

# Episcopal Follies

by Philip Jenkins



Anna Mycek-Wodecki

We have heard many debates recently about the undermining of moral and cultural traditions in contemporary America, a trend sometimes epitomized by the phrase “political correctness.” Conservatives often issue dark warnings about the ills that befall a society that cuts itself off from its roots, though few go so far as to predict total destruction, which is what might well overtake some institutions in which the process of decay has advanced most rapidly. I am specifically referring to those churches which used to represent the moderate mainstream of American religion and which since the 1960’s have generally been in the vanguard of every major radical and liberal movement of social reform, from civil rights and feminism to gay rights, pacifism, and ecology. Activism and even militancy may have been justified, but the various causes have so overwhelmed the fundamental religious mission of the churches that all the traditional denominations have declined precipitously, to an extent that is stunning to an outsider.

This has been true of all the various “mainstream” Protestant groups, including Methodists, American Baptists, and the United Church of Christ, but most illustrative of this trend is the Episcopal Church, which enjoys a political and cultural influence far beyond its official numbers. For example, though its membership has never amounted to more than one or two percent of the American population, the denomination usually claims the allegiance of up to a fifth of all United States senators, a figure equivalent to the number of Roman Catholics in the Senate. For this reason alone, what happens to the Epis-

copal Church is significant for how it affects the leadership of this nation; but it also epitomizes far wider trends.

And what has happened to the Episcopal Church has been little short of a catastrophe. Between 1966 and 1989, the baptized membership of the church fell from 3.6 million to 2.4 million, a rate that, if extrapolated, means the literal extinction of the denomination before the year 2020. Nor is this rate unusual when placed alongside the fate of other “mainstream” groups, which are fast becoming anything but that.

It is possible to find nonpolitical reasons for this decline, for example in demographic changes, and it is true that church membership has fluctuated greatly throughout American history. On the other hand, the decline has not affected some other denominations, usually fundamentalist, and the membership of the (Pentecostal) Assemblies of God has in a very few years raced ahead of that of the Episcopalians. The Episcopal Church has hastened its demise by a series of violent conflicts over political and moral issues, most of which revolve around such familiar themes as the definition of authority, the importance of tradition, and the nature of sexuality. In the 1970’s, the church lost many conservatives through far-reaching revisions of its prayer-book; the new 1979 version abandoned much of the linguistic power of its 1928 predecessor. Still more divisive was the question of women’s ordination to the Episcopal priesthood, in flat contradiction of scriptural injunction and two millennia of consistent tradition. Women’s ordination to the priesthood began in 1976, and in 1989 Barbara Harris was ordained suffragan bishop of Massachusetts. In the 1970’s, the church provided funds to various politically militant groups under the guise of “empowering minorities” and failed to curb or even reprimand the floridly heretical specula-

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tions of some of its clergy. Not surprisingly, many Episcopalians abandoned the church, usually feeling that it had abandoned them.

The chaos of the 1970's was understandable in the context of the political upsurges of these years, particularly the churches' weary quest to become "relevant"; but whatever the causes, this was a decade that most Episcopalians should have been glad to see end. What is baffling is that the church did not take the opportunity to retrench and recover after this turbulence, and throughout the 1980's there was a steady slide in the directions advocated by the most radical. While the rate of decline in membership has slowed somewhat in the last five years, this is no cause for optimism. All this means is that the ceaseless hemorrhage of traditional Episcopalians is being counteracted by an influx of refugees from other churches, who believe that bad as it is, the Episcopal Church cannot be quite as bad as their former institutions. Today, some 60 percent of Episcopal Church members were raised in other Christian traditions. It remains to be seen how long such refugees from other torn denominations can continue to staunch the flow.

