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Archbishops unite to condemn gay 'wedding'

By Matt Cresswell

WEDDING-STYLE services for homosexuals are against the Church's teaching, both Archbishops have said.

In an uncharacteristically defiant statement Dr Rowan Williams and Dr John Sentamu have said that clergy are not "at liberty simply to disregard" current church policy.

Their remarks follow a tide of controversy as the civil partnership of two gay priests was recently blessed at St Bartholomew's church central London.

The Rev Peter Cowell, a London chaplain and Westminster Abbey priest, and David Lord, a priest from New Zealand, engaged in a wedding-style service which has plunged the church into turmoil weeks before both Synod and the Lambeth Conference. The Bishop of London, Richard Chartres, has ordered the Archdeacon to investigate "what took place".

The Archbishops' statement read: "We have heard the reports of the recent service in St Bartholomew the Great with very great concern. We cannot comment on the specific circumstances because they are the subject of an investigation launched by the Bishop of London."

They continued: "On the general issue, however, the various reference points for the Church of England's approach to human sexuality (1987

Synod motion, 1991 Bishops' Statement: *Issues in Human Sexuality*, Lambeth motion 1:10, House of Bishops' 2005 statement on civil partnerships) are well known and remain current."

They added: "Those clergy who disagree with the Church's teaching are at liberty to seek to persuade others within the Church of the reasons why they believe, in the light of Scripture, tradition and reason that it should be changed. But they are not at liberty simply to disregard it."

But traditionalist groups are treating the service as the final straw for the Anglican Communion. The Rev Paul Dawson of the conservative evangelical group Reform said the gay blessing service had "brought to a head the issue of whether or not the Church of England intends to remain faithful to the Bible's revelation."

He said many clergy will have to seek alternative authority. "Those seeking to be true to the doctrine of the Church of England will necessarily have to realign themselves with those Anglicans, at home or abroad, who can affirm with integrity Canon A5." His comments come as hundreds of disillusioned evangelical clergy head to Jerusalem this Sunday for the newly formed GAFCON conference which many believe aims create a new theological centre.

Asked why he conducted the service the Rev

Martin Dudley, of St Bartholomew's, told the New Statesman: "I did so not to provoke the so-called traditionalists and to deliberately disregard the guidelines published by the English House of Bishops, not to defy the Bishop of London, whose sagacity I respect, or Archbishop Rowan, who I have known and admired

for 25 years, but because to respond in any other way would have been a negation of everything I believe, of everything that makes me who I am, as a man and as a priest."

However, gay and lesbian campaigners are said to be surprised by all the fuss. "The Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement (LGCM) has been supply-

ing statistics to journalists on gay blessings in church, many in London, for the past 30 plus years," said Richard Kirker, LGCM's Chief Executive.

Their former press officer, Martin Reynolds, put it more colourfully: "This is obviously just two toffs marrying each other in a toff's church and it has disturbed the toffs!"

New chair for Christian Aid



CHRISTIAN AID has announced a new Chair, Anne Owers, who will succeed the Bishop of Chelmsford, the Rt Rev John Gladwin, who is standing down after 10 years in the position.

Ms Owers, who will continue in her position as HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, said: "I am delighted to have been asked to succeed Bishop John Gladwin, though he will be a hard act to follow."

As a former director of JUSTICE, the law reform and human rights organization, Ms Owers received a CBE in 2000, recognising her human rights work.

She said: "I very much admire Christian Aid's combination of practical help and powerful advocacy, and look forward to working with the Board, the staff and the member churches to tackle poverty."

ENGLAND ON SUNDAY

The Paul Richardson Interview: Prof Keith Ward

Tackling the big questions

By Paul Richardson

"Evolution is one of the great theological arguments for God," Keith Ward told me when I interviewed him in Oxford about the book he has just published, *The Big Questions in Religion and Science*.

Although Ward has produced apologetic works in the past, this new book is not meant to be one of them. Written in response to an invitation from the Templeton Foundation, Ward sees it as a textbook, outlining the views of science and the world's religions on a range of vital topics. 'Textbook' however may not be the right term if it leads potential readers to expect a dry volume to be consulted rather than enjoyed. It is in fact a lively and accessible summary of issues many people, especially many young students, are talking about.

I begin the interview by raising Ward's reference to the 'God hypothesis'. 'Surely we can't commit our lives to a hypothesis?' I ask. "For me hypothesis is a good word," Ward replies, "it just means something you believe to be true. A hypothesis can be a well-established theory no one actually doubts but which it is still possible for someone to deny. In that sense God is obviously a hypothesis. It doesn't mean you are not personally certain about it. You can build your life on a hypothesis. To say the external world exists when you are not looking at it is a hypothesis."

We turn to evolution. In his book Ward seeks to distinguish between 'philosophical naturalism' (which rules God out completely as a cause) and 'methodological naturalism' (which simply says that we should not expect to be able to detect God's handiwork). Evidence for God's existence comes not from gaps in evolutionary explanation (as Intelligent Design teaches) but from the signs of purpose in an overall pattern leading to the emergence of conscious human life.

I throw at Ward a quote from Darwin that evolution made God seem 'careless, wasteful, indifferent, almost diabolical.' Does this undermine claims to see God's plan in natural evolution?

"This isn't about evolution," Ward replies. "This is about the

world. Looking at the natural world do you find it brutal and cruel, or elegant and awesome? The truth is it has elements of both. My claim that religion provides an interpretative framework is about the world as a whole.

