

The Church of South India – Very Thoroughly

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The problem of South India is a real but rather mysterious entity floating around the novel *A Glass of Blessings* – from page 4 to page 257 in the Virago Classic printing. It hangs over some of the characters like a sword of Damocles, but despite Fr Thames saying right at the beginning ‘We are hoping to go *very* thoroughly into the South India business this autumn...’ nothing much seems to happen. As this is said on October 18th – St. Luke’s day, after a lunchtime service – one would expect the course to start fairly quickly. Our heroine, Wilmet, in her misguided wanting to see more of Piers Longridge, thinks such a course would be good for him, but she is deflated by her mother-in-law with the more realistic suggestion that they might both go to his Portuguese class, and that Wilmet herself might gain from the church course on her own – a good winter intellectual study. And this from a non-believer! Clearly the issue is of no importance to some people, but mysteriously vital for others, though we don’t know who they are at this time, or why it might be so important.

What was happening in 1948 to make this topic a reality for the characters involved ? Why was this a hot issue for the more catholic Anglicans of the day? It seems to have struck at the very identity of the national church, its powers and responsibilities. We have to go back in time to appreciate what this was about. The Catholic Revival within the Church of England in Britain during the reign of Queen Victoria, was a result of the Oxford Movement. This itself went back to views from the Stuart epoch often call High Church, themselves combating the Puritans and looking at their past. The champions who taught the divine basis of Church and State, the power of monarchy and the episcopate, were William Hooker, Lancelot Andrewes and William Laud. They emphasised the continuity of the Anglican Church with its pre-Reformation self, i.e. the continuation of the threefold order of Bishops, Priests and Deacons. This would take the form of direct laying on of hands, called the Apostolic Succession. It had stayed the same throughout the history of the *Ecclesia Anglicana* and going right back to the Apostles in the early Church. There was nothing at all deficient in Anglican Orders !

As a practical example of the changeability of Anglican theology, we will now sing three verses of *The Vicar of Bray*.

In good King Charles’s golden days,
When Loyalty no harm meant;
A Zealous High–Church man I was,
And so I gained Preferment.
Unto my Flock I daily Preach’d,
‘Kings are by God appointed,
And Damned are those who dare resist,
Or touch the Lord’s Anointed.’

Chorus

And this is law, I will maintain
Unto my Dying Day, Sir,
That whatsoever King may reign,
I will be the Vicar of Bray, Sir!

When Royal James possest the crown,
And popery grew in fashion;
The Penal Law I shouted down,
And read the Declaration:
The Church of Rome I found would fit
Full well my Constitution,
And I had been a Jesuit,
But for the Revolution.

Chorus

When William our Deliverer came,
To heal the Nation's Grievance,
I turn'd the Cat in Pan8 again,
And swore to him Allegiance:
Old Principles I did revoke,
Set conscience at a distance,
Passive Obedience is a Joke,
A Jest is non-resistance.

Chorus

You can look up the remaining three verses!

This was built on by the Oxford Movement following the decline in church life in the eighteenth century. On 14th July 1833 John Keble preached in the university pulpit on 'National Apostasy'. This saw the state had taken over the Church of England and was taking it in the wrong direction, especially over the proposed suppression of ten Irish bishoprics. John Henry Newman followed this up with 'Tracts for the Times'. Together with Pusey they attracted a lot of support, and naturally some antagonism. The *Book of Common Prayer*, traditional creeds, and centrality of the Eucharist/Holy Communion/Mass/Lord's Supper, brought about a deep theological change of emphasis from just Matins and Evensong as the main service attraction on a Sunday morning after an 8.00 am Holy Communion. The more puritanical clergy would preach up to four hours given half the chance by the local squire. Sunday worship could now become more interesting. Red letter or Holy Days were again seen as important during the week. This Church was Catholic and Reformed, and not too keen to call itself Protestant. The Church of England was the natural Reformed Catholic Church of the land, as a contrast to the Church of Rome, sometimes known rather patronizingly as the Italian Mission. I myself was brought up not to let Roman Catholics get away with simply calling themselves Catholics.

