

A Betrayal of Trust

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If anyone needed any convincing about the extent to which secularism has eaten away at the vitals of the Church of England and the need for alternative episcopal oversight in England itself, the debate last Tuesday (10th February) in the House of Lords on the government's Gender Recognition Bill would have given them all the evidence they required.

This piece of legislation is in effect a transsexual's rights bill. If it becomes law in its present form, it will be possible for a person to change their legal gender and be issued with a replacement birth certificate, even if no gender reassignment surgery has taken place. Clergy would have no right to know a person's true sex and could therefore perform a marriage service for two people, unaware that they are of the same biological sex. And if a clergyman were to disclose the person's original and natural gender, even to another cleric, he would risk a fine of £5,000. The bill is also a serious threat to religious freedom because it gives a legal platform for hostile individuals seeking to impose secular practices on the church.

To practice the basic Christian teaching that gender is God-given and determined at conception and that marriage is between one man and one woman could therefore lead to a criminal record. There has already been an attempt to sue a church in South Wales which refused to allow a male transsexual to use the women's toilets and attend a women's prayer meeting and such action would be much more difficult to resist under this legislation.

In order to protect the churches, Baroness O'Cathain introduced an amendment to the bill which sought similar exemptions to those already given to sporting bodies, but the tragedy of the contemporary Church of England was illustrated by the fact that the opposition to the amendment was led by one of the Church's own Bishops, Dr Peter Selby, the Bishop of Worcester. Given Peter Selby's track record of strong support for the gay/lesbian agenda this was predictable, but perhaps we have become desensitised to the horrible paradox this represents. A bishop, enjoying a privileged role in the British parliamentary system as a member of the House of Lords, uses that privilege not to guard the spiritual and moral life of church and nation, but betrays the trust his office entails to advocate corrosive secular values which are leading people into deeper and deeper moral confusion. It

was no surprise that Baroness Turner of Camden, Vice President of the British Humanist Association, spoke in support of the Bishop's argument.

And what was his argument? The Bishop of Worcester resides at Hartlebury Castle, an impressive establishment on the outskirts of the small village of Hartlebury near Kidderminster. He invited the peers to imagine him leading a celebration of the village church's patronal festival on the village green which was then spoilt by a mob who had spotted a transsexual present. According to the bishop, Baroness O'Cathain's amendment would have encouraged such behaviour. I imagine the residents of Hartlebury might well feel somewhat insulted by the bishop's mental experiment and it is in any case a gross distortion, echoing the equally spurious argument that we must accept homosexual lifestyles otherwise we are guilty of inciting hate. The reality is of course that the remote prospect of church members being involved in public disorder is a fanciful smokescreen which distracts from the all too real risk of hostile individuals seeking to sue churches on the basis of the infringement of alleged transsexual rights.

In the event, Baroness O'Cathain's amendment was lost by a mere five votes - 149 against, 144 for, those against including the Bishops of Manchester and Newcastle as well as Dr Selby, and so it was that bishops of the Church of England played a leading role in preventing the provision of vital protection for orthodox clergy and congregations. How much longer will bishops who claim to be shepherds of the Church of God, yet who behave like the wolves who 'distort the truth' (Acts 20:30) continue to be held in good standing by the rest of the Communion? This week's debate in the House of Lords may have seemed a mere sideshow compared to the Jeffrey John episode last year, but it is clear evidence that despite that apparent reversal for the revisionists, the Church of England is still in urgent need of being rescued from itself.

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