

apparent decline of the institutional church and the seemingly insatiable hunger for things spiritual are glorious opportunities to expand our definitions of faithfulness.” (P. 73).

As part of his argument Levan also has interesting discussions of the Christian attitude to wealth and happiness, both important matters and both badly understood in our society. Finally his essential conclusion is “ Surely the way ahead begins with an interior change, the willingness to be open to a new configuration of our religion and religious practice. Perhaps we can unlock our dilemma through laughter at our pretensions. How foolish to attempt to storm the pearly gates through professions of assurance.” (P.145)

*How does this reviewer see Levan’s book?*

To be fair Levan’s book could be better and it is to be hoped he will write a more considered work. A little tough editing would not hurt – I found some of his little stories less than effective and the last one about a wedding disrupted by a hail storm does not even illustrate the point he is trying to make. I do not find that everything he says about the past of the church squares with my own memories, especially his picture of a church bent on denying pleasure. Possibly we Anglicans have always been a jollier sort of people than our United Church relations or possibly this may be an accident of our two different biographies. I would also suggest Levan will have to clear up a little bit trouble he has got himself into logically. Try as you will, when you say dogmatism is always wrong, you are yourself making a dogmatic statement. The problem is not insurmountable but a little more work is required.

Nonetheless, we should be grateful to Levan for providing a vision of an alternative in Christian faith and practice to a defensive and frightened piety that interprets the challenge of the Gospel as a warning to pull up the drawbridge within a small fortress rather than to get out and combat the misery and destruction which disfigure the world God has created.

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## **Book Reviews: A Look at two different books**

George R. Eves, *Two Religions – One Church* (St. John NB: V.O.I.C.E., 1998) ISBN # 0-9683030-0-5

Christopher Levan , *Living in the Maybe* ( Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 0-8028-4347-6 (pkb)

These two books have certain things in common; almost identical in size they are written by Canadians in response to the situation in which main line churches find themselves especially in comparison with more fundamentalist groups. After this resemblances are more difficult to come by. Eves argues that the Anglican Church in particular is in trouble because it is not clear enough and conservative enough in its beliefs. Levan finds no joy in fundamentalist beliefs and maps out what he thinks the concerns of a mainline Christian Church (in his case the United) ought to be.

### **I. Eves**

Eves’ viewpoint is essentially church centered in the small sense of the term. He begins by diagnosing the problem as the drop in attendance and contributions in the average Anglican parish and finishes with a prescription for getting more people in the pew and more money in the collection plate. If there are not enough non-middle class people in church, the remedy is to get them in somehow - clergy who get involved in radical politics do not fit in with his view of how the world should be.

Eves’ ideas can be summarized as follows: for the past hundred years the Anglican Church has become infected with liberalism and liberals are those who do not accept the Bible as the unchanging word of God but tend to pick and choose from the Bible as their own interests lead them. Somehow these liberals are tied up with the power structure of the church though Eves never quite shows why conservative bishops are somehow exempt from this temptation. Liberalism does not believe in absolute rights and wrongs so it has no guiding principles and drifts about in unpredictable ways. Essentially liberalism is a different sort of religion from orthodox (as defined by Eves) Christianity.

Now the liberals are teetering on the brink of doing something utterly beyond the pale, namely going directly in the face of the Bible by

approving of homosexuality. This is the watershed, the final test case, for should this happen the Rubicon is finally crossed and a breakup is inevitable between the two absolutely different religions that co-exist in the Anglican Church of Canada today. Liberalism has got to go.

*How does this reviewer see Eves' book?*

To be fair not every point he makes is without merit. We are in some liturgical disarray to put it mildly, though not all of this is necessarily due to the *Book of Alternative Services*. The Anglican Church sponsored study program *Hearing Divers Voices* was indeed the sort of work that gives incompetence a bad name, although curiously enough Eves begins by attacking the one excellent contribution, namely Terry Donaldson's discussion of the biblical evidence. Eves is right that we could certainly do a lot better with Sunday School and the virtual elimination of confirmation may be liturgically up to date but it means that there is now no need for adolescents to receive some sort of instruction appropriate to their situation in life. Having said all this it then becomes difficult to find many more qualities in his book.

There are many serious weaknesses in this book that have the effect of either discrediting or vitiating its argument. For convenience's sake these can be divided into four types, although in the book itself these weaknesses intersect in various ways, namely logical inconsistency, plain ignorance, a harsh and simplistic attitude towards those who disagree with him, and lack of a wide enough viewpoint to capture the dynamic faith of the Bible.

