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## Archbishop Ramsey: The Shape of the Church

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Peter Webster's *Archbishop Ramsey: the Shape of the Church* is the best introduction to Michael Ramsey's archiepiscopacy at Canterbury currently available, and should be read by everyone interested in the state of the Church of England in the 1960s. Webster's study draws heavily on the Ramsey papers at Lambeth Palace Library, a fact which lends it greater scholarly weight than Michael De-La-Noy's colourful *Michael Ramsey: a Portrait* (1990), and makes it a very useful companion to Owen Chadwick's monumental *Michael Ramsey: a Life* (1990), to which it frequently and understandably defers. Webster's discussion covers an impressive amount of ground in just 137 pages, since, as is usual in Ashgate's Archbishops of Canterbury series, the second half of the book is given over to extracts from Ramsey's speeches and writings, which Webster has helpfully annotated. As Webster states on his opening page, *The Shape of the Church* is 'an assessment', not a biography; it focuses on Ramsey's views and activities whilst he was in office, aiming to evaluate whether or not they were effective responses to a period of rapid cultural change (p. 3).

After a brief introduction, largely devoted to outlining Ramsey's personal history and theology, *The Shape of the Church* delivers its core material over five chapters. 'The Church and the churches' examines Ramsey's inter-ecclesiastical activities, exploring relations with the wider Anglican communion, Orthodoxy, the World Council of Churches, Roman Catholicism, and Ramsey's interventions on intercommunion and Anglo-Methodist unity. 'Church and State' surveys Ramsey's attitudes towards his church's relations with the British state, including Establishment, canon law revision, crown appointments, Anglican self-government, and relations with the monarchy and the House of Lords. 'Church and nation' explores the reformation of Britain's moral laws in the 1960s, discussing Ramsey on capital punishment, abortion, censorship, divorce law reformation, the Sexual Offences Act, and debates about sex before marriage. 'The Church in a time of crisis' then turns to the imagined context in which these developments took place, which this reviewer would have

placed earlier in the discussion. This chapter contains some of the most interesting material in the book, but is confusingly organised, beginning with national days of prayer amidst the felt crisis of the late 1960s, before moving to Northern Ireland in the early 1970s, before discussing prayer book revision, and only then examining the *Honest to God* fracas of 1963.<sup>(1)</sup> Finally, 'The prophetic Church' focuses on international politics, discussing Ramsey's stances on the atom bomb, South Africa, Vietnam, Southern Rhodesia, and Commonwealth immigration. With this material in mind, *The Shape of the Church* concludes that Ramsey was indeed a highly effective archbishop, who skilfully pointed his Church towards beneficial ways of reshaping itself in the face of inexorable cultural change. 'How then should we judge Michael Ramsey?' asks the opening line of its conclusion, before immediately observing that 'in general, later observers of Ramsey have judged him well' (p. 133).

As a report from the archives, *The Shape of the Church* is highly successful. It is eminently readable, it covers a very good range of issues, and it does so using an excellent level of detail. It makes a valuable contribution to a complicated subject, and it opens up some of the Ramsey archive to a wider readership. It should certainly be included in relevant undergraduate and graduate reading lists. At the same time, this reviewer felt that improvements could have been made in the ways in which this archival material was placed in its social and cultural context. Since *The Shape of the Church* has indeed made a valuable contribution, and since its discussion was necessarily limited to 137 pages, the points below should not be read as indictments of the book, but as suggestions for how the literature on Ramsey might be pushed forward.

It seems worth stating at the outset that, from a historian's point of view, *The Shape of the Church's* evaluative focus does not seem very fruitful. As Webster fully recognises, evaluation is closely dependent on whichever partisan criteria the historian might happen to be using (p. 133), and readers will accept or dismiss such evaluations depending on whether they like the criteria or not.<sup>(2)</sup> Webster takes the only sensible way out of this problem, which is to organise his book's concluding historiographical summary by political and theological outlook, distinguishing between radical, liberal, conservative, and reactionary views of Ramsey (pp. 135–6). Yet since these distinctions are primarily about morality, and only secondarily about Ramsey, it would have been preferable to have transcended such debates by using a more historically-grounded framing question. As it was, the evaluative focus took up space which might otherwise have allowed Webster's unique expertise to engage at length with the strictly historical questions surrounding Ramsey's tenure. For, as Webster argues in a closely related context, 'to focus too closely on whether [one's subject] was right or wrong ... is to miss important wider questions' (p. 109), or at least to engage with them in less depth than this reviewer would have wished.

