

# Less established

PETER SEDGWICK

Peter Webster

ARCHBISHOP MICHAEL RAMSEY  
The shape of the Church  
255pp. Ashgate. Paperback, £25 (US \$44.95).  
978 0 7546 6596 0

Robert Boak Slocum

THE ANGLICAN IMAGINATION  
Portraits and sketches of modern Anglican  
theologians  
177pp. Ashgate. £60 (US \$104.95).  
978 1 4724 4735 7

The subtitle of Peter Webster's fine book is a nod to his subject's most famous work, *The Gospel and the Catholic Church* (1936). Michael Ramsey's core argument was that Christianity is embodied in social form. It has a shape and a location. God's way of bringing healing and unity to the human race is first through a nation, then through the personification of a nation in Jesus Christ, and then through the Church, which embodies the character of that personification. Hence – so Christians believe – the Church has a certain shape, and the heart of Christianity is to bring gospel, Church and world into mutual interpretation.

Webster does not focus on Ramsey as theologian. There are already some fine reflections on his oeuvre in print, including those of Douglas Dales, and, most importantly, of Rowan Williams, one of Ramsey's successors as Archbishop of Canterbury, in *Anglican Identities* (2003). Nor is Webster seeking to update Owen Chadwick's magisterial *Michael Ramsey: A Life* (1990). The shadow of Chadwick, who died last July aged 99, hovers over Webster's book, but the author is wise not to try to repeat the earlier biography. Chadwick, a close confidant of Ramsey, captured his subject wonderfully, having previously chaired the Commission on Church and State that Ramsey established in the 1960s.

Webster provides two things that Chadwick's biography does not. First, he gives access to all the documents and letters that Chadwick saw, but did not publish. Many original writings of Ramsey are reproduced for the first time. Secondly, he shows the central issues facing Ramsey very clearly, and provides a sober and balanced judgement of Ramsey's considerable achievement forty years after he left office. Ramsey was translated from York to Canterbury in 1961, and served until 1974. There were both enormous opportunities and threats to the Church of England and the Anglican Communion during the period. The opportunities were mostly connected with the growth of the Communion to be a diverse family of self-governing Churches. There is an extraordinary picture of Ramsey on the cover of *Time* magazine on August 16, 1963, with the headline "The Anglican Communion: Worldly, Worldwide, Catholic and Protestant". Ramsey would have winced at the description of the Communion as worldly, but rejoiced at the rest. He saw the role of the archbishop as leading the Anglican Communion globally through influence and guidance, not – as the Vatican did – by executive fiat. Even more, the visit of Ramsey to Paul VI in 1966 was only the second encounter between an archbishop of Canterbury and a pope since the Reformation. The two goals of spiritual leadership of the Anglican Communion and ecumenical convergence were closely linked in Ramsey's mind. Ecumenism included the incorporation of what Ramsey called a Protestantism which was credally orthodox and sacramental. That included the Methodists. Ramsey fought hard, though in vain, to allow the Anglican-Methodist reunion scheme to succeed. In addition, Ramsey wished to carry through a full-scale liturgical revision, after the debacle of the 1928 Prayer Book which had failed to get a majority in Parliament, especially on the Eucharist. As part of this revision, Ramsey saw the need for a certain autonomy of the Church of England from Parliament in worship and doctrine, while keeping the Church established. The Chadwick commission recommended this solution. Ramsey was delighted when it won

parliamentary approval just as he left office.