The influence of this movement was profound in its influence on theology, the liturgy and reordering and redecoration of church buildings, as the re-emphasis on the Eucharist as the main services of Sunday worship changed nearly all parishes whether they knew this or not. Church Music also had an enormous boost; *The English Hymnal* and *Hymns Ancient and Modern* later showed how far this influence spread and was a great change from Moody and Sankey type Revivalist music from the United States. Titles like *At the Feast of Belshazzar* and *Out of the shadows into the sunshine, throw out the lifeline*, went with easy swing-a-long tunes, being replaced by new more Eucharistic devotional hymns like *My Song is Love Unknown* and settings for the Holy Communion service. Even the word 'Mass' was used in many circles, sometimes also still called High Church rather than Anglo-Catholic. Many new Religious Communities were founded, i.e. monasteries and convents, some active, working in education, care for the poor and rescuing fallen women; whilst some were contemplative. A few were

mixed, combining a life of prayer, using the canonical offices, with social work with the deprived in our inner cities.

The ensuing liturgical movement, often part of the Gothic Revival in both art and building, meant that robed choirs became commonplace, as were processions with a cross or even a crucifix. Incense, vestments, and robed choirs became popular, and even oracular confession to a priest spread – much to the alarm of some. The latter had a wise saying with it: ‘All may, some should, none must’. The ritualists believed that all the senses were to be used in worship, and not just the mind. Beauty and awe became basic to parish worship, and this was particularly true of the mission of the church in inner city areas where poverty was rife. Gradually the *Book of Common Prayer* became a bit passé for some, as the study of the Medieval Sarum (Salisbury diocese) rite, seen as being the cream of English pre-reformation altar books, led to the appearance of the *English Missal* in 1912. Liturgical scholarship was increasingly popular. The Alcuin Club, specialising in this, published many works from the past and enriched the possibilities for Parish Worship.

For example:

Processions: A dissertation together with Practical Suggestions. (1932)

Consolidation: An address Delivered before the Annual Meeting of the English Church Union. (1897)

The Sacrament Reserved: A survey of the Practice of Reserving the Eucharist. (1917)

Raiding the past also meant that statues made their appearance again, with votive lights, and the Invocation of Saints became a popular devotion. For some people it was important that the roots of all this were thoroughly English rather than Roman, though this feeling was not encouraged by some whose objective was eventual rejoining the Church of Rome. Books of ‘rules’ about how all the ceremonial should go were used in many parishes.

In 1874 the Public Worship Regulation Act (repealed only in 1965) saw the state interfere with church liturgical practices. It stated that the rubrics or rules of the *Book of Common Prayer* must be followed, and that the latest accretions were not to be allowed. This showed just how political the issue of Church and State had become, and that Parliament was a battleground between the ritualists and those persuaded by the Evangelical Revival.

This was of course the sort of worship that Barbara Pym herself preferred, and which features so well in many of her novels as a cause of disagreement and tension between both clergy and laity. Some characters couldn’t wait to go ‘up the candle’ a bit, whilst others were rather worried about it, especially in the more rural areas, as in Rowena’s village, where the desire of the new vicar is to spice things up a bit is objected to even by those who don’t attend the church regularly. Fr Thames’ Church, St. Luke’s, with the richness of its liturgy appeals to Wilmet. With a host of keen servers, the keeping of Red Letter Days, wearing of birettas, use of incense, knowing when to genuflect etc etc it has its fair share of admirers. The use of the appellation Father instead of the more familiar Vicar was a change that offended many, though they still called the Forces’ chaplains ‘Padre’ with no sense of any problem of irony at all. You will find much enjoyment and learning more about this in our own publication, *No Soft Incense*, which is about the Church, to help you appreciate some of the finer details of all of this. The conflicts this wing of the church helped to create are still felt to this day.

My own childhood in Liverpool taught me all these things. When St. Faith’s, Great Crosby, my alma mater, was opened in 1900 as a Thanksgiving for the Revival of the Catholic Faith in the Church of England during the reign of Queen Victoria, members of the Orange Lodge, a somewhat belligerent group that was one part of the Irish nature of the city, came to try and violate the service, but not understanding anything about the liturgy left

during the creed, mistaking it for the Eucharistic Prayer! When going to visit my grandparents in another part of the city, we travelled on a tram which stopped outside St. Margaret's, Princes Road, famous for having their parish priest go to jail for ritual practices. With true scouse humour, the tram conductor called out 'All change for Rome' as he rang the bell. My own mother described the place as much more extreme than St. Faith's: 'It is so high, you need a ladder to get in!' Little did I know that I would become the parish priest there many years later, when I learned a great deal more about its exotic history of imprisonment and Episcopal ban which lasted for many years, diverting some of its legitimate income.

