

The chancellor of the university has lamented the damage caused by the bitter dispute between the Dean of Christ Church and the governing body. In this personal reflection, a former member of the cathedral Chapter recalls what she felt lay hidden under a veneer of friendliness and charm / **By ANGELA TILBY**

# Oxford through the looking glass

**I HAVE PONDERED** long and hard about the four years of internecine war at Christ Church, Oxford. My personal connection with the institution was between 2011 and 2016, when I was diocesan canon at Christ Church Cathedral, which is the cathedral of the Church of England diocese of Oxford. This is part of the same foundation as the college, hidden away at the south-east end of the flamboyant sand-gold architecture of Tom Quad.

I had little directly to do with the college side of things, though as a member of the cathedral Chapter, in the absence of any more senior colleagues, I was involved in Martyn Percy's appointment as dean in 2014. I had known him for years, having preached for him once when he was a college chaplain, and both of us had been involved in theological education in Cambridge and Oxford. Percy was one of four candidates; another was internal, Canon Graham Ward, who has been Regius Professor of Divinity in the university since 2012. It was the first time a dean of Christ Church – who as well as being dean of the cathedral is also head of the college – had been democratically elected by the governing body without the guidance of the state (which, until Gordon Brown's premiership, had a key role in senior church appointments). The governing body of Christ Church consists of the dean and Chapter of the cathedral, together with the sixty or so "students", the equivalent of the fellows of the other colleges. The day-to-day running of the college is the role of the censors, the equivalent of senior tutors elsewhere. The college's Visitor is the Queen.

**AFTER I RETIRED** in 2016, I continued to have a link with Christ Church by being part of its wider Chapter of Honorary and Emeritus Canons. In June 2018, I attended a farewell dinner for Dr Stephen Darlington, the director of music at Christ Church. I sat next to Canon Sarah Foot, who had been ordained to the priesthood the previous December. Her ordination had been supported and aided by Percy. On this occasion, she was determined that I should know that Martyn was in serious trouble with the college and that it was related to money. She wanted to impress upon me just how dreadful his misdeeds had been, although she was, of course, (for reasons of confidentiality) unable to say precisely what they were.



Martyn Percy, Dean of Christ Church

I was in Christ Church again several weeks later, running a theology summer school. I dropped in on the deanery to find Percy in a terrible state. He said he had just been told by a former censor of considerable influence that he must regard himself as fired and should leave the deanery without delay. That was almost certainly bluff, of course. I remember advising Martyn, not entirely joking, not to leave the deanery. I was actually quite concerned that the locks would be changed while he was out and he would come back to find himself homeless. On that day, Percy was white with anxiety, unable to believe the wave of condemnation that was crashing down on him. Under the statutes of Christ Church, the head of the college can only be dislodged for conduct that is "immoral, scandalous or disgraceful". A few months later, in October 2018, Martyn was accused of precisely that, and suspended, pending an independently chaired internal tribunal that would be presided over by Sir Andrew Smith, a retired High Court judge.

What on earth had Dr Percy done? On the surface, it appeared to be internal spat about pay. Martyn had asked the salaries board to explain the principles on which his remuneration was based, along with that of the college steward. His annual salary of £90,000 is in the bottom 25 per cent of Oxford college heads. In the *Church Times* a few weeks later,

I wondered if the dean's real offence might have been to have annoyed the censors by trying to interfere with the running of the college. I knew he wanted Christ Church to be more inclusive, more open to the outside world, and, perhaps, more aware of its wealth and vested interests. He had said as such during his extensive interviews for the job. A rumour mill had meanwhile been churning away in the background. The language of the complaint – "immoral, scandalous or disgraceful conduct" – suggested an affair, perhaps with a student? Could this be true? Or had he, as my conversation with Canon Foot might suggest, had his fingers in the till? I was told by several of my former friends and colleagues at the cathedral that the issue of his behaviour was "very serious". An old friend in Cambridge who remains close to some of the dean's detractors told me that Percy had overreached himself, that he was delusional and unstable, "a little Napoleon". Later, I recognised these phrases as similar to those in the rather disgusting emails passed between the dons determined to get rid of him, which would be included by Sir Andrew Smith in an appendix to his report but were redacted from the version circulated to members of the governing body.

