

Churchman

EDITORIAL

Into all the world

In recent years, Christians in Western countries have become increasingly conscious that the publishing industry is undergoing major changes, some of which may even threaten the continued existence of printed books. Bookshops are closing or downsizing, and well-known imprints are disappearing or being merged with others. The recent combining of the traditionally Anglo-Catholic SPCK with the decidedly Evangelical IVP-UK is an astonishing example of what is now happening. Who would have imagined, even a decade ago, that two organisations which such different histories would one day come together under a single overall umbrella? The emergence of the e-book, readily available on Kindle, is another recent development, and if it spreads further, as it probably will, the book as we have known it may soon vanish altogether.

In this rapidly evolving situation, it is useful to remember that alongside such trends there is a rapid spread of Christian literature, still in traditional book form, around the world. Works originally written for a British or American readership are regularly being translated, not only into European languages like French, Spanish and Portuguese, but also into Indonesian, Chinese and Korean. Often they are only minimally adapted from the original, with the result that readers of those translations often acquire a knowledge of Western Christianity that is not reciprocated in the countries of origin. There is a huge and seemingly insatiable demand for Christian books in Africa and Asia that is little understood elsewhere but that is of great and growing significance on the world scene.

Particularly important here is Korea. Despite, or perhaps (to some extent) because of its troubled history in recent times, Korea has seen a growth and implantation of Christianity that is virtually unique in the non-European world. It has Christian colleges and seminaries to rival those in the West, and produces a huge amount of literature that is virtually unknown elsewhere. The demand far outstrips the ability of local theologians and pastors to supply it, so the temptation to resort to other means is especially great. Publishers have long known that pirated

editions of their books are liable to turn up in a Korean translation, concealed from the rest of the world by a unique script that foreigners are unable to decipher. Just as seriously, some Korean authors are tempted to 'borrow' huge chunks of material from Western books, translate them into Korean and publish them as their own work. Such blatant plagiarism is often hard for outsiders to detect, again because of the language barrier. British or American authors are unlikely to complain about something they know nothing about, and few Koreans have the English-language skills they would need to detect the abuse of source material, even if that abuse is open and widespread.

To their great credit, a number of Korean Christians are aware of the problem and are doing their best to deal with it. An anti-plagiarism drive has recruited almost 4000 supporters, and they have had considerable success in forcing plagiarised works out of the Korean market. Of course, few writers want to be exposed in this way and in Asian cultures, the inevitable loss of face is particularly humiliating. We should therefore not be surprised to discover that some of the accused are hitting back, forcing the anti-plagiarism group to get involved in lengthy and complex court cases to determine whether the authors under suspicion are guilty of plagiarism or not.

One such person is a man called Thomas Song, a Korean who grew up in Canada and did his doctorate at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois. He has now returned to Korea as a professor of Old Testament, and in the space of seven years has managed to churn out an extraordinary twenty-two commentaries on the Hebrew Scriptures. Naturally this has attracted the attention of the anti-plagiarists, who have found ample ground for concern. But Dr Song was not going to give in without a fight, and in his defence he produced Peter O'Brien's well-known commentary on Hebrews, which was published to considerable acclaim in the Pillar Series of New Testament commentaries put out by Eerdmans. Dr Song managed to find six sentences, scattered through Dr O'Brien's work, that were identical to ones in William Lane's earlier commentary on the same epistle. How that happened is unclear, but the presumption was that Dr O'Brien had deliberately copied Dr Lane word for word. Dr Song did not see anything wrong with that – his point was that he was doing the same thing in his own commentaries and should not be accused of plagiarism on account of what he thought was an established practice in the world of Biblical commentary writing.

The matter came to the attention of Eerdmans, which launched an investigation of the O'Brien commentary that apparently found many

more examples of the same phenomenon liberally scattered through it. They then searched Dr O'Brien's other commentaries (on Ephesians and Philippians) and discovered similar correspondences with other works there, although not nearly as many. As a result, they decided to withdraw all three volumes from publication, though without mentioning the word 'plagiarism' in their formal announcement, perhaps because that question has still not been unambiguously decided. The immediate result of this is that Dr O'Brien's life's work has been destroyed and his reputation tarnished in the world of academic scholarship, even though nobody has ever complained about his work directly and he himself was completely unaware of what had happened until it was too late to do anything about it.

To make matters more complicated, Dr O'Brien's commentaries have been widely used for many years and have been highly praised by specialists in the field. Nobody has ever noticed any kind of plagiarism in his work and not even the alleged victims of it have found any reason to complain. We cannot say that the Eerdmans investigators acted irresponsibly – they were confronted with a certain amount of evidence and pursued it to what seemed to them to be the logical conclusion. Moreover, the Koreans who had informed them were non-plussed when they found out what had happened. It was never their intention to bring Dr O'Brien's reputation into doubt and they were very surprised when they discovered the drastic effect that their actions had resulted in. But whatever the rights and wrongs of this sorry episode may be, the fact remains that three useful (and widely used) commentaries have suddenly been withdrawn from circulation for reasons that nobody could have foreseen and which many still find hard to believe. How is it possible that well-meaning people trying to do the right thing could end up like this?

The O'Brien affair raises many questions, and no doubt there will be considerable heart searching in the academic publishing world in the days to come. It is clear that the whole problem of what constitutes plagiarism will have to be revisited and publishers will have to have much clearer guidelines in future. Modern technology has made it possible to detect potential difficulties before they reach print, and it must be hoped that editors will make greater use of it in their efforts to stamp out anything that might be regarded as fraudulent, whether it is or not. If that can be achieved, then some good may eventually come out of this unfortunate tale and future embarrassments will be avoided.

