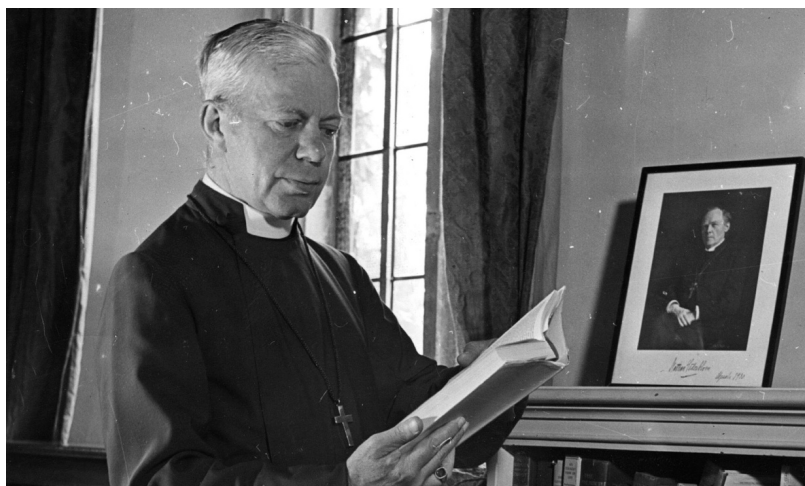


Presumption of innocence for Bishop George Bell?



In February 1954, at Abingdon magistrates court, a 25-year-old trainee priest was convicted of the indecent assault of a child and thrown out of theological college. Despite this, Roy Cotton was ordained in 1966 and went on to be the vicar of a number of parishes in the dioceses of Portsmouth and Chichester. On one job reference, the bishop of Portsmouth said this: “The charge made against him in 1953 has, I believe, been proved a false one. He pleaded guilty to spare the boys concerned having to appear in court.”

Martin Warner, the current bishop of Chichester, took over, promising transparency. Writing to one of the survivors, Warner admitted: “There has been deception and cover-up here.” In response, Fr Cotton’s victim, Gary Johnson, wrote: “I’ve been taken seriously at last.”

All of which has to be understood as a prelude to an accusation against the most senior cleric of them all, the previously sainted Bishop George Bell. Bell was no ordinary cleric. Among other things, he was a close ally of the German church’s resistance to Hitler and was a courageous – even heroic – opponent of the bombing of Dresden. He died in 1958, having missed out on becoming archbishop of Canterbury because of his unpopular stand against bombing.

But years after Bell’s death an accusation emerged that he had abused a young girl in the 1940s and 50s. No details have been made public or seen the inside of any court. The police have said that on the basis of what they have seen they would have arrested and questioned Bell – though, these days, that may be standard procedure. And so, on the advice of his child protection team, Bishop Warner settled a civil claim that was made against the diocese and issued an apology to the victim – for which he is now being publicly much criticised. Innocent until proven guilty was Charles Moore’s line in the Daily Telegraph last week: “If Bishop Bell had been a Nazi war criminal, the charges against him would have had to reach a far higher standard of proof than those by which the Church of England has destroyed him.” Warner responded in a letter to that paper: “The perspective that receives little acknowledgment in Moore’s article is that of a survivor.”

I don’t know if Bell was an abuser. But I am asked by Bishop Warner to take it on trust. To trust that, on the bishop’s estimation of the balance of probabilities – that is, on the civil burden of proof – there is a survivor out there who, like Gary Johnson, needs to be heard and protected. And on the basis of

this trust, I am asked to accept Bell's public disgrace for an event that is said to have happened some 70 years ago. However much I admire what Bishop Warner is doing in Chichester, I don't know if I can be expected to muster this level of trust. Bishop Warner's determination to cut through years of official obfuscation is absolutely right.

But the question won't go away whether Warner, in his zeal, is skipping over important moral instincts about due process and condemning a man, long dead, who has no opportunity to speak for himself. Is it really not possible for more details of the case to be made public, short of identifying the victim?

But here's the deeper dilemma: how do we balance the need for the victim to be taken seriously against the presumption of innocence? Without something like the former, victims are understandably reluctant to come forward. Without the latter, we threaten the very foundations of justice itself.

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