



Beating the bounds in states of unfeeling

The Very Revd Professor Martyn Percy, Dean of Christ Church, Oxford

Vice President of Modern Church

In 2014, my wife Emma and I were delighted to receive an invitation to write an introduction for the *NRSV Wedding Gift Bible*. We wrote some ideas down separately, drafted some copy, and then worked together to make a single text. (I reluctantly redacted my mantra: scriptures are like sausages - delicious, wholesome and nourishing - but you really don't want to see how they're actually made). We posted off the agreed text, and thought little more of it.

I included a note to the publisher with the final text. I said that in the spirit of the *NRSV* translation, we had taken care to avoid using gendered pronouns for God, where possible. And we had also done the same for the individuals who were getting married. So you could give this bible to any couple. Yes, any. So two women, or two men, could receive the gift of Holy Scripture to celebrate their wedding. The bible is for everyone, after all.

Since then, there has been no negativity; not even a scintilla. Because back then in 2014, it was reasonable to suppose society was progressive and inclusive, and broadly tolerant. And becoming more so. Yet as we know, subsequent events have challenged these rather comfortable, even smug assumptions.

The advent of Brexit and the election of president Trump in 2016 represent particularly egregious episodes in a troublesome and testing epoch of human history. Looking back, we can perhaps see that the global financial crisis of 2007-8 provided some of the seeds for this. The aftermath of the crisis hit our poorest hardest; the many took the hit on behalf of the few; the population as a whole bore the burdens created by a greedy minority. The reforms in welfare and income support penalised women particularly harshly.

Our culture has moved, quite suddenly, from being progressive to one that is wary and reactive. We live in an age of austerity, alienation and anxiety. As Pankaj Mishra's book has recently argued, *Age of Anger: A History of the*

Present (2017), we are now riddled with paranoid hatreds in our close-knit world; plagued with nativism, vengeful nationalism, misogyny and racism. There are undertones of resurgent gynophobia and homophobia too, coupled to societies that are susceptible to assertive, charismatic demagogues who capitalise on social demoralisation and nationalistic nostalgia. So, no wonder some compare our present to the Europe of the 1930s.

And even in the church, we seem to have been travelling backwards. Yes, we do now have women bishops. But around a third of dioceses have no ex officio women on their senior staff. Very few women under the age of forty are now coming forward with vocations. The Church of England, of course, had already argued for its own exemption from the 2010 Equality Act, making it lawful to continue practicing its own forms of discrimination in spheres such as gender and sexuality. We reap what we sow.

Like many, I was disheartened, though not especially surprised, by the new report from the House of Bishops, *Marriage and Same-Sex Relations After the Shared Conversations*. The content of the report was extremely poor, and almost devoid of theology, as we have come to expect from bishops these days. But arguably, the tone of the rhetoric was even more problematic. Because we learnt far too much about how tortured the authors all felt in this debate; and much of their own agonising and pain. But we learnt virtually nothing of the pain of the people - the very subjects of the report - that the church continues to torture and to oppress.

Therapists have a name for this behaviour: projective identification. It is the means by which one makes one feelings or pain known, by acting in such a way as to cause the other person to feel precisely what the projector is feeling. It is often a defence mechanism, and is frequently a form of communication. Thus, institutions and societies that cannot resolve their inner tensions, chaos or confusion, and so feel powerless, will frequently impose that impotence on to other groups. Shame, or perhaps rage, and other feelings that groups believe should be repressed, can be transferred to others too.

We see something of this in the recent report from the House of Bishops on same-sex relations. The significant changes in contemporary culture in respect of gender and sexuality have left the bishops feeling confused and powerless.

The acerbic inner tensions within the church on these issues - complex debates on humanity, sexuality and authority - leave them feeling wary and impotent. They project their powerlessness on to the very groups who most need compassion and liberation.

So those who are in same-sex relationships are made to feel defensive, disempowered and marginalised. It is ironic - with a sour, somewhat bitter aftertaste - that the House of Bishops could neither see or predicatively feel the impact of publishing their report on Holocaust Memorial Day (27th January). Here is a day that remembers an awful silencing, built upon years of discrimination and oppression.

This is all pretty strange, when you think about it. Jesus never talked about sex. Never. Yet the church never stops. Never. But it can't seem to really *listen*. Jesus did, at least, have some 'shared conversations'. The woman caught in adultery (forgiven; and the other guilty party not mentioned, incidentally - John 8: 1-11) and the Samaritan woman who had been married many times (John 4: 1-42): and both are treated with kindness and compassion.

