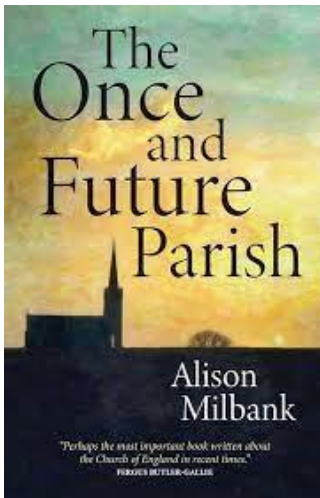


Alison Millbank. The once and future parish



Millbank is a professor of theology and a founder member of 'Save the Parish'. It is her view that the central authorities of the CofE, having totally lost confidence in the church project, are deliberately dismantling the parish system in order that a newer, fresher version of the church might emerge. She believes this is not only damagingly unrealistic and naïve, but it will also turn the church an irrelevant exclusive sect unmoored from anything recognisably Anglican.

She cites the creation of the Archbishop's Council – a small exclusive group of unelected officials – as the power behind this and references public comments from senior figures about clergy, regular worshipers and buildings being a 'burden' to the church's mission.

She draws attention to the fact that the church has adopted, uncritically, a business model for church life that was discredited by the business community in the mid-1980's and more recently by the NHS, Police and Education; and that theological training is more focussed on leadership and management than on the more traditional topics of theology and liturgy, leaving ordinands unprepared for parish life. Words like vision, strategy, and mission are vivid and radical-sounding, but are, in fact content-free and vague. 'Mission', interpreted by the church currently as simply output in terms of getting more worshipers in and there is no support or resource given for pastoral work.

So, now the clergy are enjoined to increase capacity but not to engage with the wider public through baptism, wedding or funeral or to be concerned with visiting, on-going theological resourcing or anything that looks like an incarnational presence in the community.

This overly managerial approach has meant that since 1960 the number of clergy has dropped from 13,000+ to some 7,000+ but the number of bishops has remained the same (and the number of archdeacons slightly increased). Clergy now have to sacrifice any sense of collegiality as they compete with each other for funding and resources, and while there is a separate fund for new initiatives (the Strategic Development Fund which finances short-term projects) there is nothing similar for traditional parish work. So far, there is little evidence that SDF money has created anything that is likely to last beyond the five year funding term. More is expected of the laity who are now not considered parishioners but disciples, plugging gaps left by the reduced number of clergy under initiatives like the creatively though not deliberately ironically named "Setting God's People Free" proposal. She acknowledges that the church authorities claim they are not undermining the traditional parish, but she draws attention to where the money and resources are being spent as evidence that this is exactly what they are doing.

She examines the project at Holy Trinity Brompton (HTB). A typical service there will have no recognisable Anglican characteristics: no Collect, Confession/Absolution or Creed, rarely a set of readings or the Lord's Prayer. It is not clear who is ordained. It is hugely appealing for a suburban elite and draws people from great distances but shows little engagement with the local community. In 2020 it boasted an Electoral Roll of over 4,000 but in contributed only £250,000 into Common Fund. [*This equates to £65 per worshiper per year when B&W has recently been asking for about £890*]. This is the model of church that the Archbishop's Council is seeking to resource. Millbank believes that the current leadership of the church is labouring under the false assumption that a more exciting faith will emerge, once the chains of the traditional parish have been loosened.

Her analysis is that institutions generally are in decline (from Cubs to pubs, political parties and youth groups) and one solution might be for churches to re-engage with these groups and work together for the benefit of the local community. Also to be the place where gaps in social provision can be met and ecological projects supported.

She suggests the church authorities might use some of the eye-watering sums of the CofE's investment money not in short-term projects which leave no lasting impression, but in better theological (not managerial) training and in more stipendiary clergy posts so that the job of the parish priest is not only achievable, but attractive and stimulating to new ordinands. It is commonly acknowledged that a reduction in clergy is directly linked to a reduction in church membership, but this is not addressed in the current proposals.

She offers some hope, seeing the early 21<sup>st</sup> century as an opportunity similar to the period after the War and the defeat of Nazism. Neo-liberalism has led to a new totalitarianism in public life and people are needing a more theistic accountable vision of society which, she believes, the parish system is able to provide.

Millbank offers a forensic analysis of the state of the CofE exposes a direction of travel which she believes is being deliberately concealed. It may be that the majority of the church is happy for things to develop along the lines she describes, but she feels there ought to be at least some honest conversation about this. Whether there is the appetite in the church to change direction remains to be seen.