The threats were twofold. On the one hand, the socially liberal trends of the 1960s could lead to overdue legislation on race relations and the death penalty, which Ramsey warmly welcomed. It could also lead to a much more unbuttoned attitude to personal relationships, however, and Ramsey feared the alliance of liberal Christian thinking and social permissiveness. He was no fan of Bishop John Robinson's liberal theology, and disliked intensely Robinson's bestselling *Honest to God* (1963). Secondly, a widespread decline in churchgoing meant that there had to be a loosening of the ties between Church and State. Webster is excellent in documenting how carefully Ramsey, no longer an academic theologian, steered a path through these treacherous waters. Did he succeed? Webster gives a careful verdict. Ramsey was the leader of a Church which became less and less established in nature, yet retained in its sense of mission a vocation to speak to the nation as a whole. Secondly, he symbolized the leadership of the Anglican Communion, as a body of Christians growing together in worship, prayer and mutual learning. It was a considerable achievement, and it is the embodiment of the vision in *The Gospel and the Catholic Church*, forty years before. As you read Webster, the debates and challenges become contemporary, and you wonder how the Archbishop's staff will swerve round the next pothole on the road. Not every crash was avoided.

Robert Boak Slocum's *The Anglican Imagination* is very different. It consists of portraits (Slocum's word) of theologians and church leaders. The author is an American theologian and the book is presumably aimed at the American market. There are sketches of nineteenth-century American bishops and theologians, such as James DeKoven, Jackson Kemper, William Porcher DuBose and Phillips Brooks; and of Charles Gore, the only English bishop-theologian to feature. There is then a collection of mid twentieth-century and contemporary theologians: Austin Farrer, William Stringfellow, John Macquarrie, John Polkinghorne and Marilyn McCord Adams.

Slocum's writing is vivid and direct. The book would serve as an introduction for undergraduates to the liberal Catholic heritage of the Episcopal Church in the United States – showing the strong Catholic and socially concerned heritage of that Church – and to some modern theologians. There is a certain unevenness in the pieces. The study of DeKoven, a high church

Victorian deeply involved with the American high church seminary Nashotah House, is largely descriptive of his romantic religion. The studies of Farrer and Macquarrie, on the other hand, are detailed descriptions of their theology, especially focusing on Farrer's concern with images in relation to revelation, and Macquarrie on ecclesiology. There is little critique of either theologian.

Missing is any comparison between these thinkers. There are clear parallels between DuBose's understanding of the discernment of truth, and Macquarrie's emphasis on openness to meaning and the infinite. Likewise, the emphases in DuBose and Gore would have been fertile areas to explore. Presumably Slocum introduces these sketches so that students can follow up the subjects for themselves.

So where is Anglicanism today? The Communion has survived the controversies over same-sex relationships so far, but the recent move by the Episcopal Church in the United States to have a gender-neutral marriage liturgy will put further stress on Anglican coherence. Other provinces will no doubt follow the Episcopal Church in the next few years, even if the option is for blessing rather than marriage. Many African and Asian provinces in the Communion are likely to resist this strongly. Ramsey's vision of a global Communion, both

Catholic and Protestant, seems increasingly under strain, despite Rowan Williams's attempts to use canon law to hold it together, and the strong leadership of Justin Welby. Ecumenism, too, has receded. We live now in an increasingly circumscribed world of liberals against conservatives, with denominational identity resisting attempts to find ecumenical answers. What does flourish in the much harsher world forty years after Ramsey's retirement is Anglican systematic theology.

Here Ramsey's vision of a theology that explores the nature of God through the narrative of the eucharist has borne rich fruit. The authors of an important recent book, *Imaginative Apologetics* (2011), may use contemporary philosophy in ways quite foreign to Ramsey, but the central concern is the same. Theology, apologetics and the Catholic tradition were central to Ramsey, and if the broader culture is far more suspicious of claims to authority and religious belief than in 1936, nevertheless the appeal to liturgy and the treasures of the tradition remains central. The contributors to *Imaginative Apologetics* include some of the most creative figures in English Anglicanism. Ramsey's other priority lay with witnessing to the nation. Here again, Ramsey's concerns with race relations, migration and Africa still have a contemporary feel. Peter Webster has brought his in some ways unworldly subject alive in a vivid and well-documented way. It is good to hear Ramsey's voice again. His vision of a reformed Catholicism lives on, despite everything.

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