So if we take our cue from Jesus, then what are we to make of the recent revelations relating to Jonathan Smyth QC, the former chairman of the Iwerne Minister Camps? The acutely painful and sordid elements of this case do not need reprising in detail here. Not least, out of respect for the many victims, and their wellbeing. In writing this piece, I am acutely conscious of the specific pain and torment suffered by those abused. And first and foremost, the care, concern and compassion of the church belong to them. There can be no evading of responsibility by the church here, either.

This, of course, means that trying to understand the tragedy is just as important, if history is not to repeat itself. And this is, essentially, what the rest of this short essay is directed towards. And here, I want to highlight some connections between the Smyth case and some wider issues in the church, already touched on here. So in outline, Jonathan Smyth QC, a prominent Conservative Evangelical, used his position as a leader at Iwerne Camps to groom young boys, and then take them away to ritually beat them. The justification for this behaviour was that it was for the boys' own good. It was a

kind a spiritual discipline to mortify the flesh, and especially to combat the potential evil of masturbation.

If you have ever encountered middle-upper-class English conservative Evangelicalism, none of this is especially surprising. The Iwerne Camps were founded by Eric John Hewitson Nash (1898-1982), also known as 'Basher Nash', or just 'Bash'. These 'Bash Camps', as they became known, specifically targeted boys at elite public schools. These camps were classist and elitist. Attendance was by invitation only, and the camps used their own military terminology. Nash was known as 'commandant', and other leaders were 'officers'.

As Giles Fraser has recently pointed out (*The Guardian*, 'Opinion', 6th February 2017, p. 24), these camps, much like conservative Evangelicalism more generally, promoted a kind of 'Christian manliness' that was rooted in the elite English public school system. In such environments, corporal punishment was normal - and bullying too. Moreover, putting up with it might 'make a man of you'. Any promotion of this 'manliness' was necessarily against homosexuality; and the same worldview also contains certain assumptions about the roles and identities of women. The elevation of heroic, manly Christianity also tended to make idols out of a few, and followers out of many.

As H. Richard Niebuhr pointed out in *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (1929), denominations like to think of themselves as different and distinctive on the basis of their doctrine, and perhaps their liturgical style. But as Niebuhr showed almost a century ago, the differences are usually rooted in ethnicity and class, and socio-economic factors. Denominations appeal to their confessional differences; but in fact, the real differences between denominations are usually social. Here is not the place to say much more about the class-based origins of Iwerne Camps, save only to note their obvious presence and significant bearing on the dynamics being discussed here.

To be clear, the sadomasochistic abuse that was recently uncovered did not take place at the camps, but rather off-site in the privacy of the intense mentoring cells and personal relationships that Iwerne Camps carefully cultivated among its young men. Iwerne Camps were rooted in Edwardian 'muscular Christianity' and valued 'a stiff upper lip'. The conservative Evangelicalism that grew out of these camps had always been fearful of and

hostile towards the realm of feelings and emotions. The excessive body-emotion control instilled within the individuals masqueraded as a spiritual discipline.

But in reality, it was the leaders working out their own ambivalences and hostilities towards their own bodies and desires. And such ambivalence was also directed against women, these camps being riddled with overt sexism. Moreover, the gendered consequences for men who were schooled - or one should perhaps say 'groomed' in such camps - was, of course, not to be ultimately carried by the attendees. Their schooling re-shaped their outer world, through their elevation of role models who embodied 'manly' Christian identity, and who went on to conquer and rule in other contexts.

Just as Mary Douglas argued in *Purity and Danger* (1966), the control and subjugation of the individual's body becomes an extended project that manages the boundaries between purity and pollution, dirt and cleanliness - and extends in to wider society. Women can be especially at risk here, as they are generally regarded as emotional and intrinsically unpredictable 'creatures' within conservative Evangelicalism. Ultra-conservative Evangelical churches therefore take special measures to control and segregate gender roles and responsibilities very, very carefully. The women can't be allowed to teach. They can serve and minister, but they can't hold any authority. They can be girls, wives, mothers, sisters, aunties, grannies, daughters; and, yes, 'ladies'. They just cannot usually be strong, independently-minded *women*.

