



# CNI

## **Comment - Royal Black theology : Is a wider review rather than a single C of I diocesan exercise needed?**

Part of the rather diverse and intriguing response by the diocesan bishop to the Knocknamuckley Parish situation was the announcement that an imminent English church woman would conduct an assessment of an aspect of the theology of the Royal Black Preceptory (RBP). The RBP's use of the Old Testament was specifically mentioned.

From the outset let me state that I “do not walk”, in that I have never been a member of any of the loyal orders. However, not only did I grow up at a place and a time knowing about the distinctiveness of each of the orders, but also throughout the course of my ministry I have always been in contact with members of the Church of Ireland, both clergy and laity, who are members of the RBP. As I will state later, from

my observation, they all have been exemplary members of this church, in their family life, in their civic service and by their Christian witness.

The RBP is a higher order distinct from but within the 'family' of the Orange Order. In local parlance, you have to be a member of the Orange before you can be elected to membership of the Black. The prime visual distinctiveness for the street-side observer is that it is a black, not an orange sash, and that the predominant symbol on those black sashes is a red cross.

A casual perusal of the latest issue of the RBP's magazine which is available online will reveal something of the ethos and stance of the RBP. (1)

The charities chosen for support in 2014 were The Bible Society and Missionary Aviation Fellowship. One district (a grouping of preceptories/branches) centred on Markethill raised 2,200 pounds for these causes.

Ballymacarrett district raised funds for both the charities and also responded to an appeal for persecuted Christians in the Sudan. Another raised funds for Alzheimers by organising a Songs of Praise in a church. The Salvation Army received support for its anti-trafficking work. One

preceptory has raised over 40,500 pounds for charity since 1988. Banbridge District organised a concert to mark World War 1 and raised 6,650 pounds for the Royal Irish Regiment's Benevolent Fund. Kiwoko Hospital also received support.

As someone once said "By their fruits you shall know them". This information was taken from just one issue of the organisation's magazine, and as aforementioned, it is readily available online. - see reference below.

That same magazine carried a short tribute - a longer one is being prepared - to the organisation's former leader, Lord Molyneaux of Killead.

It so happens that James Molyneaux was a member of Killead Parish, the neighbouring parish to the one in which I was nurtured in the faith and formulae of the Church of Ireland. Educated at the local Roman Catholic school, he was a veteran of the Second World War who witnessed the scenes at Bergen-Belsen after its liberation, he rose to become leader of the RBP, leader of the Ulster Unionist Party, and eventually a Life Peer, taking the title Lord Molyneaux of Killead.

A succession of rectors and clergy in the parish readily testified to his witness to the faith, and his support of the Church of Ireland in particular. I was not in the least surprised by the fact that Lord Eames, our former archbishop, was present in St Catherine's at James' funeral service.

In the leadership of the RBP, James was succeeded by William Logan, MBE, another member of the C of I whom I knew for a long time before I served in Belfast Cathedral where he is a parishioner. Billy is originally from the Shankill Road, a community he served both in business and in several voluntary roles. His public honour was for his services to the community and in particular for a long and astute period as chair of the Board of Governors of a major secondary school in the north of the city, the Belfast Boys Model.

The current chaplain in the RBP whom I know best of all is Canon Will Murphy, MBE. His public honour was for service to the deaf community. Over and beyond that he was an exemplary prison chaplain as well as a long serving chaplain to the reserve forces - the role in which I got to know him apart from both of us being clergy in the same diocese of Connor. I don't

think he would object to being described as an evangelical Anglican.

Granted, these are only three men - but men whose faith and whose commitment to their church I have nothing but esteem for. I could go on naming others who were my parishioners and whose service to their Church I have observed over some forty years.

The Christian commitment of such men maintain my esteem of the RBP. The organisation in recent years reviewed its basis of commitment and updated the language of the same. It states that a member -

“Must testify to being a believer in the one living and true God as his Heavenly Father, His only Son Jesus Christ as the sole Mediator between God and man, and the Holy Spirit as the Comforter

“Must uphold the Reformed Christian Faith

“Should study Holy Scripture, which is the inspired Word of God and therefore as such contains all things necessary for salvation, making it the guide of his faith and practice

“Should regularly attend Church for Divine  
Worship

“Should reject and oppose the erroneous  
doctrines of other faiths and practices that  
do not conform to Holy Scripture

“Should avoid all things that are indecent,  
irreligious, false and profane,

“Should live his life so that he brings honour to  
God through devotion, faithfulness,  
honesty, justice and temperance.”

