

## **Striving for the soul of the Communion: It is not a World Cup football match**

Michael Poon

Ruth Gledhill's 10 June 2006 article on Archbishop John Chew is unfortunate. It reveals how ordinary British, even with the best intent, misunderstand the present crisis that faces the Anglican Communion.

To be sure, Ruth Gledhill is an accomplished journalist, a master with words. Just read:

This is of course not the World Cup, but the struggle over homosexuality that threatens to split the Anglican Communion.

The trophy at stake is the very soul of Anglicanism, with the losers destined to live out their ecclesiastical existence as an obscure sect.

The real axis . . . is more to do with the colonial style structure of the West coming up against the Chinese-style consensus politics of the East.

The tragedy of a football match is that one side has to lose. For the Church of England at least, victory can no longer be assumed to be on the side of the established order.

Yet words used in different contexts may impress differing images on the readers' mind. As I read through Gledhill's article, for a moment I thought she took the words from medieval polemics for a "pure" Christian Europe against the "Moors" and "Jews". How British football fans mix the sport with nationalism and religion of course does not help. I am afraid that Gledhill – with her best intent – miscommunicated rather than clarified. Her assessment revealed not so much the views of John Chew or the Global South, but of sad opinions and latent fears within the Church of England; a minority view, I hope.

The present issues have nothing to do with clashes of civilisation (Chinese versus the West). It has nothing to do with an enterprising pretender in Southeast Asia challenging the Church of England establishment, or with the non-western churches scheming for the demise of the West. I thought all along that we have the common good of the worldwide Communion in mind as we contend for the faith.

Fear not. You see, I would rather prefer Church of England to be colonial. British colonials and missionaries in the past, for all their failings, at least tried to understand the world. After all, they were career missionaries; they lived and died in foreign soil. They were idealists. Ordinary British and Americans today do not have such international exposure. They turn inward and increasingly privatise their faith. So they see the "other" from overseas as threatening.

The shift in outlook of the Communion from the 1980s to the 2000s is revealing. Gone is the confident appeal in the MISAG and MISSIO Reports to do away with structures for the sake of mission. We have moved from a visionary Decade of Evangelism to perhaps an inward-looking Decade of Theological Education. It seems

the British and American establishments suddenly realize that they have to deal with the problematic result of evangelism and are not sure what to do with the “new” Provinces from “other” lands. Will these new Christians be able to understand the “intellectually purified” faith? Will they challenge our set ways?

Let’s re-educate the South, why not? If this is what Britain has in mind, at least do a proper job. Their God has become too small; the horizons have become petty. My friend John Corrie’s TEAC book list for Communion is a case in point (See <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/teac/TEACbooklist.cfm>). It misses out what young churches need most; that is, an understanding of the high traditions in the Christian past. In their places, we find a bibliography for denominational studies. Such surely would appeal to materially rich Anglican Churches that live as tiny minorities around the world. The temptation is to privatize the faith. The Anglican Way has become simply an esoteric lifestyle for the elite.

Again gone is the ecumenical vision from the 1940s to the 1960s that Anglicans work for the unity of worldwide churches. Contrast the writings of Stephen Neill and Max Warren and suchlike with the present literature. Gone indeed were the days when theological and missionary giants once inspired “England’s green and pleasant Land”. Technocrats and administrators came at their heels to restructure the Communion at their whim without going through traditional processes. The Anglican Communion Office and the Anglican Communion website are re-engineering the ethos of the Communion. How can Provinces keep Canterbury in their Constitutions if ACO reinterprets the Canterbury office without authority? Peter Akinoka was surely right when he took the lead to revise his Provincial Constitution.

Gledhill rightly pointed out the soul of the Communion is at stake. Couldn’t it be that Anglicans in the non-Western world are recalling England of forgotten horizons of faith? Couldn’t that wrestling for the soul of England and of the Communion lead to a spiritual rebirth of the Church of England?

One final point: British and American Anglicans are our neighbours too. You ain’t heavy; you’re our sisters and brothers.

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