So called Anglo-Catholicism did create conflict, but a lot of this was with non Anglicans, often part of the Evangelical Alliance of 1846. Fr Bell Cox, the first vicar of St. Margaret's, or 'Princes Road' as it was often called, was actually persecuted by a non-Anglican, a Baptist, through the Public Worship Regulation Act mentioned earlier, though with the collusion of the diocesan Bishop. The Act began a new secular court presided over by Lord Penzance, and a few clergy were put under judgement by it. Some clergy refused to comply with its judgement or even turn up for trial as they believed it was not right for a secular court to deal with such matters. Fr Bell Cox was in this number. The subsequent Chancery trial at York, which was an ecclesiastical court, Fr. Bell Cox also ignored and he was eventually imprisoned in Walton Jail for contumacy, for refusing to comply with the original judgement from Lord Penzance. (1885/6)

The case was famous all over Europe, and was the last prosecution for ritual practices, such was the scandal. The conflicting work of the English Church Union (originally the Church of England Protection Society) and the Church Association over ritual was finally almost over. A Royal Commission in 1906 recognised the legitimacy of pluralism in worship. With customary wit, a fund was set up by the Church Union to provide vestments for any parish that wanted them, and they were known as Hakes Memorial Vestments – named after the Dr. Hakes who had started the prosecution. Fr. Bell Cox made a single statement on leaving Walton prison, having been freed from jail under writ of habeas corpus by his solicitor, who was the son the rabbi from the synagogue next door to St. Margaret's: 'Whilst my Christian brethren have been trying to put me into jail, it has taken my Jewish friend to get me out!' As a postscript to this, I was given a large oil painting of Fr. Bell Cox to hang in the vicarage. It was presented by the Athenaeum Club in Liverpool as both Bell Cox and Dr Hakes had been members and worked together for Liverpool Board Schools. I was delighted to learn that there was no place to which the portrait of Dr. Hakes could be donated.

As you may imagine, appeal to law was a considerable and vital part of this process. Justification by past law and interpretation of the rubrics in the *Book of Common Prayer* were very necessary if people were to defend themselves from ignorance, prejudice and, as above, prosecution. The Evangelical revival also had a great influence in the Church of England and had very opposing views especially when they thought people were being tainted by the Church of Rome which was still much feared by many stout Englishmen of a more protestant cast of mind than the more Roman-leaning Anglo-Catholics. Fear about difference and political power was serious. There was no talking about diversity as we do today, even if not taking it very seriously.

Contemporaneous with this was the vast spreading of the British Empire and the rise of Missionary Societies. The Church Missionary Society (CMS) with a strong emphasis on Evangelical principals, and The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG) and Universities Mission to Central Africa (UMCA) having a more Catholic outlook. All this was of course mixed up with capitalism, exploitation of people and physical resources. Medical Missions and schools were founded as part of this process. Intrepid Anglican Victorian women in particular were afraid of nothing in their efforts to take the faith, education and medicine to many parts of West and

Southern Africa and also help educate women in India through the Zenana Mission. The *Zenana* were the inner apartments of a house in which women of a Hindu or Muslim family lived very restricted lives. Agatha in *Some Tame Gazelle* gives to this mission.

Such is part of the background setting of Pym's religious preferences and background in her novels. But what about the Church of South India? You may well ask, why was it such a point of departure for some clergy and laity? It was simply because it brought into question the real catholicity of this new ecumenical conglomeration of existing churches – Church of South India, Burma and Ceylon (in the Anglican Communion) together with the British Methodist Church, Presbyterian and Congregational, the latter two already united in the South India United Church. All these Churches had been in India since the beginning of the 18th century and had their own missionary societies. The Anglican Diocese of Calcutta was founded in 1814 covering the whole Indian sub-continent, and for twelve years even Australia. Chaplains and missionaries had gone out there early on from the development of the East India Company, but in much greater force in the Victorian era.