**IN JANUARY 2019**, the censor theologiae (the acting chairman of the governing body) sent a letter to college alumni revealing the cause of Percy's suspension as a pay dispute. There were also questions as to whether he was responsible for safeguarding issues in the college, to which he himself had drawn attention. In August, the governing body announced the outcome of the tribunal. Sir Andrew Smith had dismissed the 27 charges against Percy. He made one minor finding, that Percy had made a single, unintentional breach of his fiduciary duty. But there was more. Sir Andrew noted that email evidence showed that the decision to try to remove the dean actually went back to 2017 and had been orchestrated by a group of ex-censors who wield a lot of social and political power in Christ Church, although they have no official standing, acting more or less as "tribal elders".

This correspondence exposed the extraordinarily violent and contemptuous language which the former censors felt free to use amongst themselves. Emails were exchanged in which they described the dean as a "manipulative little turd" and as having a "personality disorder". One wrote: "I'm always ready to think the worst of him. Does anyone know any good poisoners?"; another pictured the dean's "wrinkly, withered little body" being found at Osney Lock.

The details of the Smith judgment were circulated to the governing body by Jonathan Aitken, the former cabinet minister and convicted perjurer, who was now a Church of

England priest, an alumnus of the college. Governing body members were immediately instructed to destroy the document without opening or reading it, and to “confirm this by return to the senior censor’s email address”. It was this peremptory command that made me conclude that there was something really weird about the opaque way in which the college was governed, something linked perhaps to the disturbingly immature language of the email correspondence. When the cathedral Chapter bravely sought legal advice on whether the governing body should be permitted to read the whole of Sir Andrew’s judgment, I was told they had received a visit from a member of the informal ex-censors’ committee, instructing them that their only role was to show “total loyalty”.

**EVEN BEFORE** I retired, I had picked up something of the brutality of the place, generally hidden under a veneer of friendliness and charm. In effect, Christ Church is run by the “tribal elders” who control the large and generally uninterested governing body. The governing body, mostly busy academics, accepts this arrangement, no doubt in part because it saves its members time and trouble, but perhaps also because they are all too aware of the pressure, intimidation and bullying that can await those who refuse to conform.

Through this whole affair, it seems to me that some governing body members have behaved like zombies, quite extraordinarily lacking in curiosity about business which, one might think, really ought to concern them. I knew some of these people. I regarded them as friends. But I realise that some were simply frustrated to the point of apathy by the institution itself.

One irritant was the space taken up by the grand (if often cold) houses of the canons and archdeacon in Tom Quad. There is a shortage of lecture and study rooms. Why should the resident clergy live in such grandeur within the college? (I counted myself fortunate to live a mile away in a red-brick vicarage.) It always seemed odd to me that governing body members, even those who professed Christian faith, rarely came to the cathedral unless they were part of Chapter. They accepted, perhaps resentfully, that – unlike in any other Oxbridge college – the head of house had to be an Anglican priest. But this acceptance depended on the dean being content to function as an obedient, hard-working figurehead. Even before I left, I had concluded that the whole place ran on ambiguity: a fatal mixture of insouciant indifference and ruthless control; rumour and silence. The “tribal elders” functioned as a counterweight power base to the unloved cathedral.

The previous dean, Christopher Lewis, had been in post for over ten years until he retired in 2014. He was generally liked and respected. But he rarely came close to stepping out of line. It helped that he had an aristocratic background, that he was tall and spare and rather shy, and that he tended to hide any frustrations he might have had with the college and its possibly dubious processes. I used to have tea

with the widow of another former dean, who spoke of her husband’s dread of governing body meetings and his need for her to be on hand before and afterwards, to prop him up. One of the current dean’s very few supporters, a member of the governing body and Chapter, has compared Christ Church to a religious cult, or totalitarian government. It would be hard not to conclude that there was something deeply wrong with the spirit of the place; the “principalities and powers” of the institution that perhaps have their roots in its history and have never quite been challenged or exposed. I am not normally one to think in demonological terms, but I do accept that institutions acquire pseudo-personalities through time, and that these can have a baleful influence, especially when they lie below the surface, unconscious and unrecognised. The “total loyalty” required of Chapter is a rather alarming demand.

