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BOOK REVIEW

*A Church for the Future:
South Africa as the Crucible
for Anglicanism in a New
Century: Harold T Lewis*

This book made me think.

It is ostensibly a history of the responses to ethical dilemmas over 150 years within the Anglican Church of Southern Africa¹. However, the dilemmas, their solutions, and in particular the process of those solutions, are relevant for any institution trying to move from colonial control to equality and interdependence.

The book starts from describing the life and work of Bishop Colenso, Bishop of Natal 1853 – 1883. Colenso was a man of strong views and combative words: he once wrote a 100 page letter to the Archbishop of Canterbury on the subject of polygamy. In 1863² Colenso was declared an heretic. His excommunication, later overturned by the Privy Council, was based on a host of theological and political transgressions, most of them entirely unremarkable in the 21st century. The most interesting, from a modern perspective, was his belief that “missionary endeavor should be based on the interchange and not the imposition of ideas” (p 19).

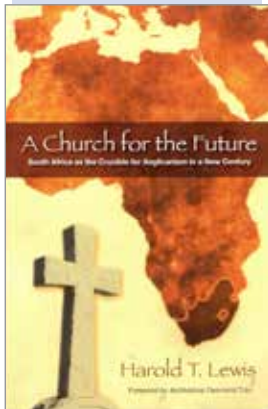
In theory, this is also a view which would not raise an eyebrow today. This book highlights the painful dilemmas which emerge in practice, within a two-way traffic of ideas and values between Africa and the West. When Western churches, as a stand of highest principle, espouse the ordination of women and homosexuals, and the African churches, on equally high principle, oppose this, what is to be done?

The author, Rev Canon Harold T Lewis, has recently retired as Rector of Calvary Church Pittsburgh. He spent a sabbatical year, in 2004, in Grahamstown, at the College of the Transfiguration (COTT), the Anglican seminary.

Lewis came to South Africa specifically to try and understand why the Southern African province³ supported the ordination of homosexual clergymen and bishops, while all the other African provinces were in strong opposition on this issue. African views matter: 40 million of the world's 80 million Anglicans live here. The future of Anglicanism will be shaped in Africa.

To his credit, Lewis does not dismiss African opposition out of hand, although he himself supports ordination of homosexual priests and bishops. He lays out the pressures and viewpoints which have shaped this opposition:

- There is a great rage against a ‘new imperialism’ from the West. The first missionaries imposed a Victorian sexual morality, contemptuously disregarding existing African beliefs and practices. Now the Anglican church is apparently disregarding, and imposing, once again, having inexplicably changed its mind about acceptable sexual practices.



**A CHURCH FOR THE
FUTURE: SOUTH AFRICA
AS THE CRUCIBLE FOR
ANGLICANISM IN A NEW
CENTURY**

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- Many African Christian churches are trying to hold their ground under pressure from fundamentalist Muslims, who condemn homosexuality out of hand.
- There is a literal biblical interpretation, shared with some Evangelical and fundamentalist US Episcopalians. These Americans have put themselves under obedience to the bishop of Nigeria, in order not to be part of a church which ordains homosexual bishops. This kind of literal biblical interpretation is one of the issues on which Colenso fell out with his superiors. It was taught rigorously by the missionaries, and learned faithfully, and has come back to bite everyone.⁴

Why does Lewis see South Africa as “the crucible for Anglicanism in a new century?” He describes a crucible as “a place, time or situation characterized by the confluence of powerful intellectual, social, economic, political or spiritual forces” (p127). He sees South Africa as such a crucible as much because of the processes by which this province has encompassed change, as the particular stand on a given issue. So schism is not an option, not with the Africans, and not with the Americans. Rather than walking away, we must learn to stay put, and live in tension. This capacity of the church to live in tension, Lewis sees as one of the most important legacies of Colenso’s challenges to church orthodoxy and hierarchy. Lewis describes the strength of the Anglican Church in Southern Africa as the “ability to hold onto one another, despite differences” (p127).

This holding onto one another occurred throughout the struggle against Apartheid, when some of the church leadership and laity spoke out against Apartheid, but more did not. Yet black and white Anglicans held onto one another, and the church as an institution and a community both endured and changed.

