Michael Jensen has published an engaging book, *Sydney Anglicanism: An Apology*, which deserves to be widely read as a discussion document. His purpose is clear. He believes the Diocese is misunderstood. Its critics savagely attack it, he says, and use poisonous words against it, but he wears it all as a badge of honour, because he believes in the church’s mission. I admire him for that.

Jensen argues that Sydney isn’t the monolithic, power-obsessed Diocese it’s portrayed to be. He says the Diocese isn’t, as its critics insist, extremist and hardline, or conservative and fundamentalist, or isolated and eccentric. Instead, he insists: Evangelical Anglicans of the sort found in Sydney have good ground for claiming the Anglican heritage as their own and ought not to accept the view that they are in some way the illegitimate children of the Anglican family.

On the whole, Jensen’s apology is charming, perhaps deceptively so, as he tends to gloss over contentious issues, skip lightly over large subjects, and his real motives are not always apparent. Perhaps this is because he’s set himself a difficult task. He needs to tread cautiously when trying to engage two different readerships: first, the broader Anglican communion, most of which is quite unlike Sydney; second, the Diocese itself, some of which might not agree with him. Sometimes he makes a lot of sense; other times he doesn’t. Unless the reader is completely within his mind—and only he can reconcile what’s happening in there—the overall effect is dynamic but baffling.

On reading his apology, one senses the Diocese is a mixture of insecurity and confidence; perhaps like the broader Anglican communion; perhaps like the broader Christian church.

**Part One: The Bible**

The first chapter of Part One, discussing whether Sydney Anglicans are fundamentalists, is perhaps unnecessary, as the term “fundamentalist”—like “conservative” and “puritan”—has become a meaningless pejorative aimed at anyone who takes their faith seriously. In particular, it isn’t necessary for Jensen to waste so much time defending the Diocese against Muriel Porter, whose views can be gleaned from the titles of her books, *The New Puritans: The Rise of Fundamentalism in the Anglican Church* (2006) and *Sydney Anglicans and the Threat to World Anglicanism* (2011), both of which assume Anglicanism is—or ought to be—indistinguishable from the liberal agenda. While there are some aspects of this liberal agenda I agree with—such as the ordination of women to the priesthood and consecration of women as bishops—I find liberals within the church are, more often than not, as intolerant as the “fundamentalists” they demonise.

The next chapter, on Biblical Theology, is the book’s most interesting read. Jensen’s description of how Biblical Theology developed under Donald Robinson is illuminating, as is the discovery that Robinson was a friend of Brevard Childs (1923–2007), the influential Old Testament scholar from Yale. Why is Biblical Theology important? Because, generally speaking, since the Enlightenment, biblical studies has increasingly focused on what is known as the historical-critical method, which is dedicated to unearthing the multiple and complex sources behind the biblical text and dissecting its development. This method has encouraged many Christians to approach the Bible as literature, which Robinson knew to be an inadequate method of studying it as scripture. Robinson and Childs, and other academics in their mould, developed a different approach called the canonical-critical
method, which works alongside the historical-critical method to reclaim a sense of the Bible as divine revelation. On its own the historical-critical method tends to rob the Bible of its revelatory sense, and the canonical-critical method provides a corrective balance to that tendency.

The concept of the biblical canon is important here, as immediately we’re forced to distinguish between those texts that were canonised and those that weren’t, and we’re invited to consider how divine inspiration operates in this canonical process. In my own words (not Jensen’s) the fact that the texts of the Bible may have been written and redacted over a long period of time isn’t as important as understanding why the ancient Jews codified an Old Testament canon and why the ancient Christians accepted the canonicity of that Jewish canon and codified their own complementary New Testament canon. Not all ancient texts are of equal value, and Jews and Christians have made collective decisions about which texts are normative to Judeo-Christianity and which texts aren’t. Again in my own words, these collective decisions may well be how divine inspiration operates.

Jensen argues that Sydney’s focus on Biblical Theology distinguishes it from other dioceses and is important to the Diocese’s polity. He’s proud that, for a long time now, Biblical Theology has been a bedrock first-year subject at Moore College and he believes there’s scope to expand the subject beyond first year and study it at the advanced level. While I agree with him in principle—since the dialectic of historical-critical and canonical-critical is crucial—there are a few unknowns to consider before I can agree with him in practice.

As Jensen insists, the focus of Biblical Theology—whether taught at Moore College—is studying the Old Testament as foreshadowing the New Testament, and the New Testament as fulfilling the Old Testament. He believes it’s fundamental to see the Bible’s theological coherence as a means of understanding its literary unity, not the other way around:

It coheres not because it corresponds to a certain interpretational scheme but because it is the work of a single divine author. This singularity finds its outworking in the centrality of Jesus Christ to the Christian understanding of Scripture. Whatever one might say about the framework and literary structure of Scripture, it cannot be Holy Scripture if it is not Christocentric.