What can be so bad about this church? The central issue is authority, or the lack thereof. Though the church has a traditional Episcopal hierarchy, it has become all but impossible to find a view or practice so bizarre, heretical, or outrageous as to attract a critical word from a superior, still less a disciplinary measure. Perhaps the best known Episcopal cleric today is John Spong, bishop of Newark, whose best-selling books have variously denounced the doctrines of the Trinity, the Virgin Birth, and the bodily Resurrection of Christ, all in the name of "rescuing the Bible from fundamentalism." "Fundamentalism" in this context means *any* belief in the historicity of most aspects of the Christian story.

Spong is especially radical on such matters as the women's role in the church and the ordination of homosexuals. A scandal arose in 1989 when Spong contradicted explicit teaching by ordaining a practicing homosexual (one church newspaper reported this moment with the memorable image "Spong lays hands suddenly on homosexual"). Apart from the illegality of this decision, the chosen candidate was thoroughly lacking in charity or diplomacy, as indicated when he suggested publicly that Mother Teresa would have been a better person if she had sexual intercourse (though his actual language was far more vulgar and explicit). Spong has explained the biblical injunctions against homosexuality by declaring that St. Paul himself was "gay" (though in most uses of the word, a less "gay" person than Paul is difficult to imagine). Spong has also denounced the alleged ill treatment of women by the "male-dominated" Roman Catholic Church, and his attacks have often ventured into the realm of strident anti-Catholicism. This singularly unecumenical position is in fact quite common among the radical and feminist wing of the Episcopal Church.

None of these actions has attracted the slightest censure or reprimand, and the lack of disciplinary framework has contributed to the intellectual anarchy within the church that passes under the guise of "spiritual freedom." In 1991, the bishop of Washington, D.C., ordained a noncelibate lesbian to the priesthood. Why should he not have? Spong had faced no sanction.

Anyone who believes that the universities are the purest bastions of "political correctness" should venture into that national theological circus called the General Convention of

the Episcopal Church, held triennially. The Phoenix gathering of 1991 featured a systematic assault on the notion of ordained priesthood in the form of "eucharistic circles" passing around the bread and wine, so that no one individual could claim a special elite authority to consecrate. Other notable elements included a fulsome apology to Iraq and its government for trouncing its armed forces in the Gulf War. The Episcopal Church is firmly antimilitarist, except when the latest media fad dictates the use of force. With the rest of the National Council of Churches, Episcopalians now demand military intervention against Serb forces in Bosnia, an act of stupidity that fortunately has not yet come to pass.

Connoisseurs of political faddery avidly awaited the 1994 convention, held at Indianapolis in August; they were not disappointed. How could they be when featured speakers included Hillary Clinton's personal guru Marian Wright Edelman? High points of the debates included passionate advocacy of ecclesiastical blessing of homosexual relationships and the customary circus of "feminist spirituality." However, the central event was the plenary session on "Overcoming Sexism," clearly the primary issue for any objective observer of the contemporary world scene or the modern spiritual malaise.

Both the Phoenix and Indianapolis conventions were most notable for their demonstration of the utter obsession of the mainline church with matters of gender and sexual preference. This especially manifests itself in the battle over "gender-neutral" or "inclusive" language in liturgy or biblical translation, where the changes demanded by feminists have long ventured far outside any concepts of traditional Christianity. The use of "God the Father" or "God the Son" are obvious patriarchal abominations, but so is "Jesus," because this form demands a male pronoun. "The Eternal Word" is an acceptable circumlocution. "In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit" is as unacceptable in many churches as racist jokes would be in the mass media. This taste for the nonspecific and neutral also helps to dilute orthodox assertions of faith and to expand the overlap with generic New Age doctrines and thought. Another fashion involves extolling feminine biblical imagery, a concept that may sound harmless until we see examples like the proposed liturgy declaring that "through Her [Wisdom] you formed the human race." By this point, we have moved close to the goddess worship of both the New Age and the Woman-Church movement.