Talks about co-operation and even unity had been going on since 1910 following the World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh. The scandal of disunity struck very early in parts of the Empire and it was a difficult thing to explain to any enquirers from other religions. It was a very real embarrassment and impediment to conversations let alone conversions. The Church of South India was supposed to be part of the solution to this scandal. The basis for union was Holy Scripture, the Apostles and Nicene Creeds, Two Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper and finally the Historic Episcopate. (The Apostolic Succession of Bishops and so on). The first three were really rather easy but the Episcopate was another matter. The latter was a very real stumbling block, since apart from the Anglicans, none of the others had a historic Episcopate. How this was to be got round was seen to be something of an evasion to many people. All clergy would be validly ordained or consecrated over a period of years. This form of getting round the problem was seen to be something of a deeply flawed compromise. Being in communion with this United Church was to many of Catholic persuasion a step too far, and the ensuing Orders would not be properly valid. Validity was a real mark of the authentic Catholic Church. This was not about smells and bells, using unbleached candles for requiems and wonderful vestments. This struck at the heart of being able to call oneself a Catholic.

Discussions had gone on for years, with the Conference of Tranquebar (now Taragambadi) in 1919. In 1927 Bishop Azariah became the first Indian bishop of the Anglican Communion, rather than a province of the C of E. This was enabled following an Act of Parliament – The Indian Church Act. The new Church was governed by its own Constitution, Canons and Rules. The union ceremony finally happened in 1947, a month after India received its independence, and was known as the South India United Church. The service was in Madras Cathedral, and it had taken 28 years of prayer and discussion for the process to be complete. There were fourteen dioceses, (but now twenty two with over five million members). At this point the problem became a reality rather than just a theological discussion point. At this point people had to make up their minds where they stood.

Such was the situation that both mystified and annoyed some of the C of E and made them question whether their loyalty was now at breaking point or not. So far as they were concerned they could no longer really count the new bishops and clergy as all having been properly and validly ordained as priests or consecrated as bishops, and they did not feel in communion with them as part of the Anglican Communion. Barbara fell out with her friend Bob Smith over this, but not permanently. I suspect that like many people, Barbara was more concerned about the liturgy itself in her definition of herself as a Catholic. Worship came first, when as a Wren she discovered St. Alban's, a church, that smelt of incense, had a statue of the Virgin Mary and votive lights, and the organ

was being played rather well. She promises herself she will go on Sunday to take away the depressed feeling that she had from worship she had been going to as part of being in the forces. On worshipping at St. Alban's she was no longer bored; she was engaged by the atmosphere. (28th July 1943 at Chatham.) Her usual descriptions of service religion tell us she was easily distracted and judged things mostly by the singing if she enjoyed it. Now she felt she had come home.

So, the Church of South India was a very hot topic, just as the ordination of women to the priesthood and consecration of women to the episcopate is with many today. The latter of course is still being worked out within the C of E as we speak, and there will not be a woman bishop until next year. This issue has been fought over in many parts of the Anglican Communion and has led to dioceses leaving, on top of parishes seeking alternative Episcopal oversight. Problems do tend to reoccur, not just with the catholic wing of the church but with the now powerful evangelical one as well. Men who cannot cope with having women in authority over them are amongst the keenest of fighters, and the two extreme wings of the Church have made strange bedfellows in the last few years. The National Synod had worked very hard to find a formula that just about satisfied all parties, with compromises that the vast majority of members could agree with.

What actually happens in *A Glass of Blessings*? How does Pym put all this background into the story of parish life? The hot topic of the opening pages rather fades out. No course has been forthcoming. It reappears in a conversation about an old college friend of Fr. Marius Ransome. Father Edwin Sainsbury, has agreed to take him in when he has to leave the Beamish household as old Mrs Beamish has died, and naturally he cannot stay there with only Mary Beamish living there. Edwin S has been writing to the *Church Times* about his doubts, seen as extreme by Father Thames, who is now concerned about his possible influence on Marius. Father Thames himself is obviously worried about what might happen:

Between ourselves, you know, I am not sure how long Father Sainsbury will be with us.... Before we know where we are we may have to be looking for another assistant priest. And you know how difficult they are to come by these days.

Wilmet wonders if the topic is now too hot to handle and that Fr Thames is really only concerned that half his congregation might go over to Rome if the discussion groups are finally started. Avoiding controversy is all important for him..

