your hard-earned rewards points if you break the terms and conditions of the loyalty scheme. If you have any doubts about anything, see your leaders, and they will explain what is wrong with your doubts, and why you must eliminate these.

The socio-cultural roots of Sydney Anglicanism helps us to understand the theological priorities. God, as Father, is a reserved, unemotional, rational authority figure, given only to anger and the necessary corporal punishing of sin as and when required. Emotions and relationships must therefore be constantly policed, and sexuality and gender are particularly fertile fields for emotions and relationships to lead the unsuspecting into sin.

Some opine that Sydney Anglicanism is fundamentalistic. I don't find this to be a helpful label or accurate diagnosis. True, in fundamentalist communities it is never the Bible that rules – it is always the interpreter. And for sure, Sydney Anglicans in the pews will struggle to articulate reasonable theological dissent and remain in the tribal fold. Conflation is the curse that many who are raised in fundamentalist communities only discover too late, when the price of believing, belonging – and leaving – are all far too high.

In fundamentalist churches, the preacher will usually tell you what the Bible says, and also oblige you with what he insists the text means. Or rather, what God meant by what God wrote. So, don't argue with this, please – it is what God says. To disagree with the preacher is therefore to disagree with God's Word. And that means if you disagree with the preacher, you are disagreeing with God. At that point, your options are limited: repent, back down...or leave quietly. Conflation between ideology and power is a problem in any authoritarian regime. In fundamentalism, it is the divine-human conflation (i.e., how can you tell the difference between interpretation and revelation?).

You know how this ends. There will not be a leaving card, with a small reception to wish you well on the next stages of your faith journey. More likely is that your name will not be mentioned again, and any question as to where you have been of late will be met with “ ah yes, s/he's left our fellowship, because they turned away from God, and from His Word...so sad. We continue to pray they will return to the Lord, and come back to us”. This is of course a highly sectarian theology. One Tribe has the Truth; the rest are the Damned. Sectarianism is often labelled as 'religious' or 'political', but the reality of a sectarian situation is usually much more complex.

In its most basic form sectarianism, is the existence, within a locality, of two or more divided and actively competing communal identities, resulting in a strong sense of dualism which unremittingly transcends commonality, and is both culturally and physically manifest. Sectarianism arises in religious, a political or cultural conflicts between groups. Factors such as prejudice, discrimination, or hatred will quickly come to dominate in such conflicts. Most members of sectarian groups are pre-schooled into believing that they are *necessarily* engaged in the conflicts that beset them, and their struggle is therefore characterised by fright, flight and fight. Fear is the key; fleeing impurity essential; and fighting error and apostasy a noble crusade.

Sydney Anglicanism is sectarian, for sure. But the roots of this stem from antagonisms locked into early Irish Brethren secession, and a complex spaghetti of class-related issues. On the one hand, Sydney Anglicanism behaves like a lower

class or lower-middle-class dissenting brand of non-conformity. It has a strong Protestant work ethic, and all the hallmarks of that Weberian classification. However, its behaviour also mirrors its nemesis Roman Catholic tribe, and whilst they can collaborate on campaigns rooted in social and political conservatism, and both are theologically ultra-conservative, neither regards the other as a 'true faith'.

Sydney Anglicanism continues to be shaped by the residual attitudes still found in working and middle class Irish Protestantism, including its Ulster branches with Orange Orders and Black Lodges. Yet Sydney Anglicanism is also wealthy, elite, and well-connected to the upper echelons of Australian society. This is partly through schooling, with fee-paying single-sex denominational boarding schools still accounting for some of the very best education money can buy. Add the colleges and the welfare organisation (Anglicare) into the mix, and the history of the Church of England in the continent, and you can easily see why Sydney Anglicanism has a permanent seat at the high tables of Australian society. Thus, the polity functions and behaves like a disenfranchised sectarian minority, but in fact continues to wield the kind of clout that upper-class Anglicanism can still muster in England.

