

Oliver O'Donovan, *A CONVERSATION WAITING TO BEGIN: THE CHURCHES AND THE GAY CONTROVERSY* (London: SCM Press, 2009).

Reviewed by Enda McCaffrey.

The context for this book is the consecration of Gene Robinson as bishop to the Diocese of New Hampshire in the Episcopal Church of the United States of America in 2003. He entered office in March 2004. Robinson is widely known for being the first openly-gay, non-celibate priest to be ordained a bishop in a major Christian denomination. After his election, some theologically conservative parishes aligned themselves with bishops outside the Episcopal Church in the United States, a process called the Anglican realignment. This development has since become part of a wider schism within the Anglican communion over homosexuality and the election of women bishops, with many priests and prominent bishops in the UK resigning from the Church of England with the intention of setting up an English Ordinariate in communion with the Roman Pontiff Benedict XVI.

While O'Donovan refers only fleetingly to these events, the issues underpinning them, notably the role of and accommodation of homosexuals in the Anglican tradition, are paramount. His question is clear from the start: 'What room is there for a "pluralism" in the church's moral beliefs and practices?' O'Donovan's response takes in a broad examination of the 'crisis' in Anglicanism which is defined in terms of a respect for tradition (including doctrine and creed) and the need to manage differences. Anglicanism would appear to have moved away from its tradition of forging coalitions and embraced too eagerly an insistence on doctrine and creed; this shift has desensitised it to the 'poetics' of moral intuitionism and the synchronic trajectory of cultural change. The nature of this drift is a recurring thematic throughout the book, expressed in different ways (the movement between the universal and the plastic, the descriptive and the practical). The paradox of liberal Christianity, according to O'Donovan, is that it has had too much critical purchase on the past, traditions and doctrinal judgement and not enough on orienting itself to moral intuition and the realities of the (cultural) present.

The need to review doctrine critically in the light of ethics is O'Donovan's proposed way forward. In order to redress the diachronic/synchronic imbalance in liberal theology and in the process understand better our current cultural context, O'Donovan argues that we need go back to the Nineteenth century and reflect seriously upon the function of ethics, in particular what he sees as the primacy of the ethical as that which is 'presupposed' and 'self-evident'. The ethical challenge therefore for liberal Christianity, he claims, is not to be seen as anti-traditional but to be more inclined to the 'the God-destined character of the present cultural moment'. Tradition is therefore redefined in terms of 'the correction of tradition', and ethics is seen to facilitate this redefinition in the way it has become linked with historical relativism, revisionism and that which can be contested. The important qualification to this ethical review is that O'Donovan is not equating ethics and historical relativism with an indiscriminate free-for-all where anything goes; on the contrary, the primacy of a universal is still invoked as a valid ethical measure but critically an 'authentic' way of understanding practical judgement must also entail the freedom to pose challenging and controversial questions. Practical and intuitive judgments are viewed as extensions of the universal and the descriptive, rather than critiques of it or independent sub-sets of it. It is a position that underscores O'Donovan's broader claim that if Anglicanism is to survive as a communion in the longer term, it must on one level return to its roots as a liberal theology (embracing the ethos of *semper reformanda*), but also learn to take into account and manage the exigencies of the present. In principle, it is a laudable and consensual position, but it is also a fragile one when subjected to the empirical analysis of real life.

O'Donovan is supportive of the trend towards constructive ethical disagreement and pluralism in the church. However, he would appear to raise concerns about the way the gay debate has been handled in the Episcopal Church of the USA. In his view the church bowed too easily to cultural pressure from the militant gay lobby and failed (contrary to its liberal traditions) to engage as a matter of priority in important debate first and foremost within the church itself. According to O'Donovan, this stance by the church in the USA was symptomatic of a misguided subversion of the 'formal' coordinates of fruitful ethical disagreement which has led to it being polarised at one end of the gay debate. As much as O'Donovan is in favour of pluralism (the acknowledgment of

'ethically significant difference' in the church) he is so within clearly designated parameters, foremost of which is respect for the primacy of an overarching ethical standard against which difference can be legitimately and authentically measured. This qualification has its benefits and drawbacks. It enables him to advance a series of interesting but questionable approaches to the 'gay controversy' and wider issues about innovation, experimentation and authenticity. The first of these is the ethical corrective he ascribes to difference. 'Ethically significant difference' can be applied only to 'practices embedded in cultural contexts in which they serve to secure social goods'; 'modes of social existence' (presumably gay lifestyles) are included in this definition because, again we presume, homosexuality has always existed and homosexuals can be socially integrated within the standard of heteronormativity. They form part of what O'Donovan calls 'established traditional differences'. O'Donovan's logic, it would seem, is that gay difference is not really different but actually has an 'established' and 'traditional' dimension that does not alienate it from the Good News. This is both positive and perplexing; positive for gay Christians but perplexing in the implications for Christian exclusiveness and conformism. Having passed the test of acceptability for access to the Christian heritage, O'Donovan sounds a note of caution by reminding homosexuals that they cannot expect special treatment from the Gospel.

In short, homosexuals have a place in the church because the church does not exclude differences that are 'traditional' or 'established' or from which a social good can come. It is a deduction that suits O'Donovan's coalition-building thesis but it also raises concerns. What of the non-established non-traditional differences? Is there no room for these differences in the coalition or in the universality of the church? For O'Donovan, the answer would appear to be no. The church's inclusion and rehabilitation of homosexuals excludes 'experimental or innovatory' expressions of difference (no examples provided). Why should experimentation be anti-tradition? Does innovation threaten tradition? Or is it that the balance between tradition and intuition is in favour of the former, so much so that satisfaction of the demands of tradition has become a condition that threatens the consensual nature of the coalition? Where is the language of co-operation, coalition and negotiation? The concern with O'Donovan's selective approach here is the extent to which tradition (or the ethical standard),

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no matter how distant, universal or unpractical, must be protected at all costs as a safeguard against the excesses of a liberal hermeneutic. In other words, there is a strong sense that tradition has more of the power in O'Donovan's coalition. There is little doubt that his positive ethics of disagreement are founded on the conciliatory roots of liberal theology, and the book defends admirably the rapprochement between tradition and the need for change. As an argument *in abstracto* it is convincing - conciliation implies drawing a line (for O'Donovan this is at the at the point of the experimental) and forms part of his welcome liberal hermeneutic of bringing the past into the present under the aegis of respect for authority. This book is one of the more mature, thoughtful and enlightened reflections on this subject I have read and I concur with much of what O'Donovan has to say. However, I would also add that his discussion of the 'gay controversy' not only highlights the internal debate within liberal theology between tradition and change but it also ventilates a wider debate about ethics, practice and their application. O'Donovan's book demonstrates that the principle of forging coalitions between tradition and change can easily succumb to the multiple pressures of practice, cultural context and the ultra-sensitive language of difference, notwithstanding the other challenges to this principle that come from critics of his 'authentic way of understanding obedient practical reason'; 'authenticity' for existentialists invokes self-renewal and self-valorisation outside tradition, humanist or otherwise. Also, O'Donovan's liberal hermeneutic should be capable of reaching beyond its theological and scriptural boundaries; homosexuality is also about human freedom, rights and the emancipation of the human spirit.