#### *1. Logical problems:*

Some of the difficulties in logic are of a relatively minor sort; for example the inconsistent interpretation of the evidence: if the conservatives are a small group in the Anglican Church, then they are the faithful remnant; if the Church is a small group in society, then something is wrong and should be fixed. More important is an implication of Eves' argument that is quite breathtaking in the crassness of the standard applied. It is argued that the numeric decline of the church is due to liberalism, therefore we should go back to more conservative ways. The standard then become success, not truth and it follows that should suddenly liberalism start packing them in by droves, that we should all become liberals - even Eves. I do not for a moment think Eves himself

## **II Levan**

When we come to Christopher Levan's book we find ourselves in a very different world of discourse, both in the author's breadth of knowledge and his interpretation of Christian theology. Even the format is a great improvement for we are given balanced bibliographies as well as indexes of names, subjects, and biblical texts.

Levan is as aware as Eves of the attraction of various conservative groups but he begins by giving an excellent summary of what is happening on the religious right and showing that it is not the unified whole Eves says it is. Levan makes the important distinction between conservatism and fundamentalism but when he says of the latter "It differs from regular conservatism, not so much in its choice of specific, eternal, and foundational principles, as in its unyielding determination to confer a transcendent ultimacy on these principles and its unwillingness to enter into any serious questioning of its own positions" ( p. 25) one has the feeling one has met something like this in Eves' book.

For Levan the problems for Christians is how to provide an alternative to the frightened and constricted view of religion provided by the fundamentalists. He finds this in the idea of stewardship in the widest sense that as Christians we are responsible for the whole of the created order, not just the minister's stipend and the upkeep of the church roof. The challenge is not to believe three impossible things before breakfast every day but the more unsettling prospect of deciding how to make use of whatever resources we have been given in the service of God's creation. This means our whole lives are up for consideration and hard choices will have to be made; God will begin to make the most inappropriate demands on our time, our resources, and maybe even that most sacred of all cows, our standard of living.

Levan has a lot of good things to say about how the shape of faithfulness changes through the centuries as it responds to the challenges of the times. He finds this pattern in the New Testament and discusses some examples from the history of the church. "Far from casting rules of fidelity in concrete, our role as disciples is to discover where God's reign is breaking out in our world and to be present and attendant at its new birth. Why waste time trying to prop up standards that are obviously outdated and speaking to another culture?" (p. 70) Again he says "The

to have what is comfortable out of the Bible. This is simply not true; take for example Albert Schweitzer who was undoubtedly a liberal, but who felt the call to lay down a brilliant career and go to a remote part of Africa as his response to a call by God.

Eves finds it hard to admit that those who do not see every saying in the Bible as God's inspired, directly dictated word may be honestly facing up to real difficulties in the Bible. His unwillingness to attribute sincerity to "liberals" is quite clear in his blithe assumption that they ought to give up their views without further ado.

#### *4. Lack of a wide enough view of the world.*

Whatever he may believe in ordinary life, there is no doubt that in his book Eves' view of the Christian faith is narrowly confined to "churchy" matters and shows no trace of interest in the rest of the world. His concern is with attendance at church and the money in its coffers - things about which Jesus showed remarkably little interest. Nowhere in his book does one find any hint that the effect of a live Christian faith is to challenge our comfortable little worlds and summon us to care for the whole of God's created order. In a world where people are suffering, our refraining from sexual acts which are not a temptation to most of us is simply not going to qualify as much of a response.

The sort of orthodoxy Eves is suggesting sounds rather like the old (and historically unjustified) idea that the Anglican Church was the Tory Party at prayer. Christian orthodoxy is simply part and parcel of unthinking support of things as they are so long as we are comfortable. Some parts of the Bible - say Amos and Isaiah - do not endorse this idea, even as Christian experience of God through the centuries records the disruptive and renewing effect of God's spirit.

would endorse this approach, but that is where his logic would lead him if he wishes to be consistent.

#### *2. Plain ignorance:*

It behooves those who appeal to the past to be accurate, even in small points such as that Richard Baxter was a Nonconformist who can scarcely be quoted as an example of Anglicanism at its best.

But Eves is obviously uninformed about church history and Biblical studies.

As far as church history is concerned, he attributes the denial of the eternity of punishments to liberalism; in fact the notion of the ultimate redemption was first suggested by the greatest of the Fathers of the Eastern Church, Origen, and was revived in more recent times by Pietists such as Wilhelm and Joanna Peterson who, whatever they might have been, were not liberals.