In terms of character, the muscular, masculine Victorian- Edwardian Christianity comes through at every level. This is an ex-carnational faith, not incarnational; any notion of the 'social gospel' will be treated as some abhorrent apostasy. Sydney Anglicans are anti-ritualistic and anti-aesthetic. They are suspicious of the realm of feelings and emotional embodiment. psychotherapy will be treated with wariness. The suspicion of feelings is highly-gendered (i.e., and so vehemently anti-feminist), and the apotheosis of the Father-figure – a distant dictator who is capable of enormous anger – the obvious anthropological root of the favoured Sydney Anglican theological construction of reality.

If this body of belief were a patient, it would be diagnosed as a material-prosthetic faith, with props to sustain their beliefs as an alternative and complete system of rationality, equal or superior to the sciences or any other discipline or discourse. Hence, the Bible is treated like a car repair manual. It maintains the vehicle, and fixes the problems, breakdowns and the broken. True believers know, however – they are schooled into the Bible-as-manual-mentality – that is you maintain your faith, life and soul as the manual stipulates, you will be safe and secure, and your faith will endure. The preacher is a kind of senior mechanic, and church is a weekly service (in the vehicular sense). Trying out other vehicles is definitely not allowed, and seen as apostate. There is a brand-loyalty. [NB: readers interested in following up these themes are directed towards Garrison Keillor's *Lake Wobegon Days*, (1985:

see especially chapter 3 on ‘Protestant’), and his *Prairie Home Companion* broadcast ‘The Secret Lutherans’ - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O_9c3lb-E4c).

Scriptural Reasoning:

Treating scripture as one equivalent text, in which every single chapter and verse is equally authoritative, is a bizarre approach to the Bible, and not one that it ever asks of its readers. The Bible has no self-conscious identity – the title of this scared book being applied long, long after its (disputed) component parts were assembled and broadly agreed. (Though please note, ‘broadly’, not definitively). Treating each verse of scripture as comparatively, equally and absolutely authoritative is a strange approach to take to texts that are variegated in origin, genre and intention.

Poetic language about the weather is not equally authoritative to a weather forecast that relies on satellite data. They are not easily compared – any more than statistics should be given equal weight to moral absolutes; or metaphors to history, or comparing science to poetry. As I (infamously) noted in Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code* (chapter 55), fundamentalists regard the Bible as if it were written in heaven, and faxed by God to trance-like robotic scribes who merely transcribed what was given. This theory of divine authorship is not biblical, but a modern form of pseudo-science.

The Bible has fuzzy edges. Some Christian traditions include the Apocryphal books within the Old Testament; others treat them as a kind of semi-detached appendix; and others do not regard them as scripture at all. The Bible is a bounded collection of scriptures, but the contents and ordering are subject to some modest variables. The core of the Old and New Testaments is largely agreed. The Protestant Old Testament is 39 books, while the Roman Catholic Church recognizes 46 books, with many parts of the Eastern Orthodox Churches recognizing an additional 6 books. Catholics, Protestants and Orthodox have the same 27-book New Testament Canon.

Temporal, regional and cultural variations in the make-up of authorised scriptures are relatively minor, and need not concern us here. There is no need to debate the finer points of Psalms 151-155, 1 and 2 Esdras or the texts known as Prayer of Manasseh or the Apocalypse of Baruch, nor 3 Maccabees (let alone 4 Maccabees, which is only used by the Georgian Churches). The important thing to grasp is the actual *nature* of the Bible you hold in your hand and read. Sydney Anglicans, I suspect, would rather you did not meditate on such things. If the Bible is not faxed by God from heaven, it would be open season on critiquing the interpretations of their preachers.