There will be parts of the book which irritate South African readers, on matters of both opinion and fact. Not everyone would agree that Archbishop Desmond Tutu “did more than any other South African to bring about the eventual collapse of apartheid” (pxiv). The continued reference to the *two-thirds world* instead of the *third world* is laudable but annoying. These minor quibbles should not be allowed to detract from the intellectual, ethical and spiritual challenges which the book outlines.

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In describing the journey of the Anglican Church from an instrument of Empire to a partnership of equals, the writer has a fine eye for colonial absurdity. He notes that until 1948 the Anglican community in South Africa resided under the jurisdiction of their near neighbour, the Bishop of Calcutta. He records that at a Lambeth⁵ conference delegates are invited to a garden party at Buckingham Palace. The invitation prescribes a dress code: bishops are to wear cassocks; wives are to wear hats. What, muses Lewis, should a lady bishop wear? A cassock and a hat? And what about the husband of a bishop?

We know that in South Africa we need to build bridges. We also need to seek out and celebrate existing bridges. That is what this book does. It is a clear-eyed view of some of the difficulties human beings must overcome to meet one another. And a celebration of this happening within the Anglican Communion in South Africa. Lewis sees Southern Africa as embodying the Anglican *via media*, which he describes as “not a path between but a bridge across”. (Others see it as a fence, upon

which Anglicans are all too wont to sit!)

The book begins with Bishop Colenso, and ends with Archbishop Njongonkulu Ndungane⁶. Lewis sees Ndungane as a natural successor to Colenso, as both men “represent the possibilities for creative dialogue and fusion between the indigenous culture... and the emerging global culture of the West” (p125). It is in this fusion, Lewis believes, that the future of the church lies.

NOTES

- 1 Formerly known as the Church of the Province of Southern Africa (CPSA), this province includes Angola, Lesotho, Swaziland, Mocambique, Namibia, South Africa and St Helena.
- 2 In 2002 he was, in a rather cumbersome process, de-excommunicated.
- 3 Africa is divided into 12 Anglican provinces
- 4 An interesting aspect of Lewis' book is his study of the social gospel preached by the Anglo-Catholic Oxford movement, who through the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel provided many of the clergy who came to South Africa, such as Trevor Huddleston. East Africa, by contrast, drew clergy from the evangelical Church Missionary Society. Lewis identifies first Colenso, and then the Oxford Movement, as early exponents of Liberation Theology.
- 5 The Lambeth Conference, which meets once every 10 years, is attended by bishops from around the globe and ecumenical participants. The very first Lambeth conference was convened in 1867 to deal with problems around the deposing of Bishop Colenso.
- 6 Njongonkulu Ndungane, successor to Desmond Tutu, was elected Archbishop of Cape Town and Primate of the Church of the Province of Southern Africa in 1996, and served until 2007, when he was succeeded by Archbishop Thabo Makgoba.

Some reflections on church history

What do the different Archbishops whose story is told in these books have in common? Do their histories have any relevance to institutions outside the church?

Patient inclusivity is perhaps the hallmark particularly of Ndungane and of Hurley. They did not turn away from the communities which rejected their ideas; nor did they jettison the ideas others found so offensive. The personal cost was high: Archbishop Hurley was denied the Cardinal's hat many felt was his by right. Even more painfully, his most cherished ideas appeared to fall on stony ground. Archbishop Ndungane was described by an opposing African bishop as not even worthy to be called an African. These rejections came from the communities which provided the context for both men's lives, which they loved dearly.

Perhaps, as with bishop Colenso's life, their meaning and purpose will only become clear in another 100 years. But there is one small area in which their influence, and that of like-minded colleagues and predecessors, is clearly visible. White South Africans appeared to sturdily reject the prayers and persuasions of clergy opposed to apartheid. But in the referendum on 1992, the two-thirds majority required for change was achieved: 68,935 of white votes were cast in favour of power-sharing.

What made the whites change their mind? Fear, hope, overseas pressure or internal unrest? Whatever it was, the reasons to do so, the language in which to clothe the new ways of thinking were ready and waiting for them.

Perhaps those patient, inclusive clergy, committed both to holding on to their whole flock and articulating coherent and powerful post-apartheid values, played their role too. They spent their lives lovingly crafting new wineskins, ready to securely hold the new beliefs when they finally came.