

Diocese of Chichester

BISHOP GEORGE BELL (1883-1958)

Bishop Bell's reputation has been severely damaged by allegations that he abused a child during the 1940s and 1950s. This 'fall from grace' eclipsed the good he had done—this account seeks to redress the balance.

I shall focus here on two areas of Bishop George Bell's work, that is, his sponsorship of the arts in a Christian context and his intervention in public debate with respect to the conduct of war. To this end, his mindset was entrenched in the Jewish prophetic tradition and the New Testament imagery of the Christian community in the belief that the Church is answerable to God for the integrity and justice of its prevailing culture.

In his book *Drama in the Cathedral*, Kenneth Pickering acknowledged Bell's role in promoting the history of the plays performed in Canterbury Cathedral during the nineteen twenties and thirties CE (Common Era). Indeed, it was Bell, as Dean of Canterbury, who invited John Masefield to write the mediaeval pastiche *The Coming of Christ* for performance in the Cathedral nave in 1928 and who commissioned music from Holst and design from Ricketts for this historic event. Masefield's text contained strong political ideas in some of the shepherd's speeches with reference to the Great War and the General Strike. However, Bell refused to censor the anti-war bias in the text and was clearly prepared to face the consequences of hostility towards him from the Archbishop and the Cathedral establishment in Canterbury. His moral courage is thus already evident. The later Canterbury plays evolved to include Martin Browne and TS Eliot which led to the formation in 1930CE of the Religious Drama Society with Bell as President. This led to him becoming a trail-blazer for the involvement of the Church in the culture of the day, both in the House of Lords and in the correspondence columns of the mainstream press.

In the process, Bell was to create routes into the establishment for those with no means of access. Indeed, unlike so many of his colleagues in the Church of England he recognised the clear nature of the threat posed by the Third Reich to the Christian tradition and most specifically to the Jewish people. Indeed, Bell's clarity on this threat was not only evident in the UK but also in the wider ecumenical community. In 1934CE, Bonhoeffer, who was at this time a pastor in the German church in Sydenham, wrote to Bell, who was then Bishop of Chichester, quoting a letter from a friend in Germany with respect to the crisis in the Church there. Bell responded as the voice of the European Christian conscience through his position in the Council for Life and Work, animating solidarity for a persecuted Christian minority in Germany.

It was the start of a long involvement for Bell across national boundaries. This was manifest in his maintaining pressure on the British Government for the protection of all victims of the Third Reich, for his practical support for famine relief in Europe in the early years of the war and in his consistent opposition to the bombing of German cities.

Hence Bell's involvement with art and culture was conducted within the confines of the established Church and in the belief in the interests of the nation that was a morally coherent society. The analogy with the prophet in ancient Israel acquires some force in that here is a voice that recalls the community to its basic self-image and self-understanding. This, of course, is in the assumption that the national community has a

myth about itself rather than just a commitment to its collective self-interest. So for Bell, as for any public moralist, what mattered about society was its commitment about what is good, interesting, life-giving for human beings in general and not just for society in isolation. This is never to reduce the particularities of a nation to moral generalities and so the specifics of a nation emerge in the history and heritage of creativity in a particular language and ethos. Part of the Church's responsibility to and for the nation at large is discharged by its readiness to nurture and support voices of questioning within the culture, voices that themselves challenge a society about what should be considered to be of worth and meaning. So then, Bell's engagement with the arts, whatever its limitation in retrospect, was emphatically in correlation with his later challenges to the moral self-image of Britain in a darkening Europe and a destructive war.

As Bell's understanding of the established Church was maturing, the church itself was going through a crisis of unprecedented severity. The year before Bell became a bishop, Parliament had rejected the Revised Prayer Book for a second time. Unlike some of his peers such as Hensley Henson, Bell did not abandon his commitment to the establishment. Indeed, in 1930CE, alongside William Temple, he joined a Commission on Church and State that was designed to sidetrack any thought of disestablishment. Rather, the idea was to reinforce a sense of establishment needed to be sharply distinguished from subjection to state authority. This was in contrast to both the Modernist and the Conservative Evangelicals who looked to the authority of the state to protect them from both superstition and church hierarchy. In short, and in direct opposition to Bell's belief, they denied that the Church had an inherent right, as an association or as a divine society, to establish its own doctrine. This of course, was the issue at the heart of the German Church struggle. In effect, Bell could not have spoken or acted as he did with respect to Germany if he had not been clear about the principles and limits of establishment in England. Bell's twofold concern with the arts and the political morality of government illustrates not the virtues of the Church embedded in its cultural environment but the essential importance of both transnational and theologically grounded interests in its life. For Bell, a Church that is rooted in the Incarnation is a reminder that God has spoken in a particular dialect and a particular body, and not in generalities or abstract principles. In speaking the languages of its environment it inevitably assumes that its Scriptures can be translated over and over again in order to address exchanges of cultural life and between societies.

However, Bell did not leave us with a simple answer as to how we should work within the establishment in England today. Rather, he retained a rare capacity to see the established Church's responsibility as related to those whose voices did not find an easy hearing in the centre of British life as normally conceived. Inevitably, this must mean a coherent awareness of the larger global context in which its national society lives and in the ultimate context of the Church's existence in the initiative of the transcendent God. As an 'insider' of the British establishment himself, he knew that if he failed to use his patronage and leverage for the voices that the establishment failed to hear then there was a serious moral issue that needed to be addressed. For this reason, Bell's voice deserves to be heard by all British Christians today.

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