The problem with this Christocentric formula, however, isn’t that it’s wrong but that it needs to be approached with caution. There’s an emerging consensus—among Christian and Jewish academics—that the New Testament is Jewish literature, that the Jesus movement was originally a variety of Second Temple Judaism, and that the antithetical identities of Patristic Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism emerged only gradually after the first century and were not fixed until late antiquity, which means anywhere between the second and eighth centuries. Ultimately, therefore, Biblical Theology needs to be aware of inter-faith sensitivities and the inevitable question of “replacement theology” otherwise known as supersessionism. As inter-faith dialogue occurs on many interdependent levels—official, academic and individual—the broader Anglican communion, the broader Christian church, and the varieties of Rabbinic Judaism, all need to know whether Biblical Theology at Moore College teaches replacement theology in any form. The challenge Christians face, and which isn’t impossible, is how to be Christocentric without also being—or even appearing to be—supersessionist.

The next chapter, on Propositional Revelation, will appear somewhat esoteric to many readers—ordained and non-ordained—and should have begun with a clearer definition to ground the subject. It would appear Jensen wants to clarify what Broughton Knox really said, in a polemical but misunderstood article he wrote in 1960: “Propositional Revelation, the Only Revelation”. Because of the confusion generated, “This small article has had a distorting rather than clarifying influence on how Sydney Anglican theology has sometimes perceived itself and how it has been perceived.” Jensen reminds us that Sydney’s position is that the Bible is God’s word, and:

in its words, God speaks to human beings so that they may hear and understand. Though he himself is beyond human comprehension, God’s self-revelation is intelligible.

Jensen defends Sydney’s understanding of God’s word against those who counter it; for example, the former Archbishop of Perth, Peter Carnley,
whose book *Reflections in Glass* (2004) targets the Sydney view of Propositional Revelation, mainly by arguing that, as human reason is limited, “the index of Christian orthodoxy” is the proposition that God is “an infinite mystery, an ineffable, transcendent reality” and therefore shouldn’t be reduced to our statements about him nor contained by our thoughts about him. As far as Carnley is concerned, this dogma of infinite mystery and transcendent reality is essential to understanding the Anglican ethos; it’s a single truth with massive implications for our speech about God; it explains why when we speak of God we can only use metaphors which we project “onto a heavenly screen”.

In defending Sydney’s Propositional Revelation against this kind of “negative” or “apophatic” theology, Jensen argues that:

if we follow Carnley, the revelation we have of God is no revelation at all. God is not with us, does not give himself to us, but comes so cloaked that we must doubt whether we have seen his glory at all.

Further, Jensen points out that what we really have in *Reflections in Glass*, rather than anything truly ancient and orthodox, is actually a religious epistemology which has its roots in Kant (1724–1804), whose “agnosticism about knowing ultimate reality” appears in the thought of Mansel (1820–1871), a theologian on whom Carnley heavily relies.

Jensen’s observation—that Carnley’s religious epistemology owes more to the Enlightenment than to Anglican orthodoxy—may or may not be true, but the reader doesn’t have to take sides here, as there are other views to consider, and the whole question of what is or isn’t orthodox is a lively one. The question is traditionally framed as a dualism, of what we see as belonging to Jewish revelation and what we see as belonging to Greek reason; however, the question is currently being re-framed in an exciting way by Christian and Jewish academics who study the Second Temple Judaism of the Hellenistic Period.

In fact, it’s no longer fashionable to draw a mutually exclusive antithesis between Jewish revelation and Greek reason. According to Benedict XVI, who appears to side more with Knox and Jensen than with Carnley, Christianity is the religion of the Logos—a term that means both “word” and “reason”. In his widely misrepresented and misunderstood Regensburg Lecture of September 2006, Benedict reminds us that, even before Christ, biblical faith had achieved a rapprochement between revelation and reason; wherein the heart of Jewish revelation and the heart of Greek reason were joined in faith; whereupon Logos, as both “word” and “reason”, became part of God’s nature, and our nature too, insofar as we’ve been made in God’s image.