Linguistic and liturgical radicalism have affected the whole range of doctrine, with particular impact on the concepts of sin and atonement. In the radical perspective, the church should be teaching pride and empowerment to the oppressed, and guilt and sin are "patriarchal" baggage to be discarded. The Atonement has even been described as the "ultimate in child abuse," committed by God the Father against His Son. And how is it possible or justifiable to seek the conversion of a non-Christian if these outsiders are already privy to a truth at least equally valid as Christianity? Episcopalians in the Pacific Northwest participated in a general apology to the Indian communities of the region for having dared to evangelize them in previous centuries. In 1992, the denomination took the lead in the ritual denunciations of the Columbus quincentennial.

Feminist influence is also manifest in the recent campaigns over "clergy sexual abuse," a term that in the Episcopalian context generally does not mean the molestation of children by clergy but sexual associations between ministers and consenting adult women. This specific form of "abuse" has been the

subject of enormous attention in the Episcopalian press in the last three years, as it serves to discredit the idea of an ordained (and still predominantly male) ministry. It also supports the view that the church exploits and oppresses women, whose position must be reformed through theological and doctrinal change.

None of these views, however outré or apparently unacceptable, will draw the slightest complaint from the church's hierarchy, because virtually anything goes and because the radical and feminist activists have so firmly established themselves in the leadership. To anyone who wonders what the Episcopal Church stands for, the answer in the 1990's is "almost anything."

In fairness, though, not all views are beyond criticism. There remain a handful of doctrines and practices that still attract the ire of the mainline (that is, liberal) Episcopalian hierarchy and its publications, which sometimes feature headlines complaining "Episcopal Authority Defied in Virginia!"—a recent banner from *Episcopal Life*. However, the subversives and dissidents stigmatized are invariably conservatives or traditionalists, those ignorant obscurantists who obey what the church has said and practiced over the last few centuries. These malignants go so far as to refuse to ordain women or to recognize such ordinations, and the columns of the Episcopalian press regularly denounce the misplaced tolerance that permits the survival of such gross heresy. If they do not like the church's rules, let them go elsewhere! The conservative Episcopal Syn-

od of America occupies a place in liberal demonology comparable to that of the "Liquor Interest" in Baptist sermons of a previous generation.

All of which raises the fundamental problem of numbers. Reading the Episcopal press suggests that the average church member is a strong feminist, believes in homosexual marriage, and wants the church to direct its primary efforts to fighting racism and saving the environment. Unfortunately, the pews are full of unenlightened individuals with more traditionally defined religious concerns. In 1991, a poll by *The Living Church* found overwhelming (80-90 percent) opposition among practicing Episcopalians to most aspects of the radical agenda, especially to ordaining noncelibate homosexuals or to consecrating homosexual marriages.

The further the leadership pushes, the more it is likely to encourage desertions that will hasten the collapse begun in the 1960's. *Trahisson des clercs*, indeed. Within two decades, the Episcopal Church is likely to be an ideologically impeccable group devoted to whatever progressive causes happen to be major fads at the time. It may also have a membership about equal to that of the Amish, and with as much influence on secular affairs. Unless matters change very soon, a once-great American church will become a fringe sect, vulnerable to endless schisms over niceties of political orthodoxy. The worst thing is that many of the activists causing this disaster would probably applaud this drift to sectarian irrelevance.



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## Progress

by Peter Russell

Venice,  
24th November 1965

Walk at large into the great sea  
Where the dolphin leaps and the sea-pig plays on the tide,  
Where the still moon at midnight lights a myriad steps  
Azure and jet and phosphorescent up to the sky,  
And the weightless sandolo glides silent all night . . .

Romantic image of lovers drifting alone  
Thrown back in the sea like a poisonous fish

While the Poet goes on his endless alarming journey  
Moonbeam by moonbeam sphere by concentric sphere  
Into the cosmic rain of the infinite mind

Leaving behind the drag of atomic reactors  
And the lame excursus of mathematics

Building a model of all elliptical space  
House by house in the hollow cave of his head

Like a young rhetor learning a maiden speech  
Like an old philosopher visiting scenes of his youth

For the last time before the guards come in  
And the cruel rope is stretched round Boethius' head.