Mary Beamish, testing her vocation to the religious life at St. Hildelith's Convent, wonders if the discussion course has started, and later has letters from Marius telling her of his own doubts and questionings. 'I feel he really needs me in some way – my advice, of course.' It is striking that Pym has put Mary at St. Hildelith Convent – a branch house named after one of the most obscure Anglo-Saxon female saints. Like others of her ilk she was a princess in origin, highly educated in France and became a ruler over a double convent of men and women in Barking, following the more famous St. Ethelburga. Although Mary doesn't stay in conventual life, her patron has perhaps shown her some sense of her own power which is both a surprising and a confusing revelation to her. It also paves the way for her acceptance of his proposal of marriage later.

The truth finally comes out when Wilmet is reading her evening paper. The headline VICAR QUILTS ANGLICANS leaps out at her and she barely manages not to say something out loud to the other passengers with her on the train. The harsh reality of faith and belief have come to a head and Edwin Sainsbury has asked to be received into the Church of Rome. He is received at Westminster Cathedral, apparently less sinister than Farm Street (a Jesuit Church there doubly suspicious after we have read about it in *Excellent Women* – Mrs Bone: 'The

Jesuits got at my son, you know’) according to Marius who goes to meet him afterwards and they go out for egg and chips; banality after such drama. It is interesting that famous churches, like the aforementioned Princes Road, and the more local Margaret Street or Bourne Street are known not by their patron saint, but by the address! Apparently converts had been going over so thick and fast of late. The subject has died rather a pathetic death at St. Luke’s, and is seen as part of the journey some people make to the Church of Rome.

It is put into context again by Wilf Bason making his usual put down remark – this time about Father Ransome. His decision to get married to Mary Beamish, rejecting the celibacy of the clergy, is rather like his doubts about the Church of South India.. Obviously some people like things just as they are, with no change from their routine and taste in a very comfortable rut. The rather catty gossip takes place in the Cenerentola Coffee Bar. Wilf recounts overhearing the conversation between Fr Thames and Fr Ransome: ‘first it was the South India business and doubts about the validity of Anglican Orders, and now this. Oh it is too bad, too bad’. Wilmet realises all the mysteries of her own could have been sorted out long ago, as people whom she assumed were quite separate know each other in what is a trendy and quite gay place in both the old and new senses of the word. The coffee bar itself is seen as a rather dangerous new place of gathering, almost seditious.

The issue is still not over though. I am sure if Pym were writing now, she would have made reference to the Ordinariate. The last Pope, Benedict, decided, apparently without the approval of the Roman Catholic hierarchy in this country, to offer a special place for those in the Church of England who might want to leave over the issue of women bishops. A new welcoming section, called the Ordinariate of Our Lady of Walsingham, would allow people to join the Roman Church but retain their Anglican liturgy and so bring with them the riches of Anglican worship and spirituality. There was no great rush, but a few congregations and a group from one religious community, not to mention a few individual priests, did make this historic journey. Quite how many of the travellers knew much about Anglican liturgy is a moot question, as many of them used the Roman rite anyway. It is well worth looking at their website. Barbara would have loved to stick pins in a story about this with her usual delicacy. Hints of the new life would trickle in like the previous people and especially clergy who had ‘gone over’. One sharp contrast though would be the fact that married priests could keep their wives and still be priests. Only a very, very small number had previously been allowed this privilege.

The Church of South India may itself be a dead duck as an issue, but what was behind the controversy is still very much alive. Barbara would also doubtless enjoy having characters who had been Roman Catholic clergy, but who were now Anglican, having done the reverse journey. The good old C of E never makes a fuss about such priests, nor the numbers who ‘go over’ and then come back again. The psychological reasons that make such issues vital are still open questions. The need for rules and boundaries is essential for nearly everybody, no matter who they are or what the issues involved are. What makes us feel safe? What questions make us feel uneasy? How tight these boundaries have to be will be an endless variable from one individual to another, from one group to another. Barbara Pym poses these questions yet sees them as a part of life that doesn’t always get an acknowledgement let alone an answer. Some skate over them, and others are quite unaware. Many discussions about Church and other sections of society today when they are in conflict have and will still elicit that wonderful response, ‘Very Barbara Pym!’ The Church of South India is a good part of the plot as an agent of change, discussion, pain and finally sent to a timely death by being ignored by nearly everyone in *A Glass of Blessings*.