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Review of 'Anglicanism: Confidence, Commitment & Communion' by Martyn Percy

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Within our rapidly changing culture is there any point to the Anglican Church? In a world that’s variously described as post-Christian, post-secular and post-atheist, there are times when Anglicanism seems as relevant as classical expressions of the secularization thesis. With religion and spirituality evolving and mutating into a myriad different forms surely there’s no future for such an institution? With his exploration of this situation Martyn Percy writes from of his experience as Principal of Ripon College, Cuddesdon, which is situated outside Oxford and educates clergy for the Church of England and other denominations. However, Percy’s book is not written out of a rural haven. He has a knowledgeable and engaged view of the worldwide Anglican Communion which is reflected in his analysis of developments during the past decade.

This volume is a revised collection of twelve essays published at various times during Percy’s ten years at Ripon College, with a newly written introduction and conclusion. This has advantages and disadvantages – there is a certain amount of repetition but it also allows us to see how his thinking has adapted over time in response to specific developments. The essays are arranged under three headings. The first four chapters examine current challenges of ministerial education, in particular different images for church ministry; the second batch explores the
changing context of ministry in terms of the parish church, generational changes, establishment and ‘Fresh Expressions’; the third heading looks at the bigger picture of the Anglican Communion in the light of recent Lambeth Conferences, the Windsor Report and proposed covenant. Percy brings a deft touch, humour and insight to what can be a complex, even convoluted, subject.

In dealing with the multifaceted nature of the Anglican Church, one striking and effective approach employed by Percy is to use a wide range of metaphors and analogies. In addition to some well-known biblical images (vine, body, bread), he perceives it to be like a flock of starlings, a thesaurus, singing in unison, an orchestra, a big tent, painting, bricolage, climatic conditions, rope and even, at times, Northern Ireland. It is tempting to recall the adage “All metaphors are wrong, some are useful” and, in this respect, all of Percy’s images provide insights into the difficult challenge of bringing some sense of order to the innate pluralism and anarchy of Anglicanism.

Throughout this book Percy is making a case for what might be called ‘classical’ Anglicanism, characterised by breadth of vision, warmth of welcome and accommodation to theological diversity. However, this is not a book to make readers feel comfortable and at ease. He is sharply critical of a constant chasing after new fads at the expense of old wisdom, illustrated by Fresh Expressions’ willingness to abandon the original title ‘Fresh Expressions of being church’. For Percy, pandering to niche spirituality is not the way forward and in taking this line he stands against a significant part of the Anglican Communion which sees such experiments as the best hope for the future.
Percy concludes with some reflections upon the nature of leadership within Anglicanism. His model is that of ‘husbandry’ – nurturing a body, propagating an organism, growing an institution – and the model of leadership he advocates is one that is rooted in blessing, which allows an organic system to flourish. In this respect he concludes that leaders across all churches need three characteristics: (i) an ability to hold the ‘thick traffic’ of ecclesial discourse; (ii) an understanding of the Church’s inherent complexity; but without losing (iii) the skill of reaching out and speaking to the contemporary culture. His closing metaphor for Church leadership is an ability to read the tides and, by implication, steer the ship.

There is much in these chapters to challenge current notions of what Anglicanism is and where it should be going. Percy combines insights from several disciplines to map the ocean upon which the Anglican ship is sailing and to chart a far-sighted course. Some will challenge the direction he is plotting, others will disagree over some specifics (e.g. I remained unconvinced over his analysis of establishment) but still there is much to be gained by engaging with these well-informed studies of the present trajectory of the Anglican Church.

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