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ILLIBERALISM

Some of you sent me copies of the recent New Yorker essay "A Canterbury Tale: the battle within the Church of England to allow women to be bishops" (April 26th, 2010). The New Yorker is of course an institution of American literary liberalism – and that's not a slam. I grew up relishing its wonderful cartoons, exquisitely crafted short stories (including those by the Canadian writers Mavis Gallant and Alice Munro), and its long essays on all manner of topics arcane, mysterious, and engrossing. Though I don't often read it now, I still regard it with esteem. So it is sad to read "A Canterbury Tale"; it is evidence of a sorry declension of a once noble tradition into something very near the promotion of mindless hatred.

The hatred is evident enough: all the gay and female priests are "brilliant" and "attractive" and are suffering terrible oppression (except, of course, being handed plum positions and being lionized in the press). All the conservatives are "chilling," "schismatic" and "condescending" sub-fascist misogynists whom justice requires be crushed. The analysis rarely moves above the level of: theological liberals good - theological conservatives bad.

The mindlessness is equally evident: despite the New Yorker's reputation for thoughtful essays, the discussion of "the battle to allow women to be bishops" is advanced without any theological reflection whatsoever. Quite a lot of sloganeering does not count. It is an unpleasant read for conservatives who like women, have no problem with powerful women, and who nonetheless think that the church's decisions should be grounded rationally and theologically in the church's historic Faith and Order. But it must be an even more unpleasant read for genuine liberals, to see their humane and rational tradition hijacked by illiberal bigotry. GGD

The Rev'd. Gavin G. Dunbar

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