"I actually think evolution helps you to understand how the random process of mutation will inevitably lead to competition and to predators. If you don't have evolution you have to conclude God made things this way because he wanted to — which is a horrifying thought. God is the creator of the evolutionary process. He didn't want the pain but it is an inevitable part of the process.

"People who don't believe in evolution have a harder time explaining pain and suffering in the natural world. You couldn't have a world with people like us in it, carbon-based material beings who have originated by processes which are partly random but which help bring about beauty and goodness, without pain and suffering. The process God has set up is aimed at beauty and goodness, but it has to pass through pain and suffering.

"For me as a Christian this can only be resolved if there is another life in which we can exist without evil and suffering."

Changing track, I raise the argument of Charles Birch, an Australian scientist and Christian layman, who believes that the evolution of human beings was an accident. Had the dinosaurs not become extinct human beings would not have been able to flourish. Doesn't this undermine claims to see a purpose in the emergence of conscious human beings able to appreciate the world? Maybe our existence is just a lucky fluke, the result of a fortunate throw of the dice.

"What is interesting," Ward observes, "is the presence of chance. There are some theological views that do not allow for elements of chance at all. But if we do not allow for chance we are back with the problem of God directly willing all the suffering and evil in the world.

"Actually I think dinosaurs were a blind alley in evolution because their brains are too small for their bodies. Conway Morris (a Cambridge biologist) argues not that human beings in their



Prof Keith Ward

existing shape were inevitable but that given the way the universe was set up sooner or later carbon-based intelligent life was going to exist. It did not have to be human and it did not have to exist on this planet. But some form of carbon-based life was inevitable somewhere in the universe.

"Perhaps in time human beings will actually be superseded. I have no worries about that. Humans are not the centre of everything. What is interesting is that there seems to be a progress towards intelligence and consciousness in the universe. God wants there to be persons but not necessarily human beings. That might shock some Christians but they'll just have to get used to it."

'Does science always set the agenda?' I ask. 'Can it over-rule theology or does theology have its independence?' "Science is absolutely sovereign in its own area," Ward maintains. "That is the area of the physically observable, testable, mathematically expressible features of reality. Whether human beings evolved is a scientific question. Science is sovereign over empirically testable facts. But those are not the only facts there are. God is not an empirically testable fact and acts of God are not empirically testable facts."

It may surprise some of his critics, but Ward sees no problem in affirming the possibility of miracles, arguing that scientists are not really interested in one-off exceptions to the rule or unique cases. "I think Christianity is about acts of God and our response to them and science has

nothing to say about that. Science is compatible with the existence of miracles and if there is a God I would expect there to be miracles."

One area where Ward clashes with some theologians, notably Tom Wright, is in his readiness to make use of the concept of the soul and even to talk about immortality. "Tom is right about the stress on the body in Christianity, Judaism and Islam," Ward concedes, "but I not happy with a purely materialistic account of human beings because it simplifies a complex philosophical issue. We have a clear case of a mind which has not material elements and that is God. I would find it odd if humans did not share in that immaterial consciousness of God in some way.

"To share in the divine nature is to share in some way in the trans-material nature of God.

"I probably disagree with Tom about the nature of the resurrection body. I think St Paul's teaching is quite clear that the spiritual resurrection body is quite different from the material body. Paul says that the spiritual body is 'incorruptible'.

"This means it does not obey the second law of thermodynamics and therefore cannot be physical in any way that we can understand it. Being incorruptible means not obeying the laws of nature so you have a different nature.

"In Christianity body and spirit are intertwined so they go together but it is very important to say this is an intertwining of two different parts of human beings,

body and spirit," Ward tells me, summarising his views on a complex topic. "I think the spirit can, by God's grace, exist without a body."

At the root of belief Ward sees 'personal encounter' not inferential belief. As a young man he underwent a conversion experience though he never accepted such distinctive evangelical beliefs as the substitutionary doctrine of the atonement or the inerrancy of scripture. But although he emphasises personal encounter he accepts that religious experience does not take this form for everyone and quotes surveys indicating only 40 per cent of evangelicals have had a personal experience of God. "A personal experience is not an illusion but it is not necessary to being a Christian," he suggests.

Ward ended his career as Regius Professor of Theology at Oxford and a canon of Christ Church though he began his academic career teaching philosophy at Glasgow. He was ordained while teaching at King's, London. In many ways he has followed an unfashionable path, seeking to link theology with philosophy and science and being ready to listen to other religions as well as Christianity.

During the past 30 years what I describe as a 'Barthian wave' has swept over theology. How does Ward feel about that? Has the eclipse of natural theology left clergy at sea in the current debate about theology and science? Ward is outspoken.

"What you call a 'Barthian wave,'" he responds, "has had the effect of separating Christianity too sharply from our culture. It has made Christianity inward-looking and unintentionally helped the growth of fundamentalism. We have cut off conversation with people who are still asking the big questions."

Not surprisingly, at a time when young intelligent people are asking philosophical questions, Ward gets many invitations to speak to sixth forms. He is rarely asked to address clergy schools. Too many seekers today, he suggests, see Christians as people who want to preach to them but not discuss their questions.

Ward has debated with Richard Dawkins in public three times and he is scathing about Dawkins' inability to understand philosophical arguments. Ward would probably hate to be called an evangelist but I left the interview thinking that is what he is and wishing the church had more like him.

Perhaps one beneficial result of the rise of the 'new atheists' will be to stimulate interest among the clergy and church members in philosophical questions. If this happens, Ward will be a good guide.

The Big Questions in Science and Religion by Keith Ward is published by the Templeton Foundation Press, ISBN: 978-1599471358, price £9.99