All of this may seem a long way from the affairs of the Anglican Communion (though Dr O'Brien is an ordained Anglican minister) but it

comes closer to home than many of us realise. Whether we like it or not, we live in a globalised world where information spreads like wildfire and where events in faraway places can impact us whether we understand what is going on or not. This is a universal phenomenon, and it is by no means restricted to Christian publishing. The world is a much smaller place than it used to be, and cherished concepts like privacy and national sovereignty no longer mean much. When a prominent person like Sir Cliff Richard is accused of something it becomes front-page news and plenty of people start to believe that something is amiss, whether there is any evidence for the charges being made or not. A man like him may be perfectly innocent (and according to the law is so, unless and until something to the contrary can be proved) but in the scales of so-called 'public opinion' he will have been judged and found wanting – at least in some people's minds. What has happened to him could happen to anybody, of course, but prominent people are bound to suffer disproportionately and once the word is out, there is nothing anyone can do to stop it.

It is therefore particularly disturbing that concepts of truth and of scrupulous adherence to facts, which at one time were the hallmarks of good practice, are now rapidly disappearing from public discourse. Even in the O'Brien affair, there were some observers who could not resist adding fuel to the fire, making claims against him that had no more basis than their own creative imaginations, and so it is not difficult to understand how dangerous this can be. Distance and unfamiliarity with the circumstances only make matters worse, because the less that is known about something, the easier it is to make things up and fan the flames of ignorance and prejudice, using uncontrollable social media as the vehicle of choice for spreading gossip and slander. It is one thing for unscrupulous politicians to behave in this way, but quite another when Christians get caught up in it as well.

This matters, because as the Anglican Communion has discovered to its cost, the ripple effect of lies and misrepresentations can be very unsettling. One of the most astonishing things about the push for the acceptance of homosexual behaviour as morally equal to that of heterosexual marriage is the way that this innately absurd idea has been embraced, not only by the formers of public opinion in Western societies, but also by church leaders who in theory ought to be resisting it. Politicians prattle on about rectifying the injustices done to the victims of 'homophobia', but when bishops chime in and start beating their breasts in self-inflicted guilt, we have entered a new dimension of warped fantasy. It is now taken for granted in many quarters that the mainline churches

have treated homosexuals with considerable cruelty in the past, even though it is also acknowledged that a number of them have risen high in the hierarchy of their respective denominations. Certainly the Church of England has long been a kind of safe space for such people (not to mention active paedophiles, who are only now being rooted out – often years after their death and on the basis of evidence that is far from watertight). At the same time, nobody mentions that many people have quietly engaged in ministry to homosexuals over the years and received no publicity (or credit) for their work. If such people are mentioned at all, it is usually in the context of lurid attempts on the part of maverick pastors seeking a ‘cure’ for homosexuality. The details are often vague and impossible to verify, but the mere mention of such practices is often enough to ensure that the compassionate care exercised by many responsible pastors is ignored and effectively discredited.

What has not been kept quiet, of course, is the constant whining of the supposed ‘victims’ of the church’s alleged policies. People in the UK or the USA may think that this is an in-house problem that can be debated in synods and discussed in ‘shared conversations’, but word travels far and fast. Plenty of people in the far corners of the world are well aware of the troubles of the Anglican churches of the West, and they are deeply worried by what they see as the complicity of a hierarchy that not only cannot bring itself to challenge the immorality of the day but prefers to compromise with it instead. The grotesque picture of clergy and bishops entering into homosexual ‘marriages’ tells its own story and does more to discredit the church around the world than many people realise. In some countries Christians are in danger of their lives because the locals associate them with such shenanigans, and the perpetrators of their discomfort neither know nor care.

Nor is the problem restricted to irresponsible liberals seeking to overthrow traditional teaching. A few years ago, when a freewheeling Florida preacher advertised that he was going to burn the Qur’an, several churches in Pakistan were burnt to the ground in retaliation and people lost their lives, even though it was nothing to do with them. Militant far-right groups who are out to target Muslims in retaliation for the behaviour of Islamic extremists can easily enlist like-minded Christians in support of their aims, with the result that the actions of a tiny minority end up tarnishing the church as a whole. Few people bother to distinguish the true from the false in such matters, and the bias of so much of the media often makes it virtually impossible to do so. The end result is that innocent people suffer and serious Christians find themselves facing

potential discrimination because their beliefs are held up as socially divisive and inimical to law and order.

Globalisation is an uncomfortable thing for many people, but it is here to stay. Populist agitation to build a wall, or to leave the European Union, in order to keep out unwanted immigrants may be an attractive solution to some, but any success in such endeavours will prove to be temporary and will ultimately backfire. At the other end of the scale, totalitarian regimes that try to block the internet are extremely vulnerable to the tide of modern technology and are more likely to collapse than to achieve their aim in the longer term. Whether we like it or not, we live in an interconnected world where what happens in one place can have unintended and highly damaging consequences elsewhere that nobody can do anything to prevent. We are fooling ourselves if we think that we can ignore this trend and any attempt to turn the clock back to a simpler time will end in failure, if not in disaster. As Christians, we are faced with a situation of unprecedented danger, which we must recognise and take steps to counteract as best we can. We must resist the temptation to resort to the ways of the world in order to overcome it, hard though that may be for some. The challenges we face are new, multifaceted and largely unfamiliar, but the weapons of our warfare remain the same – truth, righteousness, the gospel of peace, faith, salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God. Against these no enemy can triumph, and with them we shall be able, as St Paul so eloquently told the Ephesian church, to ‘quench all the fiery darts of the wicked.’

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