



Opinion

The Boston ‘Church’ Fire and the Version of Uganda’s Emotive Anglicans

By Jonathan Mwesigwa S.

GENERALLY speaking, the Anglican Communion and its club in Africa— suffice to mention Uganda, in particular—are *luckily*, not short of instances where they can cause quite a stir in the world. Counting from the *Reformation* to *Mission* days, to the *Lambeth Conferences*, to the *East African Revival*, through *GAFCON*, and now to the recent fire triggered by thunder and lightning that burned down the sanctuary of the First Congregational Church of Spencer in Massachusetts in Boston, US; it is manifestly clear to one that our various congregations have been *enriched*, rather enormously with blue, sentimental and acutely cynical fellows of all stations.

Do not be fooled, though, that our (“biblical” and “orthodox”) positions (read: pretensions) have always been truly informed and legitimate. There is a plethora of cases where we have intentionally neglected to benefit from the vast spectrum of hindsight. We have not been very keen students of our history either, hence the contradictions reflected in our various stands on a range of *questions*, like the Bible (Which version, for example, should we read and why—recent discoveries of other Dead Sea scrolls aside? And how should we read and interpret it?); on faith and order; worship; doctrine; on the sanctity of life and defence of other human rights and freedoms; on the rights and duties of our members; on Christian unity; and on social justice, among others.

While, for instance, the *Battle for the Bible* (as narrated in a *YouTube* documentary aired a few years ago) centred on the awe-inspiring need to translate the *Holy Scriptures* from ancient Greek and Hebrew into English and other native tongues, behind the efforts is a rather “...dark and deadly story of subversion, smuggling, imprisonment and murder”—all done in the name of God! At the centre of this tale, though, are the *heroes* of our *Protestant Reformation* like John Wycliffe, Thomas Cranmer, William Tyndale, and Martin Luther whose indomitable spirit yielded the breaking of ranks with the then Church establishment, i.e., the present-day Roman-Catholic Church and devotion of “their lives to bringing the Book to the masses...” the world over. Yet it is this same college of heroes—in the case of Cranmer, for instance, which espoused *Evensong*, one of the most reverent Services in our Anglican liturgy as issued in the *Book of Common Prayer* (1662), but previously said at Mass with the invocation of Mariolatry worship in the anthems,



The sanctuary of the First Congregational Church of Spencer (FCCS) after a fire outbreak due to lightning.

Ave Maria at the beginning and *Our Lady* at the end of compline—certainly a very unnerving feature for any protestant.

In his *Evensong: A Journey of Faith* as presented in the first Prayer Book Society’s Advent Seminar held about two years ago, The Revd. Ian Forrester (Vicar of Boxgrove Priory, Diocese of Chichester, UK) a renowned musician and liturgist accentuates this point thus:

“The first thing to ask is: *How did it come to exist—this form of Service—in the 1662 Book of Common Prayer? How did it come to be in the form it’s in? And how has it over the years attracted so many people to enjoy its particular brand of spirituality?* Well,” he continues “it’s fair to say that when Thomas Cranmer, the Archbishop of Canterbury—the author of the first *Book of Common Prayer* (1549), when he started his work...he was conscious of [the fact that]... Pope Clement VII had actually asked one of the cardinals, Cardinal Quíñones to look at the office with a view of simplifying it...and so Quíñones set to work and he produced, first of all, a quite radical set of suggestions... But, of course, there was a reaction against that and so he had to produce a second set of ideas which rode back on his initial hopes for the thing to be simplified... But we do know that Thomas Cranmer had read them. We know that because there was a bit of overlap

in the work. So he had been interested enough to know what was going on in Rome. And the 1549 book, the first Book of Common Prayer actually owes a lot to the thinking that Quíñones was demonstrating in his projects.”

So recently, the *WhatsApp* thread of St. Paul’s Cathedral, Namirembe provided a most perfect illustration of our fixed quandary. For *obvious* reasons, the full identities of some of the disputants remain reasonably private. (For details see the link in the Twitter thread.) According to the Vicar, Dean and their flatterers, the Boston incident was a consequence of that Church’s sustained celebration of gay marriages and non-repentance—both of which offended God, not to cite the Church teaching on marriage, at least as informed by the Holy Scriptures.