The Christian scriptures are multifaceted, containing addresses to God, laments, commands, words from and acts of God, history, opinion, songs, parables, tales, advice, poetry, prose, genealogies, rubrics, proverbs, mysteries, tragedies, unfinished sentences, unicorns (yes, they are mentioned in the KJV) and more besides. Our scriptures feed us and nourish us. But perhaps like sausages – though delicious, and full of many different ingredients – it is not always good to pry into how they were made and came to be quite so tasty. Our approach to the scriptures here is not to question their composition or interrogate the ingredients. Rather, we are meant to feed on them, allowing the word of God to be tasted, eaten and inwardly digested. The scriptures nourish us, slowly. That is how we grow.

Our Bibles are of more mixed pedigree than many suppose. Chapter numbers, verse numbers and sub-headings are not original to the texts as received. Neither is punctuation. Nor illustrations, in case you were wondering. Indeed, words such as Annunciation, Visitation, Magnificat, Benedictus, Christmas, Beatitudes and Nunc Dimittis or Epiphany do not figure in the Bible. Sorting out what the Bible says, what someone claims it means, and what the Bible means to say are three different-but-related propositions. In all this, remember that language attaches itself to things we see, know, think we know, experience and think we think. Language manages known unknowns, and even the unknowns we don't know about. The point is, words are not precise, and they tend to round things up.

Let me give a non-biblical example. Recently in London, I hailed a black cab. Except it was pearl white in colour. The fact that most Londoners refer to such vehicles as black cabs no longer describes their colour – they can be pink, blue, fluorescent green, gold, silver and other colours. 'Black cab' actually refers to the shape of about three types of vehicles (mostly black) that have one function: vehicles for hire and picking you up when you need it. The point is, the nominated colour is no longer determinative.

The aim of formal equivalence approaches is to render the translated text as the same or as close as possible to the original Hebrew or Greek. However, this does not always work well, even functionally. For example, we do not “gird up the loins of [y]our minds” (1 Peter 1: 13, KJV), though we do know what the writer means (i.e., “get ready!”, as in Proverbs 31: 7). Overall, word-for-word translations may not work. Poetry, psalms, metaphors, similes, parables – all of these have multiple meanings – so any translator must opt for the most likely interpretation that conveys the best sense of what a passage might be saying. What the Bible says and what it means are not necessarily congruent.

For example in Psalm 23:5 the text literally reads, “anointed my head with oil”. This is rendered by the *Good News Bible* as “welcomed me as an honoured guest”. Fair enough, as you most are unlikely to appreciate a pint of sunflower oil poured on your head the next time you drop round to a friend for dinner, a dynamic-equivalent translation can be more readable than a more literal or word-for-word translation. Naturally, there are issues with any dynamic equivalent translation, as they will inevitably take liberties with the text – such as losing the reference to oil and anointing, and going with the meaning (which is one of honouring and welcoming). The Bible cannot be literally translated, but it is still literary. Your version cannot be faultless (no translation of *any* text is ever ‘perfect’ – because language does not work like that!). But that does not mean that the message of God’s Word cannot come through to you clearly.

Sydney Anglicanism is sectarian and authoritarian, and a faith where it is hard to critically interact with the scriptures (as that means disagreeing with the preacher-interpreter, and thus with God) may have limited traction in the future. Such authoritarian custodianship is unappealing. Millennials and GenZ have other values; because their world is different. It is diverse, inclusive and open-minded. Sydney Anglicans have similar problems to those experienced by Ulster Orange Orders unable to recruit young people who no longer subscribe to the tribalism and struggles of their forbears. The mitigating factor for Sydney Anglicanism is their relative social and fiscal stability, and the relative lack of proximate alternatives.

Yet the writing is still on the wall. Like northern hemisphere Christianity, secularism and secularisation have less agency than many within conservative faiths continue to stress. Ultimately, Sydney Anglicanism faces the same problems as the Church of England. An indifferent citizenry that are clearly moral, spiritual and good – but have better things to do than listen to a preacher still fighting battles with Dawkins or Darwin. The citizens of Sydney may have little further use for the kind of religion promoted by such enduring caprices of sectarian culture.

First published Michaelmas 2022

Anglicanism.org