To enable the transmission of these values the RBP has for some time offered media training workshops to help members to spread the order's Christian and charitable message. This programme was developed and is delivered under the oversight of Austin Hunter, a well known, high calibre journalist, recognised for his integrity. Small wonder that in the televised series on Armagh as “City of Faith”, two of the participants, both Presbyterian elders, are members of the RBP.

The C of I had a Sectarianism Committee which reported to the General Synod in 1999. Arising from its work, public funding was obtained from both sides of the border for further work which

morphed into the Church of Ireland's Hard Gospel project. The role of the loyal orders came under the scrutiny of a scoping study report for a Sectarianism Education Project (SEP) in January 2003. (2).

The Hard Gospel project as a whole in no small part was influenced by the concern within the C of I arising from Drumcree. "Many respondents would like the SEP to continue to address the relationship between the church and the Orange Order" (Page 10, SEP).

Perhaps I may have missed it but I cannot recall any substantive dialogue based on this Hard Gospel work which effectively engaged the RBP. After a period of inactivity of some 12 years, now there is to be an examination of one aspect of the RBP and by one diocese.

Is it fair to ask why this specific concern has not been raised prior to the recent quite shocking events at Knocknamuckley which as far as I can make out arise moreso internally from within that parish than they do externally from the RBP either locally or throughout Northern Ireland?

The situation now could beg the interpretation of a quid pro quo. The question is readily formed - Is it part of an attempt to appear to be even-

handed? Is the decision to move the rector on being 'balanced' with an investigation into one aspect of the RBP?

I hope this is not the case. I have often wondered why the C of I has not attempted to effectively engage with and hopefully mobilise its responsible members within the loyal orders, and particularly the RBP, in a critical alliance to understand and address the range of concerns in places like (i) Drumcree which more than exercised the ministries of Archbishops Eames and Harper, and (ii) Ardoyne in the city shared by Connor and Down where tens of thousands of pounds are being wasted in policing each and every evening, in a society strapped by the scarcity of public finance.

The RBP is found in strength throughout the five northern dioceses, and it would be a minority of parishes which do not have parishioners who are members of the order. The consequences of an action in one diocese could play out in places well beyond its boundaries, affecting other parishes and relationships between clergy and their parishioners.

Would the issue in the first instance benefit from consideration by the House of Bishops and the Standing Committee of the General Synod? If



these bodies deem that such an enquiry is necessary, the initiative would be much more strongly safeguarded by clearly having the official support of the wider Church of Ireland which could ensure that it is conducted within the spirit and scope of the work already commenced and identified in the Hard Gospel initiative.

In particular Section E of the General Synod Sub Committee on Sectarianism Report : April 1999 should be consulted regarding the possible consequences of action being taken by an individual bishop. (3).

It seems to me that something similar was considered and the opinion recorded in this report to General Synod, including a reference to legal opinion, may be pertinent.

To confine a theological enquiry solely to an aspect of the RBP's use of the Old Testament is massively inadequate in respect of the Knocknamuckley situation.

If the RBP enquiry is warranted, then a similar enquiry into the introduction of personnel from the Bethel Church into the worship activities of that parish is warranted.

The Protestant Standard is not exactly top of my reading list. But this well established blog in a comment on Bethel Church raises enough concerns for me. And I feel I would not be alone in the C of I.

Bethel Church practices according to the Standard include:

- members rolling on the graves of dead Christian revivalists to “soak up the anointing of the dead”
- walking through a fire tunnel as evidence of the presence of the Holy Spirit
- waking up angels
- releasing the sounds of heaven
- seeking signs and wonders such as the glory cloud and gold dust
- raising the dead. (4).

Most will readily agree this is somewhat well removed from standard C of I liturgical fare.

I do not suggest that these practices were made manifest in the situation in the parish concerned.

Rather, I am concerned that this Bethel Church is alleged to have found favour with the duly appointed incumbent and that some of the C of I parishioners were concerned, and in my opinion, rightly so about manifestation of this.

How this came to pass and furthermore, that the incumbent was exercising a ministry in other parishes in the diocese under the New Wine banner, I feel should concern those with whom responsibility for standards in ordained ministry rests.

House of Bishops - over to you. - RBP, Bethel Church, New Wine.

*Houston McKelvey*

## **References -**

**(1).** Royal Black Preceptory - <http://royalblack.org/>

**(2).** Hard Gospel Scoping report - <http://synod.ireland.anglican.org/2003/news/scstudy1.pdf>

**(3).** Church of Ireland General Synod Sub Committee on Sectarianism Report : April 1999. Reprinted from the Church of Ireland, General Synod Book of Reports 1999 - <http://ireland.anglican.org/information/49>

**(4).** The Protestant Telegraph - Who are Bethel Church? <http://protestant-standard.blogspot.co.uk/2015/06/who-are-bethel-church.html>