The first of these questions is the precise nature of Ramsey's own moral and political strategy. In particular, *The Shape of the Church* could have dedicated much more detail to the paradox, perhaps central to any understanding of Ramsey, of exactly why his main approach to international politics seems to have been principled confrontation, whereas his main approach to moral legislation seems to have been compromise and accommodation.<sup>(3)</sup> Was this primarily because his principles led him to care more about one set of issues than the other? Or was this strategy primarily the product of his reading of the political situation? Or does the term 'strategy' imply a level of deliberation which, amidst the whirlwind of being an archbishop, Ramsey did not actually have time to develop? Underneath that apparent paradox are questions about how to contextualise Ramsey's moral-political principles. Should his politics be primarily seen as typical of those who shared his theological beliefs, for example, or were they chiefly shaped by his Liberal background? To what extent should Ramsey be regarded as an individual voice, rather than reflecting the political assumptions of the educated elite described in Noel Annan's *Our Age*?<sup>(4)</sup> Webster correctly notes that both theological and political influences were involved in Ramsey's political principles (p. 117),

but more contextualization would have helped place Ramsey on the wider cultural map more effectively.

This leads to the second major historical problem about Ramsey, which is the precise extent to which his hand really was forced by rapid social and cultural change. The orthodox view of 'the Sixties', advocated by Arthur Marwick and Callum Brown, sees traditional cultural leaders as adapting to massive popular trends which they had no role in causing.<sup>(5)</sup> A revisionist view, put forward by Hugh McLeod, sees church leaders as being moderately constrained by social developments, but still able to exercise positive agency in significant ways.<sup>(6)</sup> Matthew Grimley offers a still more revisionist view, arguing that the Church of England was an influential leader in certain aspects of legislative change.<sup>(7)</sup> More radically, but building on one of Grimley's insights, recent work has identified 'secularisation' in the early 1960s as an elite construct, not a real phenomenon, thus implying that the real religious temper of most of the British population in the early 1960s was broadly similar to that of the 1950s, and therefore that Ramsey actually had very significant public influence on 'moral' and religious matters, even if he did not realise it.<sup>(8)</sup> Webster's discussion tends to conflate these positions, ensuring that the true extent of Ramsey's room for manoeuvre is not always adequately ascertained (pp. 3, 104, 113). The general thrust of *The Shape of the Church* is towards the orthodox view, but this is implied by teleological language rather than explicitly defended. On the subject of permissive legislation, we are told that 'the moral law was based on an older moral consensus that had manifestly lost its force' (p. 138), though when, how, and among whom this loss of force happened is never discussed; the fact that some aspects of permissive legislation remained widely unpopular into the 1970s is acknowledged, but its implications are never seriously reckoned with.<sup>(9)</sup> On the subject of secularisation, we are told that 'the Church of England needed to learn to sing the Lord's song in a strange land' (p. 20), but we are not told precisely why it needed to do this, even though 90 per cent of Britons claimed a Christian affiliation in 1963, and over 70 per cent of Britons identified themselves as Christians in 2001.<sup>(10)</sup> *The Shape of the Church* concludes that 'the Church of England was redefining itself, and being redefined' (p. 139), which is definitely true, but since this is a major area of dispute between religious historians, it would have been valuable to have had greater clarity about the relative weight of these two dynamics.

That question can be partly illuminated by investigating a third central question about Ramsey, which is how he understood his social context, and how this understanding changed over time. For if Ramsey thought he was responding to his social context, then it seems difficult to understand his responses without tracking how he imagined that context in some detail. If this is not done, it becomes tempting to imply that Ramsey possessed inexplicably formidable powers as a sociologist. In this case, Ramsey 'knew' that the uncoupling of sin and crime was 'both inevitable and right' (p. 90); he 'knew' that the relationship between the established Church and the British people was changing' (p. 90); he 'knew' that liturgical change 'had been necessary, and right' (p. 108); and his views on ecumenism and church order were, apparently, 'always subject to the reality of divine action in the present age' (p. 40). The objection here is not that Ramsey's views about the inevitable flow of history were wrong, although they may have been, but that he presumably arrived at them through an imperfect process of cultural construction. Uncovering this process - historicizing Ramsey's teleologies, rather than repeating them - is a crucial part of explaining his approach to being an archbishop. How precisely, for example, did Ramsey's 'preparedness for difficulty, indeed an expectation of it' (p. 113) alter his perception of contemporary social trends? Thinking about Ramsey's interpretation of his own society is also a significant part of ascertaining his theology, since, as David Martin pointed out in 1965, the concepts of 'secularisation' and 'the secular age' are not theologically neutral; Ramsey's acceptance of them would have had important implications for his views on either divine providence or divine sovereignty, both of which are fundamental aspects of Christian theology.<sup>(11)</sup>