Those women who somehow did continue to persist in these churches with very strong vocations to ministry were usually advised to go abroad - as 'missionaries'. Or told that they could be 'deacons' - on 'complementarian' grounds ('equal, but different' - so not able to lead or to hold any kind of authority). As one woman, with a strong vocation to ordination that I know from this world was told, 'we can pray for you and support you if you are a missionary abroad - but we obviously can't countenance you being a clergywoman here'. The 'doctrine' of 'complementarianism' - so beloved of conservative Evangelicals (and only recently invented), has more of an *Alice-in-Wonderland* feel to it than any scriptural basis. It legitimizes socio-psychological behaviour patterns. The 'doctrine' is a retrospective theological gloss that validates gender discrimination, all under the guise of 'difference'.

Its basic and unreconstructed essentialism is little more than a white male bid to retain heterogeneity and power. (The Church of England now legitimises this with a bishop especially appointed specifically to care for the congregations that want to continue investing in this worldview. This is all done in the name of 'mutual flourishing' and diversity).

Some Evangelicals may protest at this point. But one must remember the nickname given to the 'female helpers' at 'Bash Camps': 'Bunnies'. They were not allowed to teach or lead bible studies for impressionable boys, of course. 'Bunnies' were only there to help and support. It is hard to know if this nickname was meant to be mildly Heffner-esque in orientation, or to communicate a kind of warped juvenility - actual bunnies being cuddly and comforting. I imagine the ambivalence here is revealing, with the nickname pointing both ways: sexual objectification (but as at Heffner's clubs, a 'no-touching, no-dating' policy) on the one hand; and childhood regression with a comforting passive pet on the other.

The projective identification is thus established. Those men who most fear their relationship with their own bodies, and the bodies of women (that is to say, their ambivalence, the need to repress their own desires, often with associated feelings of shame, and sometimes of disgust; and quite often with some seeking to repress an inchoate homosexuality) simply transfer that to other groups, and attempt to make them feel as they do. Afraid of their own emotions and bodies, they also project this on to any threat to 'Edwardian Christian manliness' - with women and gays especially vulnerable at this point. The boundary being drawn in such behaviour patterns also has a name: 'normality'. White upper-middle-class heterosexual men are simply 'normal'. Some of these men are single or celibate, 'for the sake of the kingdom'. Others are married with children. But as a tribe, they are *the* 'normal' ones.

Cherished conservative Evangelical doctrine flows from the family dynamics locked into this social-psychological pattern. So do ecclesial patterns of practice, such as placing a premium value on redemptive violence. An atonement theory that posits an angry God who demands the sacrifice of his only cherished and innocent son, in order to abate the all-consuming-wrath of a (distant) father being visited upon the world, will invariably lead to more victims. The more the sense of sin grows in the individual or group, the greater

the proportion of self-sacrifice required. And it can be projected. It goes without saying, that others can be sacrificed in this equation - as expendable collateral. Indeed, by punishing them, you may actually be saving them. Smyth acted this out in a warped and grotesque way, even if he never consciously realised it. 'Bash Camps' served as an ideal context for grooming boys into this worldview.

It is interesting to note, therefore, that when the complaints against Jonathan Smyth QC could no longer be denied, he was quickly and quietly packed off abroad - to Africa. It is exactly the same place that women in conservative Evangelical churches, and who held strong vocations for ordained Christian ministry, were also advised to go. The heterogeneity of English-Edwardian 'muscular Christianity' therefore continues to secure its identity and its prided purity-of-place; the home remains undisturbed. The classist, racist and sexist values become pillars on which this culture rests, and are justified on the basis that 'reaching the elite' is the ultimate missional goal: 'evangelising the few, who can reach the many', is how Bash expressed it. So it gains its preeminent value in evangelism, and in turn is theologically legitimised. Women with voices and minds of their own are despatched abroad with the deviants. If one were to protest at such marginalisation rooted in gender constructs, one would simply be labelled as a heretic (i.e., 'unsound').

Is Smyth's behaviour really a case of projective identification? It would seem so. Smyth had worked with the campaigner Mary Whitehouse, and he was the QC who worked so hard with her to 'clean up' what they saw as the 'moral filth' of the post-1960's legacy in Britain. In 1980, Howard Brenton's play, *Romans in Britain* saw Whitehouse bring a private prosecution for 'gross indecency'. Yes, there was a staged scene of male-on-male rape as part of the play. But you can see these 'scenes' in ancient Roman carved stone friezes dating from the time of Julius Caesar, that celebrated the conquest of Britain in AD 43. The play was actually about the abuse of power and oppressive imperialism, and not about homosexual rape. Smyth and Whitehouse had brought an earlier successful legal case against *Gay News* in 1977, resulting in prosecution for blasphemy for the publisher.