While I was at the cathedral, I arrived on most weekday mornings at 7 a.m. for Morning Prayer and left after Evensong at about 7 p.m. I remember a persistent fantasy that when the cathedral doors were locked at night a colourful array of ghosts and monsters took over the space and fought to the death until dawn. Then at cockcrow, (Christopher Lewis kept chickens and guinea fowl), the spectres crept back into the shadows, leaving the place calm before the vergers opened up. The place was, at one and the same time, holy and

haunted. And perhaps it really is. After all, this is where a priory dedicated to the local healing saint, Frideswide, was demolished to make way first for Cardinal Wolsey’s vanity project, “Cardinal’s College”, and then, after his disgrace and downfall, for Henry VIII’s re-founding of the college and his casual, money-saving experiment of transforming it into a cathedral and college all in one.

This dual role as cathedral and college chapel remains unique. Frideswide’s legend is portrayed in stained glass in the Latin Chapel and there is a recently acquired statue of her by Peter Eugene Ball. The carved head of Henry VIII looks down from above the dean’s stall. The acoustic in the cathedral is terrible and unforgiving; there is no echo to soften mistakes and provide a glow of mystery. But for polyphony, it can be marvellous, every voice is exposed, and when the voices are as rich and sure as they often were, it provided a sacred intimacy that was extraordinarily beautiful. Yet the darkness was there too, always waiting.

The last time I entered the cathedral was a Sunday morning in October 2020. Percy had been officially reinstated, although he was not actually present. A new sub-dean was presiding, rather flamboyantly, I thought, as though to dispel any lingering anxieties about the still unresolved dispute. Graham Ward preached movingly about the power of love.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 6



**OBERAMMERGAU 2022**

**Austria and Oberammergau**

Led by Monsignor Roderick Strange

Exclusive to readers of The Tablet

**12–19 August 2022**

**Fly from London, Manchester, Birmingham or Dublin**

**The cost of this holiday is £1,765 per person**

**Price includes:** flights from Heathrow, Birmingham, Manchester or Dublin to Munich, including baggage allowance, seven nights accommodation with breakfasts and dinners, airport transfers, and excursion programme with local guiding. Also included are gratuities to guides, drivers and hotel staff.

Your tour price also includes two nights in Oberammergau village, a Grade 1 Passion Play ticket, McCabe Passion Play guide book and lunch on performance day.

To book your place contact McCabe Pilgrimages on:  
Tel: 020 8675 6828 | Email: info@mccabe-travel.co.uk

**THE TABLET**  
SINCE 1840

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 5

It happened that, a few days earlier, a woman had alleged that Percy stroked her hair in the cathedral sacristy after a service, and Professor Ward had lodged a complaint against him under the Church of England's Clergy Discipline Measure. At this point, the Bishop of Oxford, Steven Croft, announced that the dean would be stepping back from both his college and cathedral roles while the allegation of sexual assault was "properly considered". The dean denied touching the woman. After an investigation, Thames Valley police decided that the alleged assault did not meet a criminal standard.

The case went before the president of tribunals for the Church of England, Dame Sarah Asplin, who is also a senior Appeal Court judge. She ruled: "Although I do not intend to trivialise Ms X's allegations in any way, it seems to me that it would not be proportionate to refer this matter to a tribunal. The incident itself was extremely short, the alleged hair stroking was even shorter and the language and the conduct as a whole was not overtly sexual." Christ Church is continuing with its own internal investigation into the allegation of sexual assault. And in the middle of this, the complainant has decided to complain against Christ Church as well as the dean. So it seems now that this second tribunal against the dean will be delayed while this is sorted out.