The deafening silence of both the Dean and Vicar of a whole Namirembe Cathedral when met with counterarguments, plus the gagging attitude of some of its overzealous congregants who feel that it is too “unspiritual” for the flock to interrogate its shepherd tells a great deal of the plight of the Church in Africa, in general, and the Church of Uganda (CoU), in particular.

Both keen and longtime worshippers at St. Paul’s should be offended that unlike during the pre-colonial, colonial and early post-colonial periods, their native Diocese of Namirembe has since steadily lost the lustre of a refined body of clergy of rare quality very much needed to serve in its Cathedral, which also is the provincial/national cathedral. All too often, though, we have gloried in being the *Nnakazadde* (Mother Diocese of the entire Province, previously stretching to Rwanda, Burundi, and Boga-Zaire) and thus, the ultimate cradle of *emnono* (Anglican orthodoxy and orthopraxy—assuming, of course that ‘orthodoxy’ can be defined) in the land—yet rather oddly, unheeded the challenge to fully grasp the basics of the same and to not fit square pegs in round holes.

Now, if this is the case at our *mighty* Namirembe; what is the state like elsewhere in the Province? Most importantly, what could have informed this kind of surge which obviously does not bode well for us?

Failure to historicize is the initial, most obvious and major handicap that the two *good* clerics suffered from when they rushed to highlight and interpret the Boston incident in the manner they did. Their station, the Cathedral Church of St. Paul The Apostle, Namirembe has a volatile history given that all four of its forerunner sanctuaries (three of which were ‘cathedrals’) *survive* but only as a tale—thanks to leaking

thatch, rotten poles and a thunderous storm, termites, and lightning one-to-one.



Clockwise from top left: The current Namirembe Cathedral and three of its predecessors. The last picture shows the 3rd Cathedral after the disastrous fire.

Owing to these circs, “The Catholics held [in the case of the first cathedral, for instance], according to [Archdeacon Robert H.] Walker that ‘the fall of our church indicated the rottenness of our faith’. The Anglican [George L.]Pillington, on the contrary, thought it as a sign that ‘we ought to spread out more and extend our influence over a larger surface’. The Baganda converts, unmoved by such speculations, reached a more straight forward conclusion. It indicated quite simply, they said, that ‘the poles had rotted off at the ground and that in future they would build with several different kinds of wood.’” (See Moon, K., *St. Paul’s Cathedral Namirembe: A History and Guide* (1994) and Tucker, A.R., *Eighteen Years in Uganda and East Africa*, Vols. I & II (1908) for detailed accounts).

Can it be said, yet, that the two clerics’ *analysis* was possibly inspired by the rather obtuse Roman-Catholic view above? And that the same *logic* can be unreservedly stretched to, for example, the recurrent school and market fires in this country and in all cases of other destructive natural phenomena, here and elsewhere in the world? Can the *men of God* also cross their hearts and insist that all marriages solemnized at St. Paul’s have been as “God’s Word doth allow...” and lawful; and that all those who have been coupled together there have been true in giving their troth to each other, i.e., “to have and to hold, from this day forward... according to God’s holy ordinance...”? Or would they care to clarify why they continue to preside in a *minster* over which, according to *mythology*, some *Ganda* traditional rites were also done to appease Namirembe (the peace goddess) during its construction? Your guess is as good as mine.

Yet the foregoing failure is **structural** and regrettably, all our clergy and laity—the mighty and feeble alike—are more often than not unconscious victims of the rather poor quality of our seminaries and the despotic nature of our church “...hierarchy, authoritarianism, patriarchy, and patronage”. These *oppressive codes* as per the *Freirian Model* and as adeptly argued by the current Provost of All Saints’ Cathedral, Kampala in her 2012 PhD Thesis “serve the interests of those in power while exploiting those below...” “[A] *code*,” The Very Rev. Canon Dr. Rebecca Nyengenyne

states “is meant to raise questions and not give answers. This is because people become familiar with the *codes* as part of their life and [thus] fail to ask the relevant questions that can eventually lead to *liberation* and *transformation*...”