But we can now see that Smyth's energies were probably just the outward working of his inner torment and self-loathing. The beaten boys that he picked

off from the 'Bash Camps' were tragic collateral damage. However, according to a former housemaster from one of the schools that sent boys on Iwerne Camps, Smyth 'only picked the good looking ones to mentor and beat' (*Channel Four* interview, 02/02/17). His repressed sexual desires needed to be admonished. Smyth was administering the very punishments to the boys that he felt he needed himself. So, what of the institutional projective identification? The leaders of our institutions do not use others merely as a hook to hang their projections on. They strive to find in the other, or to induce the other to become, the very embodiment of that projection. Thus, women in the church have experienced indifferent procrastination and discrimination for decades. All of this is recast under the guise of 'we need more time to reflect' (on gender, and sexuality) - which is merely a coded way of saying 'we don't know what to think of you as *people*; you are not like *us*, and we are still resolving our issues of ambivalence, shame and confusion *in ourselves* on these issues'.

Thus, the silencing of subjectivity continues. The so-called 'shared conversations' did not really *listen* to the experiences of LGBTQ people at all. They did not tune in to the joy, pain, tears, laughter and humanity of our people. No. Rather, the document is yet another platform - institutional projective identification - for the bishops to tell us how tormented *they* feel, and invite us all to participate in and re-experience their own agonising. Having a semi-conscious sense of their own impotence, they then needed to hand this on; otherwise they can't continue to hold on to their power and authority. So they projected their impotence and torment on to the very groups they were supposed be listening to so deeply.

So what could theology do here? One way forward is to tease out the differences between empathy, sympathy and compassion. And here I draw on the work of Nel Noddings (*Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*, 1984; and *Educating Moral People*, 2002. See also Emma Percy, *Mothering as a Metaphor for Ministry*, 2014). Empathy, simply put, is registering that the person you are listening and attending to may have some similar feelings or experiences to your own. So here, you could say 'I recognise this in you, because I recognise it in myself'. In that regard, for example, any 'empathy' for a bereaved woman who has lost her child will be something of a

sham, unless the listener really has had a similar bereavement. If they have not, they cannot empathise. The whole notion of 'shared conversations' needs to at least grasp this basic point. You can only empathise with a person who has shared at least part of your experience. What do the bishops know of alienation, shaming, marginalisation and oppression? Not much, I am guessing.

Then there is sympathy. The concept of sympathy is richer, and contains the sense that feeling is something that can be truly shared. The word comes from the Greek: *syn*, meaning 'together', and *pathos* which means 'feeling'; hence the idea of 'fellow-feeling'. It goes without saying, of course, that if institutional or individual projective identification is fully operational, a 'shared conversation' is impossible. Those in power will deny their own feelings, project them on to others, and then pathologise them. Sympathy, deeply rooted in any theological dialogue, will be a real and rich exploration of 'all desires known... no secrets hidden'. It will be risky stuff, with all parties making themselves profoundly vulnerable, each to the other. The lack of sympathy, and indeed the near total 'empathy deficit' in the Bishops' *Shared Conversations* report, is notable and lamentable at precisely this juncture.

Then finally, there is compassion. This is, of course, what God in Christ has for all creation. The incarnation and cross represent the pre-eminent passion; it is the fullest demonstration of God's *com*-passion for humanity. Compassion is what motivates people to go out of their way to aid others who carry physical, spiritual or emotional hurts, pains and wounds.

Compassion is usually seen as having an emotional dimension. But, in fact, it is more often expressed in systemic and structural modes, being rooted in concepts of fairness, justice, mutual interdependence and human flourishing. Compassion is the act of St. Martin of Tours with the beggar at the gate, and cutting his cloak in two. It is an act of mercy; a work of charity; an instinct, but also calculated. It is rooted in the heart, of course; but also rational in nature; an application understood as an activity based on sound judgment. Jesus' passion, and his *com*-passion, are both calculated and matters of the heart. They are invariably risky prophetic acts that offend norms and sensibilities (the apparently moral and religious ones of his day), in order to reach out to people, and show others just how *much* God loves the poor, lame, outcast, demonised, sinner and marginalised.

