

BOOK REVIEW

Percy, Martyn. 2025. *The Crisis of Colonial Anglicanism: Empire, Slavery and Revolt in the Church of England*

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Reviewed by Benjamin Aldous

As someone who was ordained, both deacon and priest, in the Anglican Church of Southern Africa I often feel a step removed from direct critiques of the Church of England and its complex machinations. With recent gatherings of Synod full of tribal invective, handing-wringing over safeguarding failures and continued evasion for a move towards more accountability and transparency, Martin Percy's new book is timely. Percy explores the complex entanglements between the Church of England, the British Empire and the accidental birth of the Anglican global Communion in his typically uncompromising style.

Percy's central thesis is that the British Empire is primarily an English construction, and the Church of England has essentially served as the spiritual arm of this imperial project. He explores the Empire's Englishness and how it was embroiled in exploitation, racism and slavery which continues to shape its understanding of itself.

Divided into 15 pithy chapters, the introduction subtitled *implosion* sets out to "explore the expansion, gradual retraction, decline and fall of an empire and national church" (1). For Percy the church and the empire have always been in lock step and the Anglican communion a kind of quasi-ecclesial "commonwealth" riven with factionalism. At the heart of the problem for Percy is the Church of England's persistent evasion of scrutiny and transparency, its privileged monarchical pattern of control over clergy and laity and its tacit support for England's colonial conquest and subjugation of peoples the world over (3). In chapter 2, Percy notes that the fear of losing pre-eminence is a particular English vice and he links the desire for the Archbishop of Canterbury to maintain his *primus inter pares* with Henry VIII's desire for monarchical pre-eminence. He then charts the way in which Church of England interests were deeply embedded in the monopoly held by the East India Company. In essence the British Empire enabled the Church of England to move from being a

national church to becoming a global communion. Where the Empire grew in coercive power and influence, in its wake were Church of England missionary societies and their clergy effectively being agents of imperialism (49).

In chapters 4 to 6 Percy deals with the relationship between the slavery, church and colonial racism. Under slavery, capitalism and Christianity found their interests conflated. The now well-known legacy of English slave trading through the Queen Anne's Bounty, a charitable foundation which invested significant sums in transportation of slaves to the Americas, is a case in point. Percy asks why when the Church Commissioners have roughly £12 billion in investments would they only set aside £100 million (0.83% of the fund) as a way of addressing the church's historic links with slavery. Moreover, it is only the interest generated from this £100 million that will be used. For Percy this again speaks of the historical amnesia of the Church of England when it comes to the moral reckoning of its past duplicity (79). It is, as far as Percy is concerned, a problem rooted in the English psyche. "A nation not able to audit its own historical accounts means telling details get lost in the valorisation of the past" (169).

Chapter 11 asks why if slavery was the foundation of the British Empire and of English colonial expansionism why so few studies have emerged within theology that challenge the notion of the Anglican Communion has a highly problematic identity and legacy (165). For Percy the scale of this entanglement is undeniable and yet is often not faced squarely.

In chapter 14 Percy compares what he deems the "Old World" Church of England with that of the "New World" democratic shape of the Episcopalian church that quickly evolved in North America. The Old World believed in the pre-eminence of a God-willed monarchical authoritarianism which now looks increasingly untenable, out of touch with the vast majority of people in the nation and continually resistant to accountability and transparency in order to protect itself. The New World believed in the inalienable right to democratic equality. The Old World offered monarchy. Even if benign, kind and good, its citizens were *subjects* and others were born to rule over them (208). The dogged issues of classism, privilege and power continues to shape the way the Church of England operates in the world and puts in an uncomfortable position.

Finally, Percy paints a picture of the Anglican global communion as a wounded body never in hope of recovery. Percy suggests that the emergence of the Communion was an accident of history. Anglicans have already stopped doing things together and a family reunion every ten years cannot sustain the familial relations required to knit together a global communion (58). There is no common theological training. Evangelical and Catholic wings of the church promote different proclivities (59). Globally there is no international judicial oversight, no shared canon law and even the 39 articles are not adopted by all of the 46 members of the communion (191). On

top of these realities is the fact that the Archbishop of Canterbury's assumed default position as the first among equals has been seriously undermined by denouncements by various parts of the global South over the past few years and this is unlikely to improve with the recent resignation of Justin Welby. The Communion is fractured – conservative Anglicans now have new networks to enshrine their values. GAFCON, ANCA and smaller groups are effectively outside of any control of Lambeth. This, for Percy, is partly about the Church of England's hubris and desire to control to be seen as a global church of significance.

Percy concludes that this postcolonial era is no time to patch things up and move on, as though nothing serious has ever really happened but is a time to face the past and pay the dues owed (236). Until the church squarely faces the past, deals with its love of power, its continued racist and classist attitudes and favouring of monarchical privilege it cannot be the church of the nation and nor should it perhaps claim to be.

This is an important book, but at times the rhetoric borders on polemic, which can begin to undermine the argument. This is understandable given Percy's own treatment by the Church of England (which he has now left to move to Scotland and be part of an Episcopalian church) and his long-drawn-out and bitter dispute with Christ Church Oxford over various allegations. I think Percy fails to give fair treatment to Church of England mission societies. Everyone recognizes their links to imperial power but there are stories of sacrificial incarnational ministry amongst those who left to share the gospel. Again, the Anglican Communion is a complex animal but Percy's analysis fails to admit there may be any collegiality and value in the gatherings or hope of a new path for the future if the Archbishop of Canterbury's role is reassessed. Ultimately Percy suggests the writing is on the wall for the Church of England. In the words of Daniel 5 'Your days are numbered; you have been weighed and found wanting; your empire will be divided.' Or there may be a more hopeful future.

About the Reviewer

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