It is of little surprise then, that many prelates relish in handling us like real sheep, which if we may remind them, we are not! In the Diocese of Busoga, for instance, the Christians complained to the State that the “Bishop...is a poor administrator, in fact a dictator, has no respect for others, no respect for other people’s views, no accountability in governance, full of sarcasm... practices nepotism based on clan sentiments and political party values...He ruled the diocese with no constitution, synod, chancery and a commissary. He ruled by inspiration of the Holy Spirit and an iron hand under the guise and mysterious canon law...” (Nyengenyne (2012) *supra*.)

‘We’ have been, as a final observation, flagging our concerns in this regard for some time now as one way of stemming the creeping **infallibility** among our clergy, yet utterly misjudged by many of ‘our’ readers, maybe naïvely. These latest events, however, strengthen ‘our’ long-held view and fears and ‘we’ know there are many others who share ‘our’ sense of alarm. Yet how fast some have turned ‘infallible’ escapes us all. The situation obtaining today in the CoU is not all that starkly dissimilar from the one that obtained in the Church of Rome in medieval Europe onwards, hence the cries for reforms plus the *Reformation* itself. The calls for changes plainly challenged *inter alia* the authority of the pope and more precisely, *papal infallibility*. This is “A dogma of the Catholic Church which states that, in virtue of the promise of Jesus Christ to Peter, the Pope when he speaks *ex cathedra* is preserved from the possibility of error on doctrine initially given to the apostolic Church and handed down in *Scripture* and *tradition*...”

“A development in the later medieval period which is of central importance to a study of the Reformation”, writes a leading scholar on the subject “is the growing crisis in authority, evident from the fourteenth century onwards. To whom, or to what, should someone look for an authoritative pronouncement concerning doctrine? Who was in a position to state unequivocally that ‘the position of the catholic church on *this* matter is *that*’? ...The papacy required the means of coercing those with unorthodox views to abandon them, or at least stop teaching them... [T]he authority of the pope was called into question through the Great Schism [1378-1417] and its aftermath.”— McGrath, A.E., *Reformation Thought: An Introduction*, (1988).

It cannot be, therefore, that we in the 21st Century are so keen to pay lip-service to the ideals of the *Protestant Reformation* namely; reasoned debate, truth telling, directness, outspokenness, and firmness in proclaiming the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, for “The *Reformation* is no historical curiosity which we only admire, but a living, on-going reality...”—Engelsma, D.J., *The Reformation and Twentieth Century*, (2000).

Yet all is not doom and gloom. There is, at least, a body of prelates and ordinands, scarce as it may be (within Namirembe and beyond), for which we are confident that it will spur debate and advancement in matters theological and non-theological very much longed for in ‘our’ Church.

The leadership of the CoU, we recommend, needs to seriously rethink its *reactionary approach* to these very sensitive matters. For it to not be thought of as a gang of phonies, it should desist from making rash statements calculated to stir up the emotions of its faithful and Ugandans, in general, with the view of swaying them to unquestionably adopt certain positions their erroneous nature notwithstanding. This is the norm especially seeing how little opportunity the faithful have to grasp the historical and theological contexts of countless matters of deep and mixt nature, not least access to key documents for their own rational engagement.

Difficult though our programme of internal reforms might seem, it should be embarked on vigorously yesterday! This is far better than sounding acutely prudish all the time.



The FCCS before the calamitous fire.

For the reasons enumerated above, one finds much the argument made by ‘our’ detractors to be rather disingenuous. ‘We’ thus feel that this critique will be of great help to the CoU hierarchy in restraining itself when impassioned and in forming sound views on all matters henceforth. “The leader”, at least one of its number was inspired to state in his *Old Testament Exegesis: II Kings 5:1-14*, (1992) long before he was nominated and elected to the bishopric “is required to listen to his subordinates. Therefore we the clergy and bishops must humble ourselves and listen to our Christians. God can use these people to say something to us (leaders) which can be of greater help in building up His Church.”

The writer is a proud Evangelical, wishing to remain a thinking Anglican. He was recently, at the instigation of the powers that be at Namirembe Cathedral, banished from its WhatsApp Group for expressing his ‘unorthodox’ views on various questions vexing the overall Anglican Communion and the Church of Uganda, in particular.