



## Book Reviews

Andrew Chandler and David Hein, *Archbishop Fisher, 1945–1961: Church, State and World* (Burlington, VT and Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), pp. 261, £30.00, ISBN 978-1-4094-1233-5.

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It is often said that being Archbishop of Canterbury in modern times is an impossible job. In a period of intense and unprecedented challenges to church and state in the aftermath of the Second World War, Geoffrey Fisher made it seem do-able. The need was for reconstruction, renewed order, social norms and a sense of security. Fisher was more than a safe pair of hands; he was an intensely purposeful, capable and indefatigable force. Coming between William Temple, who died of gout compounded by chronic overwork in 1944 after two years in office, and Michael Ramsey, whose Anglo-Catholic churchmanship he found antipathetic and whose succession he opposed, Fisher has been overshadowed by the immense intellectual and spiritual stature of both men. But Fisher's tenure was, these authors insist, 'a pivotal archiepiscopate, one that cries out for fresh examination' (p. 5). What Chandler and Hein have provided is an estimable study of Geoffrey Fisher revisited, reassessed and studded with many intriguing judgements. This book could not have been written without Edward Carpenter's major biography *Archbishop Fisher: His Life and Times* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 1991) and it incorporates material from Hein's briefer work *Geoffrey Fisher: Archbishop of Canterbury 1945–1961* (Princeton Theological Monograph no. 77; Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications [Wipf & Stock], 2007). It sets Fisher in a fresh light, bringing out both strengths and weaknesses, and exhibiting his true stature. Along the way, we see Fisher relating to such figures as Churchill, Attlee (Prime Minister, 1945–51), Temple, George Bell (Bishop of Chichester), the notorious Bishop Barnes of Birmingham, the 'Red' Dean of Canterbury Hewlett Johnson, John Robinson (Bishop of Woolwich) and Michael Ramsey, as well as Pope John XXIII and the Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras I – and not being fazed by any of them.

Temple and Ramsey were both scholars, deep thinkers, theologians and, in a sense, mystics. Temple was on a higher plane altogether and Ramsey was often, frankly, 'on another planet'. Fisher was devoid of intellectual curiosity (he turned down offers of Oxford fellowships on the grounds that he did not want to waste his time on questions to which there was no answer), but he was deeply interested in human nature and was galvanized by the opportunity to apply his outstanding practical intelligence to empirical problems. But both Temple and Fisher were, as the authors put it, 'ecclesiastical thoroughbreds' who knew their way through the intricacies of church life and were adept at negotiating its many anomalies. Temple

was a fairly competent administrator and a superb chairman, gifted with the ability to produce a reconciling, uniting formula when all hope of agreement around the table seemed lost. But progressing business was not where his heart, his vision or his flair really lay. He kept the show on the road, but was not inclined to dig down to fundamental structural problems. That, however, was Fisher's *forte*. He had mopped up at Repton School after Temple and would do the same for the Established Church after the latter's death. Fisher possessed a sharp business acumen that both Temple and Ramsey lacked. He took to the job of being the chief executive officer of the large complex organization that was the Church of England as to the manner born, but he did not forget that it was much more than an organization: it was a historic institution, with sustaining traditions, laws and typical ways of doing things, which he well understood.

William Temple had been chosen by Prime Minister Winston Churchill, to succeed Cosmo Gordon Lang, from among the available bishops as 'the only half-crown item in a sixpenny bazaar' (which was somewhat unjust, especially to George Bell and to Fisher himself). Although Temple supported (against Bell) the national government's policy of bombing Germany into submission, his leftward leanings as one of the intellectual architects of the post-war Welfare State, were unpalatable to Churchill who, it is said, callously rejoiced when Temple died. Churchill chose Fisher to recommend to King George VI, over Cyril Garbett, the able and articulate Archbishop of York, and Bell who had, in the House of Lords, compared the saturation bombing of German cities to Nazi atrocities. At that time (the authors write with dry irony), 'The Church of England was ostensibly led by bishops who by and large had little clear idea of what they were supposed to be doing, though some of them did whatever they decided upon well. Some were industrious, others were simply enigmatic' (p. 3). Fisher, by contrast, knew exactly what he was doing and set about it with energy, tenacity and system, though he did not always channel his huge administrative and executive abilities into the best causes.

Fisher grew up in a country parish where his father was the incumbent and so he instinctively understood the grass roots of the Church of England, the ordinary parochial way of being an Anglican. He progressed through a series of high offices – Headmaster of Repton (where he succeeded Temple and where Ramsey was a pupil), Bishop of Chester, Bishop of London, Archbishop of Canterbury – without having been a parish priest himself. After retirement in 1961 he found a fresh lease of life as the priest of a rural parish where he proved himself a dutiful pastor. He had the gift of getting on with everyone without distinction of class or rank and had a genuine interest in the lives and loves of 'ordinary' people.

Fisher was an uncomplicated, unemotional and psychologically rock-solid person, but when he heard of Temple's unexpected death he knelt in prayer for an hour. As Bishop of London during the Blitz he had honed his skills both of reconstruction and of ecumenical diplomacy. His fundamental axiom was that good order is the prerequisite of human flourishing and he relished the challenge of restoring order in whatever context. Fisher was able to master a mass of detail while subordinating it to strategic ends. We should not think of him as a machine. He was basically humble, though in him humility could be overridden by strong conviction and a sense of responsibility and then he could be overbearing and tiresome,

especially in later life. He was possessed of humour, charm and friendliness. His approach to what needed to be done was down to earth, shrewd and pragmatic. Doctrinally orthodox and ethically conservative, his churchmanship was central tending to low, whereas Temple's churchmanship was central tending to high and Ramsey's was high tending to central.