PHOTO: ALAMY, PETER BARRITT



The interior of Christ Church Cathedral

Meanwhile, the Charity Commission has become involved. Like other Oxford and Cambridge colleges, Christ Church is a charity and the commission acts as regulator on the use of its funds. Christ Church is a rich college. It has a huge endowment of over £577 million. The Charity Commission had received complaints from alumni that college funds may have been improperly used in legal action against the dean, and that his own very considerable legal costs have not been paid by

the college. The commission originally recommended a highly experienced mediator, who, after an initial approach, chose to withdraw. The college is reported to be prevaricating in its response to the commission's request for financial information. Of course, in the end, if the college cannot comply, the Charity Commission could demand that the trustees (the governing body) repay any wrongly used funds. It has even been suggested that they could end up in prison.

More recently, the chancellor of Oxford University, Chris Patten, and the vice-chancellor, Professor Louise Richardson – who have no formal powers to intervene – asked to speak to the governing body. Lord Patten wrote to its members that he deplored the "protracted and ongoing dispute" and "the damage it is doing to the reputation of the collegiate university". The response of Christ Church was to agree, but email exchanges between the dons reported by *Private Eye* reveal their fury at this interference by Patten, who was "a dinosaur" (*sic*). No one must question the "tribal elders". Given these developments, it is perhaps not surprising that the college should attempt what looks, at least to me, like one last desperate throw of the dice: an investigation into the dean's health in an attempt to prove his mental incapacity. It seems to me that the inner madness of the place cannot be assuaged until it has vented its sins on its chosen victim. And this

Sign Up — Find More Courses — Get in Touch

[www.londonjesuitcentre.org](http://www.londonjesuitcentre.org)

a LONDON JESUIT CENTRE event

## An Experience of Synodality: Pope Francis' Dream of a Synodal Church and How to Get There

Sign up for a talk led by papal biographer and journalist Austen Ivereigh, followed by a workshop offering a 'Synodal Experience.'

Event Runs  
Saturday 19.02  
10:30am to 1:00pm

 LONDON  
JESUIT  
CENTRE



## Bacon's eclectic references reminded me of Bob Dylan's buccaneering plunder

is part of a pattern. The “immoral, scandalous or disgraceful” behaviour Martyn Percy has been accused of *has* taken place in Christ Church in recent years, though not perpetrated by him. Look through the press and there is the violent attack of the student Lavinia Woodhead on her boyfriend, a student-on-student safeguarding issue. There have been mysterious thefts from the wine cellar and the picture gallery. There has been the conviction of the regius professor of Hebrew for keeping pornographic images of children on his computer. There has been the suspension by the university of a lecturer who is being sued by an American evangelical institution for selling them stolen artifacts. Yet none of these unsavoury episodes has led to the censuring of any individuals within Christ Church itself. Only the dean.

A final reflection. There is no doubt that Oxbridge colleges sometimes have problems with their heads of house. In Oxford, this is much to do with the colleges' insistence on, and pride in, self-government. Anyone taking on the role of head of house needs to exercise a light and tactful touch. But as the demand for greater diversity and inclusion mounts in society in general, institutions like Christ Church will find themselves under increasing scrutiny. They will not survive well unless they find ways of examining themselves: their practices, their corporate thought processes, their habits of evasion and self-protection. The combination of professional and social interests in an Oxbridge college makes real internal scrutiny virtually impossible.

**IT SEEMS CRAZY** that what no one thought to do – before the whole ghastly situation developed – was to initiate a review, and if the match between dean and Christ Church had been found unsatisfactory, to negotiate exit terms, with a proper financial pay-off to the dean, reflecting both regret and respect for his human dignity. It is now reported that a group of alumni has at long last proposed just this solution: but it appears that the college is determined to press ahead with its own separate internal tribunal into the allegation of sexual assault and to institute a medical board to decide whether Martyn Percy is medically capable of continuing to act as dean.

What this reveals is tragic, but like all demonic tragedy it collapses in the end into comedy. Demons can never in the end agree among themselves. Charles Dodgson wrote *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass* while at Christ Church, living there until his death. In his weird way, he understood the culture all too well. But now it is time for Christ Church to come out of its distorted mirror world. The Mad Hatters' tea party is surely almost over, and if the Red Queen still shouts: “Off with his head!”, it will be only to herself.