Fourthly, if it is true that 'secularisation' was indeed a powerful and self-fulfilling myth, rather than an unavoidable sociological reality, then *The Shape of the Church* might have evaluated the possibility that Ramsey's acceptance and public repetition of ideas such 'the secular age', and deliberate moves to detach the moral law from Christian precepts, were themselves an influential factor in causing the sense of religious crisis in Britain in the 1960s.(12) Whilst *The Shape of the Church's* discussion on moral legislation begins with a vague sense that 'things were changing, and quickly', especially amongst 'legislators', which 'put all the churches in a new situation' (p. 65), it omits to mention that atheists and agnostics comprised just eight per cent of the 1966 House of Commons, and that Ramsey might therefore have contributed to the idea that there was a 'new situation', precisely by attempting to react to it.(13) Indeed, *The Shape of the Church* reinforces this impression by emphasizing the wide range of ordinary correspondents, not just Anglicans, who looked up to Ramsey as the national religious leader (pp. 92-6). It also hints that majorities of Britons opposed the separation of sin and crime, although it dismisses them as having failed to divine the inevitable course of history, as Ramsey had done (p. 90). For this reviewer, a full assessment of Ramsey's legacy should eventually include a detailed assessment of his contribution to the cultural narratives of rapid social change which created the British 'Sixties', not simply his stances on particular issues.

Finally, whilst a book of this length is not expected to contain extensive theoretical reflection, such reflection may help to contextualise past and future debates about Ramsey. The burden of this review, for example, is that *The Shape of the Church* might have embraced particular kinds of 'cultural turn' rather more enthusiastically than it has done. The orthodox secularisation thesis took an essentially materialistic view of religion, arguing that it inevitably declines in the face of socio-economic modernization; especially since Callum Brown's *The Death of Christian Britain*, by contrast, the leading accounts of 20th-century British religion have increasingly pushed culture towards the forefront of their analyses. When reflecting on the role of culture in social life, this reviewer finds it helpful to use Jeffrey Alexander's distinction between 'weak' cultural approaches, which foreground culture but then portray it as a dependent factor in cultural change, and 'strong' cultural approaches, which foreground culture itself as the primary agent in cultural change.(14) Using this distinction, both Arthur Marwick's and Callum Brown's accounts of the 1960s 'cultural revolution' might be classified as 'weak' approaches, since on closer inspection their explanations see cultural change as being largely dictated by affluence and demography, or by the ahistorical desire of the British people for moral liberty.(15) *The Shape of the Church* might also be understood as adopting a 'weak' approach, since it conveys a strong sense throughout of Ramsey reacting to *a priori* necessities that dictated what was 'inevitable' and 'right'. Yet the 'weak' approach of explaining cultural change through social necessity has a critical flaw: it privileges the culture being written about (which is usually, and not coincidentally, the historian's own culture) as the natural product of social or moral necessities, without explaining how a great diversity of 'multiple modernities' might exist around the contemporary globe. As Shmuel Eisenstadt observed, if there are many modernities, then individual cultures are not primarily shaped by the universal social features of modernity; instead, each culture is directly structured by its own underlying cultural assumptions, which heavily influence how contemporaries interpret the society around them.(16) On this view, the diversity of religious settlements across the globe indicates that 'secularisation' is not an inevitable process, but a cultural choice, created by cultural narratives about the weakness of religion in the modern world.(17) Similarly, the diversity of contemporary global cultures implies that the wider cultural revolution of the British (and indeed western) 'Sixties' was not an inevitable social effect, but a cultural invention, created by the construction of new cultural narratives.(18) From this 'strong' cultural perspective, which privileges the agency of myth, it is essential to look critically at the familiar stories we tell about 'secularisation', 'the Sixties', and moral change from below, and to historicize them as important factors in their own right; it is essential to avoid just repeating them. Given that Ramsey was an important religious figurehead during a critical era of

