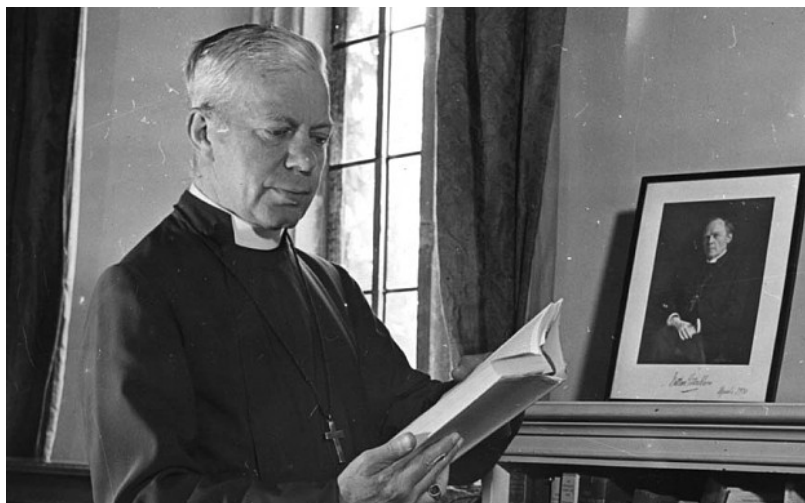


The unholy destruction of Bishop Bell

The Church, the police and the unholy destruction of Bishop Bell. Time and again in recent child-abuse inquiries, grandiose claims have turned out to be baseless.

On April 8 1945, Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian and anti-Nazi, was condemned to death in Flossenburg concentration camp by an SS judge,



without witnesses, defence or records. He was executed the following dawn. On the day of his sentence he sent a message, via a British prisoner, to George Bell, the Bishop of Chichester. Bonhoeffer regarded Bell as the greatest friend of the German Christian resistance to Hitler (“I feel ashamed when I think of all your goodness”). His message was “Tell him that for me this is the end but also the beginning – with him I believe in the principle of our Universal Christian brotherhood... and that our victory is certain.”

"Time and again, in recent child-abuse inquiries, the police have made grandiose, ill-based claims"

More than 70 years later – last October – the current Bishop of Chichester, Martin Warner, issued a “formal apology” to an unnamed individual who was “at the time [the late 1940s and early 1950s] a young child”, and announced the settlement (with an unspecified sum paid) of “a legal civil claim regarding sexual abuse against the Rt Rev George Bell”. Bishop Warner said “I am committed to ensuring that the past is handled with transparency and honesty.”

Bishop Bell died in 1958. When he was thus condemned 57 years later, he had no witnesses in his defence and, indeed, no defence. There are no published records of the process which condemned him. The decision was made by the “core group” of “safeguarding professionals” and the bishops of the diocese, under the Church of England’s National Safeguarding Team. They decided, not on a level of proof that would satisfy a criminal court, but “on the balance of probabilities”, that Bell had committed the alleged acts. There was no “transparency” about the past: we shall not be told what the alleged acts were, who the “victim” was and what the evidence consisted in.

Bishop Warner’s announcement has disturbed the Diocese of Chichester (in which I live). Bell was our nearest thing to a saint since St Richard of Chichester (died 1253). He was noted for his

controversial courage in condemning the Allied bombing of Dresden in the Second World War; for his earlier warnings against appeasement; and for helping Jews and others escape Nazi Germany. He also revived Christian arts: TS Eliot's play *Murder in the Cathedral*, for example, resulted from Bell's suggestion. He was universally regarded as a holy man. Five years ago, his special day was put into the Church calendar for veneration. There are buildings and institutions named after him.

Now Bell is becoming a non-person. Flowers placed on his memorial in the cathedral get removed. George Bell House – “a centre for vocation, education and reconciliation” – will be renamed shortly. Bishop Bell School will probably go the same way. The man described by Ian Kershaw, the leading historian of the Hitler years, as “the most significant English clergyman of the 20th century”, is now being ruined by an anonymous, unpublished claim, upheld by a non-court which won't explain its decision. At first stunned by the October announcement, many in the diocese and beyond are now angry at this unfair and therefore unChristian manner of proceeding.

"The key legal principle – the presumption of innocence – is being set aside"

Why is the Church behaving in this way? Its public statements about Bell suggest self-protection. The Diocese of Chichester stands accused of mishandling past child-abuse accusations, including the complaint about Bishop Bell, when it first received it in 1995. There have been other cases. The former Bishop of Lewes, Peter Ball, recently went to prison for a series of offences he had earlier denied.

The national Church authorities know they will be one of the subjects of Justice Lowell Goddard's inquiry into historical child abuse. The diocesan statement proudly quotes the complainant's solicitor praising the current Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, for pushing this forward, implying a favourable contrast with 1995. The reputation of a bishop long dead seems dispensable compared with the need to get critics off the backs of the present ones – Bell? Ball? Who cares? Let's get out of this.

To buttress themselves, the Church authorities cited the police in their statement. The police “confirmed... that the information obtained from their inquiries, would have justified, had he still been alive, Bishop Bell's arrest and interview, on suspicion of serious sexual offences.” The Diocese doesn't dare say Bell committed a crime, but they want us to think that Plod thinks he did.

I am unimpressed. Time and again, in recent child-abuse inquiries, the police have made grandiose, ill-based claims. They searched Lord Brittan's house, five weeks after he was dead, on the basis of “evidence” which has now collapsed. One officer, Detective Superintendent Kenny McDonald, described the mad accusations about rape and murder in Dolphin Square as “credible and true”. Another stood outside the late Sir Edward Heath's house in Salisbury and invited anyone “if you have been a victim” to come forward and denounce the former Prime Minister.

Last year, Field Marshal Lord Bramall (aged 91) was accused, without corroboration, of grotesque acts of abuse, and subjected to a 10-hour police search of his house. Everyone knows the police have found nothing, but they will not admit it and are passing what they have got – or rather what they have not got – to the Crown Prosecution Service, leaving Lord Bramall hanging. Why should one be swayed by the police's (improper) speculation that they would arrest Bishop Bell if they could? They'll arrest anyone.

Some may bridle, and say that famous people should not be protected from the work of justice, however painful: “Be you never so high, the law is above you.” Quite right, but the key legal principle – the presumption of innocence – is being set aside.

Besides, as I have had confirmed by several correspondents, entirely unfamous people also suffer when accusations of child abuse start flying around. I shall cite only one, who goes by the alias of David Anderson.

Six years ago, Mr Anderson was accused by Thames Valley police, on the basis of unspecified “intelligence”, of downloading child pornography. He was kept on police bail, renewed 14 times, for two and a half years. Then he was charged. When it came to trial seven months later, the police offered no evidence. He had lost, on his hard drive, all his work as a film-maker. He lost his income too and has lived in a twilight of suspicion since 2009. He still does not know who falsely accused him. He suspects that lodgers, disgruntled about his refusal to connive in benefit fraud, may have planted images on his computer, but the police will give no information. There are probably thousands of people today, unknown to fame, who are similar victims of anonymous and malicious denunciation.

Justice is not guaranteed by passionate feeling against a particular, horrible crime such as child abuse. It depends absolutely on proper process. When public bodies set that process aside, what trust or “transparency” is left? 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. The restoration of justice should be its New Year resolution.

Charles Moore - The Telegraph