So, compassion actually has a *quantitative* dimension. The compassion of an individual can have a property or character to it, such as depth, vigour, determination or altruism. The etymology of the term 'compassion' comes from the Latin word, meaning 'co-suffering'. So to have com-passion is to suffer alongside, and so very deeply with, the very ones we seek to help. We enter into their experience. Just as Christ, in his com-passion, fully entered into our flesh; he became like us. And ultimately experienced the same scorn and hatred in his flesh that had been inflicted upon so many of the victims he had healed, loved and nurtured. Christ's incarnation and our redemption are rooted in God's passion for us; and his com-passion poured into the one who loved us enough to fully abide with us: Christ, no less.

Compassion, then, is much, much more involved than any mere empathy. And the one who has compassion, commonly, has an active desire to alleviate the suffering of another. Yes, to actually save and free them. Sometimes from sin. But quite often from those alienating, visceral forces of hatred that oppress and marginalise people - and to which Jesus was (and is) so openly opposed.

Alas, the *Shared Conversations* report from the House of Bishops got nowhere near this for the LGBTQ community. The projective identification of those in power did not even manage empathy, let alone sympathy. And somewhere in this, there is the ongoing protection of a white, male heterogeneity that sees itself as 'normal', and the experience and pain of everyone else as merely 'other'. What is needed, then, is some revolutionary emotional and ecclesial intelligence to rectify this. Otherwise, the Church of England will continue to be a place that is full of 'states of unfeeling'. It won't even be able to enter into the experience of women, let alone our LGBTQ sisters and brothers, who are part of the church.

As Harvey Cox noted in *On Not Leaving it to the Snake* (1968), the first and original sin is not disobedience. It is, rather, indifference. We can no longer ignore the pain and alienation that others in the church experience - and especially when this is *because* of the church. Indifference is pitiful, and it is the enemy of compassion. Our age may well be one of anger, austerity and anxiety. But it is in such times that the church needs to recover its primary calling and roots. Rooted, indeed, in the one who was com-passionate with us, and in Christ, continues to call us to full, loving humanity, one with another.

So I return to where I started: with the *NRSV Wedding Gift Bible*. Why did we write the introduction in the way that we did? It was not, let me reassure you, a nod to some kind of misplaced political correctness. It was simple act of compassion: a calculated and heartfelt act that recognised the men and women we know personally - who have married, or are in civil partnerships - and whose love for each other is something that spills over into the lives of others and enriches society. Just like any other marriage. We have been to blessings of unions, and to marriages, and participated in these with prayers and preaching. We simply wanted to recognise, affirm and celebrate the intrinsic *goodness* of such relationships, and the presence of Christ in such love, and the delight of God in such unions.

Our beloved Church of England is, at present, in a *state of unfeeling*. To the pain of others within its own body and polity, it is indifferent and impotent. Its leaders project their inner angst and tension on to the very groups that look to them for love, mercy and compassion. The result is the slow procrastination and the torturing alienation of people who are only looking for their love, lives and very being to be fully affirmed and embraced. Yet the church cannot seem to do this.

So are there limits to this compassion? For the church, alas yes; but not for Christ. Even for Jonathan Smyth QC, there is compassion. Something made him the man that he became - turning this poor tortured man into a sado-masochistic torturer. We know that Christ proclaimed a bountiful forgiveness for the demonised and oppressed. We know already that Jesus aches compassionately with all the victims who were brutalised at the hands of Smyth. But we forget too easily that Jesus also forgave his torturers and tormentors: 'Father, forgive them - they know not what they do' (Luke 23: 24) are some of his final words on the cross.

It is this cross of Christ that absorbs our hatreds, and our violence towards one another. It is in this place that the compassion of God speaks at its fullest. This is where we see that Christ looks at us with pity, and not with blame. It is perhaps in such a place that *Shared Conversations* might begin again: all of us recognising that Christ has, amazingly, saved us, in spite of ourselves. And no matter what we want to project on to God, or on to one another, all Christ does with this is to look back at us. Not with hatred, or with judgement - but

with a love that is wider than the measure of our minds, and deeper than the depths of our hearts. God is full of love for all humanity, not just a chosen few. We cannot earn it for ourselves, nor indeed deprive or ration it out to others. That's the amazing thing about grace: it is free and abundant. Future shared conversations could begin in such places, and with such grace.

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