Britain's cultural reinvention, and given that this cultural transformation was driven by cultural stories rather than by social necessity, it is worth speculating that Ramsey's underlying assumptions about the future of his society had significant cultural consequences, perhaps more so than his stances on particular issues.<sup>(19)</sup> The depth of Ramsey-related knowledge on display in Webster's *The Shape of the Church* makes it a fine addition to the literature, but there is much more historical and theoretical work to be done before Ramsey's legacy can be properly ascertained.

## Notes

1. A different and better order is advertised on Webster's website <<http://peterwebster.me/archbishop-michael-ramsey/>> [accessed 26 August 2015].[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Cf. the opening remarks in P. Webster, 'Review of "Godly Ambition. John Stott and the Evangelical Movement"', (review no. 1352)', *Reviews in History* <<http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1352>> [accessed 20 August 2015].[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Webster, *Shape of the Church*, pp. 115, 73, 75, 82.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. N. Annan, *Our Age: the Generation that Made Post-War Britain* (London, 1991).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. A. Marwick, *The Sixties: Cultural Revolution in Britain, France, Italy, and the United States, c. 1958-1974* (Oxford, 1998), p. 13; C. Brown, *Religion and Society in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Harlow, 2006), p. 255.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. H. McLeod, *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s* (Oxford, 2007), pp. 220-1, 260.[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. M. Grimley, 'Law, morality, and secularisation: the Church of England and the Wolfenden Report, 1954-1967', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 60, 4 (2009), 725-741, 726.[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. S. Brewitt-Taylor, 'The invention of a "secular society"?' Christianity and the sudden appearance of secularization discourses in the British national media, 1961-4', *Twentieth Century British History*, 24, 3 (2013), 327-350, 349.[Back to \(8\)](#)
9. For the uneven unpopularity of most permissive reforms, see P. Barker and J. Hanvey, 'Facing two ways: between the 60s and the 70s', *New Society*, 27 November 1969, 847-850, 848; M. Collins, 'Introduction', in *The Permissive Society and its Enemies*, ed. M. Collins (London, 2007), pp. 1-40, p. 18.[Back to \(9\)](#)
10. C. Field, *Britain's Last Religious Revival? Quantifying Belonging, Believing and Behaving in the Long 1950s* (Basingstoke, 2015), p. 18, table 2.1; J. Garnett et al., 'Introduction', in *Redefining Christian Britain: post-1945 perspectives*, ed. idem (London, 2007), pp. 1-18, p. 1.[Back to \(10\)](#)
11. D. Martin, 'Towards eliminating the concept of secularisation', in D. Martin, *The Religious and the Secular: Studies in Secularization* (London, 1969), pp. 9-22.[Back to \(11\)](#)
12. This possibility is implied in Brewitt-Taylor, 'Invention of a "secular society"?'', p. 343.[Back to \(12\)](#)
13. McLeod, *Religious Crisis of the 1960s*, p. 228.[Back to \(13\)](#)
14. J. Alexander, *The Meanings of Social Life* (Oxford, 2003), pp. 17-26.[Back to \(14\)](#)
15. Marwick, *The Sixties*, pp. 23-25, esp. his 'hierarchy of explanatory factors'; C. Brown, 'What was the religious crisis of the 1960s?', *Journal of Religious History* 34, 4 (2010), 468-79, 478.[Back to \(15\)](#)
16. S. Eisenstadt, 'Multiple modernities', *Daedalus* 129, 1 (2000), 1-29, 1-3.[Back to \(16\)](#)
17. Cf. G. Davie, *Europe: the Exceptional Case?* (London, 2002).[Back to \(17\)](#)
18. Cf. W. Sewell, 'Historical events as transformations of structures: inventing revolution at the Bastille', *History and Theory* 25, 6 (1996), 841-81.[Back to \(18\)](#)
19. Cf. *ibid.*, 874-5.[Back to \(19\)](#)

The author thanks Dr Brewitt-Taylor for this generous and perceptive review.



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