Eves has no understanding of why the historical-critical interpretation of the Bible arose. He appears to consider this a liberal plot to pick and choose what appeals to liberals; he does not for a moment consider that the Bible is not altogether the clearest document in the world for a modern western person. Even the conservative minded are open to the charge of picking and choosing, for they are saved from the trouble of picketing astrophysical observatories as temples of blasphemy only by their amnesia about the fact that there are more passages in the Bible which presuppose that the sun revolves around the earth than there are condemnations of homosexuality.

There must be many people who have set out to read the Bible from cover to cover and who never made it past Leviticus simply because it is full of many things they find dull or unintelligible. Worse than the dull bits are the lively ones that are only too clear; when Joshua is sent out to capture the city of Ai, it is said God tells him to kill everyone in the city - men, women, and children. This sounds far too much like our modern problems in the Balkans and any suggestion that the God we worship wants this sort of thing to happen is so grotesque as to put many people off the Bible, especially the Old Testament.

What Eves does not appear to know is that the historical-critical approach to the Bible was developed by sincere members of the church (e.g. Astruc who is behind the JEDP theory of the Pentateuch so roundly

denounced by Eves) who were trying to show that allowing for human content in the Bible was the only satisfactory way to defend its significance.

In his interpretation of the New Testament Eves does not even seem to have much knowledge of the original Greek. In discussing Romans 5.12 since he insists on repeating a mistake in translation perpetuated by Augustine. (The situation is that the Greek words *eph ho* should be translated “because” not “in him” - this eliminates the one text that might support original sin as guilt an otherwise innocent baby inherits from the sin of Adam.)

One also gets the impression that Eves is unaware of the distinction between intellectual belief and faith. This is a point made in the Epistle of James where it is pointed out that even devils believe that God is God but they cannot be said to have faith. In other words without being aware of what he is doing he has fallen into the confusion of orthodoxy – something to which the Devil herself can aspire – with genuine faith. They are not always separated, but when they do drift apart, it is clear that orthodoxy has no real life of its own.

Finally Eves is simply wrong when he says that if the Anglican Church were to accept the legitimacy of homosexual unions it would for the first time depart from the Scriptures. It is perhaps a vain hope that those who appeal to the past history of the church would find out a little about it. In theory it sounds nice to suggest that the doctrine and moral theology of the church has remained unchanged for thousands of years, but is this really the case? Let us look at two cases where the church has in fact gone against specifically biblical injunctions in doctrine and practice.

If you look carefully at the Epistle to the Hebrews you will find that by any reasonable interpretation it says that there is no forgiveness for serious sins committed after baptism. This is certainly how the church felt the passage should be interpreted for several hundred years - if you need a good example consider Augustine’s mother’s problem when as a boy he fell seriously ill. If she did not get him baptized and he died then he would be condemned if he died (had Eves been there presumably he would have said as much had he been asked to take the funeral.) On the other hand if she got him baptized and he lived, then he might well get

himself condemned by committing serious sins after his baptism. The reason why it is hard for us to work our way back into this sort of thinking is that eventually the church decided that enough was enough and Hebrews was not to be taken seriously on this point.

A second incident from more recent years was the problem of marriage to deceased spouse’s sibling (i.e. deceased wife’s sister or deceased brother’s wife). This was good Anglican practice for hundreds of years; Henry the Eighth used it as the basis for the annulment of his marriage to Catherine of Aragon (thereby providing the deciding factor in the Church of England’s first break with Rome); this biblical injunction, firmly anchored in Leviticus, was enshrined in the Table of Affinities still to be found in older prayer books (unlike the liberal version in the 1962 Canadian BCP), and was only disposed of in the late nineteenth century (remember the line from *Iolanthe*?).

Now whatever may be said about or done on the matter of homosexuality, it is simply not true that a positive response to say approving same sex unions would be the first time the church has decided against a biblical injunction. (Please note, all this is separate from the more important matter about whether such a step would be proper or not.)

Ironically it is here that Eves shows how much in common he has with the theologically challenged crew that put together most of *Hearing Divers Voices*. One of our problems in Canada is that there are very few in our churches who have a solid and well grounded knowledge of our Christian tradition on which to base intelligent decisions, especially and above all our clergy. Theological institutions have not done their jobs properly for many reasons, some of them well-intentioned but we are now paying the price that we have people like Eves urging a retreat into an Anglican world that never existed on land or sea and those who disagree with him often have trouble in giving reasons for not following suit or providing alternatives.

### 3. *Harsh judgements.*

It is the hallmark of an educated person, never mind of a Christian, that he/she can allow the possibility that not all those who disagree are necessarily knaves or rogues. Eves’ cartoon-like picture of “liberals” ignores the manifold distinctions that exist amongst those he lumps into this single group. Worse still he appears to feel that liberals simply want