According to Benedict, this rapprochement remained intact until the late Middle Ages, when trends in theology sundered its synthesis. At that time, in contrast with the so-called intellectualism of Augustine and Aquinas, there arose with Duns Scotus a voluntarism which—in its later developments—led to the claim that God’s freedom allows him to do anything he chooses, even to act without reason. Benedict finds this claim problematic, as it suggests God “could have done the opposite of everything he has actually done”; the claim could even lead to the image of a capricious God who isn’t bound to truth and goodness; an image of God contrary to biblical faith. According to Benedict:

the faith of the Church has always insisted that between God and us, between his eternal Creator Spirit and our created reason there exists a real analogy [in which] unlikeness remains infinitely greater than likeness, yet not to the point of abolishing analogy and its language. God does not become more divine when we push him away from us in a sheer, impenetrable voluntarism; rather, the truly divine God is the God who has revealed himself as logos and, as logos, has acted and continues to act lovingly on our behalf.

The final chapter in Part One, on the Romance of Preaching and the Sydney Sermon, is about Sydney’s preference for something called Expository Preaching; a method based on the conviction that the Bible is the inspired word of God; that to hear the Bible is to hear the voice of God himself. According to Jensen: “The expository sermon thus has the grand, even heroic, task of mediating the divine voice to the present-day hearer.” This task is fine in theory, but it depends on many variables, including the knowledge and ability of the person preaching.

Several years ago I heard a Sydney layperson preach, at an Evangelical parish, on Trinity Sunday. I’ve got nothing against laypeople preaching, whether male or female, as there’s a good chance they’ll be as qualified as the clergy, and their sermons are liable to be no worse than the clergy’s. The theme of his sermon was hard to grasp, though, and seemed counterintuitive, as he didn’t expound on anything biblical, or even religious; he simply questioned the relevance of this feast day. Trinity Sunday, he said, is fairly recent, and therefore questionable, since it began in the medieval period.
I suspect he was trying to make the perfectly valid point that, unlike other feast days, Trinity Sunday focuses on a theological idea about God's nature rather than salvation history, but it didn't come out that way. Instead we were reminded of how much more we know now than they knew then, and he seemed more of a stand-up comic than a preacher when mocking scholasticism's debate over how many angels can dance on the head of a pin. This is one example where the Sydney preference for expository preaching clearly doesn't apply; no doubt there are other examples throughout the Diocese.

Clergy trained outside Sydney are encouraged to use a different method, which ideally includes the principle of expository preaching but doesn't regard expository preaching as a "romantic" end in itself. For example, I was taught that the attention of listeners starts to drift after three minutes and even good preachers begin to lose their listeners after six. I was also taught that, within my Sacramental tradition, the liturgy has a particular shape and the purpose of the sermon is to complement that shape rather than create a hiatus which detracts from it. The service of Holy Communion—otherwise known as the Lord's Supper or the Mass—is in two parts: the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist. The sermon occurs between these two parts and it's meant to link them, not compete with them. The layperson I heard preaching that Trinity Sunday clearly didn't preach an expository sermon and I wouldn't describe the experience of listening to him in romantic terms. It was more like a blind date with someone I never want to see again.

Part Two: The Church

It's difficult for those outside Sydney—and for the tiny minority of non-Evangelicals in Sydney—to comment on Jensen's treatment of the subjects covered in Part Two. This is because his treatment is highly nuanced—to a degree that some readers will find self-contradictory—and because it's aimed at Evangelical readers within Sydney rather than the broader Anglican communion. Bruce Kaye has written a perceptive review of the book (which can be found at www.anglicanstogether.org). Jensen's book and Kaye's review should be read together, as the issues both raise are significant.

In particular, Kaye questions Jensen's unconvincing and cavalier treatment of Sydney's history, as he skips from Richard Johnson—Chaplain on the First Fleet—to what Kaye calls "the current hegemonic views" of the Diocese. It's unfortunate that Jensen, who teaches Church History at Moore College, has chosen to be silent on several generations of diocesan history, in order to give the impression of "a continuing evangelical stream flowing continually in Sydney". Also, Kaye asks, "Where are the Memorialists in this story?" referring to the fifty clergy—representing one-third of the diocesan parishes at the time—who in 1938 presented Archbishop Mowll with a memorial appealing for an acceptance of diversity within the Diocese, "and how have successive dissenters been treated, and is there any pattern to that side of the story of Sydney? These are questions worth addressing in a book that wishes to commend and challenge."

My favourite observation of Jensen's is pregnant with unintended meaning:

The reality is that the archbishop of Sydney sits at the hub of an enormous and relatively well-resourced see; and so it is not surprising that archbishops of Sydney tend to develop their own views on things.

He is speaking here of the role an archbishop plays in diocesan politics, dominated as it is by leading clergy, who have an innate mistrust of bishops, even the ones they have helped elect. But Jensen's observation surely applies to many other issues, on which the future of the Diocese depends, where the role of the archbishop remains decisive. How Catholic is that!

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