Fisher's achievements are not entirely unambiguous. He pushed through the desperately needed revision of the Church of England's Canons, which were substantially still those of 1604, but the revision took 11 years to complete its progress through the Church Assembly (the predecessor of the General Synod) and many became weary of it. In ecumenism, his Cambridge sermon of 1946, in which he invited the so-called 'Free Churches' to take episcopacy into their systems and to try it out on their own ground, created a paradigm shift in ecumenical method that has been widely followed in Anglicanism to the present day, though none of those churches, not even the Methodist Church, has yet implemented Fisher's proposal. And in retirement Fisher loudly opposed the Anglican-Methodist unity scheme of 1969-72, much to the chagrin of his successor Michael Ramsey who, ironically, was a late convert to the scheme's proposed method. Fisher was won over to the vision of a World Council of Churches, that Temple and Bell had done so much to help realize, and when the WCC was inaugurated at the Amsterdam Assembly of 1948, Fisher was in the chair. In 1960 Fisher made the first visit – strictly unofficial, private and low key, as it was – of an Archbishop of Canterbury to a pope since the Reformation and when John XXIII spoke of his hope for the 'return' of separated brethren, Fisher smartly interjected, 'Your Holiness, not *return*'. Fisher was a man of ready initiative and always had his wits about him. He supervised the rebuilding of bombed-out churches and, working through the Church Commissioners (formed in 1948), he did more than any other modern Archbishop of Canterbury to improve the standard of living of the clergy. Structural renovation in various theatres was what he excelled at. 'Theatre' is not an inappropriate word: Fisher showed his sense of it when he crowned Queen Elizabeth II, with glorious pageantry, in 1953.

Fisher did not resist the dissolution of the British Empire and gave patient, detailed attention to setting the newly independent churches of the Anglican Communion on a sound constitutional footing. He presided at the Lambeth Conferences in 1948 and 1958. He followed Archbishop Temple's cautious approach to the Church of South India proposals. But, as Chandler and Hein point out, while Fisher did much to renovate the structures and processes of the Church of England, he left the Church woefully unprepared to meet the challenges, including the subversive cultural tone, of 1960s' England. In matters of social ethics he was more than conservative; he was basically intransigent. Over divorce, artificial insemination by donor, marriage to a deceased wife's sister, Premium Bonds and capital punishment, he was not only out of step with the mood of the times – which for a bishop might be the right thing to be – but also with the evolving Christian conscience of his Church. His advice to Princess Margaret, the Queen's sister, who wished to marry the divorced Group Captain Peter Townsend, had rather tragic consequences. But Fisher resolutely opposed apartheid and supported, with a degree of prudence, South African bishops who were being pressurized. In his later years, both before and after retirement, Fisher could not keep quiet: he held forth unstoppably and

expected to be heeded. To the end he was a man intent upon God's business as he saw it. His final utterance deserves a place among 'famous last words': to his wife Rosamond as she approached his bedside, 'Don't bother me now, dear. I'm busy dying.'

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Dominic Janes, *Visions of Queer Martyrdom from John Henry Newman to Derek Jarman* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), pp. 240, ISBN 978 0 226 25061 8.  
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In this provocative and fascinating book, Dominic Janes tackles the thorny issue of same-sex desire and countercultural sexuality, with a particular focus on Anglo-Catholicism from the time of the Oxford Movement. He does not set out to scandalize, but simply to discuss how the church offered an environment in which alternative relationships could be expressed and where a 'queer' lifestyle could be lived out in a safe space. Perhaps most fascinating is Janes's attempt to rehabilitate the idea of the closet which made sense in the hostile and homophobic environment of the past, but which makes less sense in the liberated Western world of today. He has little interest in what modern Anglicans like to call 'homosexual practice' and does not speculate on the sexual activity of soon-to-be saints, but rather seeks to trace the development of a safe space for same-sex love which, even if wholly 'spiritual', is no less love (p. 3). Such a lifestyle involved a form of suffering in a world in which there was no outlet for sexual desires apart from marriage: this led to a form of 'queer martyrdom' which 'could encompass both attempts to accommodate sexual deviance within the realm of Christian moral witness and the attempted manipulation of Christian imagery of martyrdom in the cause of sexual liberation' (p. 9). Often queer martyrdom involved finding liberation from sexual shame in abasement and obedience and in exemplary service and suffering which was modelled on the suffering of the ultimate object of desire, the Body of Christ himself.

Through a series of case studies both of Christian and post-Christian thinkers and writers (and in one case a film-maker), Janes discusses the construction of a queer sensibility both within the ecclesiastical closet, and, later, as this influenced the broader culture of same-sex desire (as with Jarman's *Sebastiane*). He begins with brief discussion of Newman (where he is critical of those who seek to sexualize his relationship with Ambrose St John) before moving to a detailed account of the ritualist priest William Bennett who offered a powerful visual account of the Eucharist as well as a unique set of stations of the cross outside his Somerset church. What emerges is a theology in which sacramental theology offers a pathway to regeneration in which 'even the fallen body of the sodomite might find (in spiritual terms) salvation' (p. 33). Religious devotions could thus offer a safe space for same-sex desire through a sublime material encounter with Christ's flesh and blood. Artistic expression of same-sex desire is also explored in relation to Simeon