Welby praises “most orthodox” bishops since WW2 as UK gives up on the church

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As the UK undergoes a "revolutionary generational change" away from religion the Archbishop of Canterbury has boasted that the Church's Bishops in the House of Lords are the "most orthodox since WW2".

Speaking during the fractious meeting of the Anglican Communion, Justin Welby, Archbishop of Canterbury, boasted that "the Bench of Bishops is described by the longer standing members as the most orthodox since WWII."

This was shortly before new research from Lancaster University again confirmed society's turn away from religion. Linda Woodhead, Professor of the Sociology of Religion, said that "not only [has] society has become less religious, but ... religion has become more so" – and this fuelled the secularisation of society. While the Archbishop boasts of his orthodox credentials to appease arch-conservatives in the Anglican Communion, wider society in the UK is even more alienated from the established church, which still claims national authority and to be (in Welby's words) a "primary source of leadership for communities".

The response to the Anglican Communion's punishment of the Episcopal Church for its stance on same-sex marriage has given as good a view as any of the chasm between church and society. In response to the sanctioning of the Episcopal Church a petition has been launched calling for the Church of England bishops in the House of Lords to be removed, and Lord Scriven, a Liberal Democrat peer, has submitted a written question to the Ministry of Justice calling for the disestablishment of the Church of England. He described the Church's behaviour over same-sex marriage as "institutionally homophobic."

Chris Bryant MP said that he had "finally given up on" the Anglican Church due to its decision on sexuality.

The Archbishop's claim that "The Church of England is still a primary source of leadership for communities" – and that this is to the "dismay of secularists" is peculiar. Even if his contention were true, it would have no bearing on the case for a secular state, which is practically strengthened by a non-religious majority, but not weakened in principle by majority religiosity (as in the US). Secularists have no investment or interest in where individuals derive their moral leadership; they merely resist the legal imposition of religious moral codes on society at large.

His claim is not justified in any case. 75% of Britons have never been influenced by a religious leader. Less than one-in-five are influenced (positively or negatively) by what religious leaders say. This is not to say that religious leaders cannot do tremendous good in their local community; but that is not an argument for notably conservative religious representation in parliament.

Professor Woodhead, herself an Anglican, has said that religious sexism and homophobia are one reason why the UK now has a "'no religion' majority". Not only are people not influenced by religious leaders, when they hear what religious leaders are saying, they are actually put-off. Woodhead says "This gap between church and society has been widened by a series of moral

stands by church leaders which have set them against both English and Anglican opinion, and turned the CofE into a church which likes to [say] no." She adds that the Church of England has shifted from being a "societal church" to a "sectarian" one.

The Church's struggle to maintain its prestige project – the worldwide Anglican Communion – is widening the rupture between it and the society in which it claims to be a "primary source of leadership". The cost of maintaining the illusion of religious unity – inevitable given the global demography of the Anglican Communion – is that "Archbishops of Canterbury will continue to give more weight to Nigerian and Ugandan churches than to the views of ordinary English – or American – Anglicans."

To save the Anglican Communion the Church of England will become more religiously conservative, further alienating itself from the UK. The elephant in the room during the meeting of Anglican Primates was that surely many English Anglicans quietly agree with the Episcopalians. In the UK, liberals and modern-minded Anglicans have complained to the NSS for decades that they cannot get preferment in the Church; some have gone as far as to maintain "this is no longer the Church I joined".

Welby bragged that "we are exempted from the same sex marriage act, showing that our voice is still heard against the prevailing wind of our society, and at much cost to ourselves, by the way". But he omitted to mention that this was also against the prevailing wind in his own Church. Besides, nobody would want to see clergy compelled to perform same-sex marriages: but the Church's stance prevents those clergy who would perform them from doing so.

As the Church of England charts a course away from the new moral norms of the society in which it finds itself, it clings on to its institutional privileges – not least in education.

Welby, boasting of the moral leadership the church "still" provides, said "the C of E educate more than 1,000,000 children in our schools." But even this won't help the church; and it means continuing discrimination against parents, pupils and staff.

The British Social Attitudes Survey found that "40% of those brought up Christian become nones" and Professor Woodhead argues that "additional forms of Christian socialisation like Christian schooling clearly don't compensate."

Despite this, the Church is desperate to maintain its position and disproportionate hold on the education system, even as adults leave church in droves. The schools are not helping the church's mission to spread the faith, and they represent an anachronistic level of control over the education of a million children – and the imposition of faith on families who don't want it. This truly is something that does "dismay" secularists and the parents who contact us every week trying to protect their children from unwanted religious interference.

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