**Angela Tilby** is a canon emeritus of Christ Church Cathedral, Oxford. She is also a writer, a lecturer on church history and theology, and a regular contributor to BBC Radio 4's Thought for the Day.



ONE BANK holiday in the 1980s, when halfway respectable people had homes to go to, Francis Bacon was in the Colony Room club in Soho. He was in his seventies, but looked younger, his expensive leather jacket, fastened at hip level, concealing his paunch.

He stood near the Georgian window, as light from the wasted day lit up the cigarette smoke, and played with a sunken-bottomed and horribly uncomfortable barstool of tubular construction, much like the ones he used to design for Heal's in the 1930s, although he didn't want anyone to remember that. As he stood talking, buying more champagne for anyone within range, he remarked to me: “You see, I can't paint.” Perhaps I agreed with him too readily, for he fixed me with those eyes set deep in his pear-shaped head as though I was being drawn into an ambush.

I thought about this remark a year ago when a big exhibition, *Francis Bacon: Man and Beast*, was to open at the Royal Academy. And I thought about it again last week when the exhibition, delayed by the pandemic, actually opened. Trivially, it is true that he couldn't paint. A breakthrough in his career was a canvas called *Painting* (1946). In it, before an opened carcass of meat, a figure grimaces under an umbrella (behind some tubular furniture). The dead beast derives from Rembrandt's *Slaughtered Ox*, but the central image began as an attempt to paint a bird landing in a field. Another remark by Bacon that was only trivially true was once made to the novelist David Plante, that human beings are “nothing but meat”. Of course a painter can only represent bodies (or photographs of bodies), but the reason that the paintings come to be hung up in the great rooms of the Academy is that the sitters and the artist are much more than meat.

A third element in Bacon that doesn't ring true is his titling of paintings. No doubt he couldn't call them all *Painting*, but one in the current show, from 1950, is called *Fragment of a Crucifixion*. Again, under the screaming mouth and spattered blood, it derives from a photograph, an owl in flight. It's relation to the Crucifixion is only accidental. Bacon was hostile to religion and its iconography. From Poussin's *Massacre of the Innocents* (1628) the one thing he brought away was the screaming mouth

of the mother of one of the infants being murdered.

It's not that he treated the Crucifixion in a sado-masochistic way. Though a masochist by preference, his treatment of sexual violence is so extreme or abstracted that it leaves the erotic behind. I'm not saying abstraction made it safer: his life was affected by what he saw as the deliberate aggression of his former sadistic lover Peter Lacy committing suicide to coincide with Bacon's first retrospective at the Tate in 1962.

Bacon's eclectic references reminded me of Bob Dylan's buccaneering plunder of songs and poetry to remake into his own work. A large room at the Academy shows only three large canvasses of bullfight studies painted in 1969. This seems to me a weak passage in his career to emphasise. Two of the paintings include representations of a crowd under a version of the *Parteiadler* emblem of the Nazis. It doesn't help that the curators have chosen to quote a joke of Bacon's to accompany these pictures: “Bullfighting is like boxing – a marvellous aperitif to sex.” He might have said the same of a Nuremberg rally, but it would hardly tell the whole story.

THE HOLY water is back in the stoups in my parish after the long Good Friday of pandemic drought. I wasn't sure I was ready to splash about with the communal germs till they were behaving as uninterestingly as they used to. But after falling back for 22 months on the words carved above the stoup, *Lavabis me et super nivem dealbabor*, “Wash me and I shall be made whiter than snow”, I feel no threat from a drop on forehead, breast and shoulders. I just don't inhale.

WHILE TREES were falling on people in the north of England, the sun came out in London and so did I, wandering near the Thames through the grounds of Chiswick House, that chilly Palladian extravagance. By a round pond with an obelisk stands a classical gravestone memorialising a favourite dog, Lilly – *humani generis vitiorum expers* – “free of the weaknesses of humankind”. So the dog is remembered, but funnily enough, no one seems to know quite whose dog she was.



**Christopher Howse** is an assistant editor of *The Daily Telegraph*.