

## What should we do about offensive memorials in churches?

On 11 May 2021, the Church of England published “*Contested Heritage in Cathedrals and Churches*” by the Church Buildings Council and Cathedral Fabric Commission for England.<sup>1</sup>

It follows the Black Lives Matter campaign which amongst other things highlighted the ongoing offence many feel from the presence of statues honouring historic figures who had made their fortune from the slave trade.

Some have called to tear down all such statues or memorials from our public places, including in churches. Others have said that if we removed from churches every memorial so someone who had been a sinner, there would be no memorials left.

The guidance document acknowledges the problem, recommends local consultation, and gives options on what action to take. It reminds us that the Church of England has a commitment in:

“the fourth Mark of Mission, which enjoins everyone in the Anglican Communion: ‘To transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and pursue peace and reconciliation.’” (Page 7).

Every memorial is to a sinful person. But we should take account of ongoing offence:

“Discussions of contested heritage should be framed to avoid starkly binary thinking that classes anyone as wholly good or evil. A theology of forgiveness is not reducible to simplistic categorisations. From a Christian perspective every memorial is a memorial to a sinner, however fulsome any tribute to their life, character and achievements may be, and the final moral reckoning on all our lives is known to God alone. The focus of discussion should be the impact of a piece of material culture on a church or cathedral’s ability to be a place of welcome and solace to all, and how this should best be addressed, not on whether an individual deserves to be expunged from the historical record.” (Page 13).

“Some may feel that where an object causes any degree of pain or offence then should be removed without delay, just as others might believe that present-day feelings could never justify the removal of an historic monument. The public interest in ensuring the sustainability of our historic buildings, embodied in the historic buildings legislation under which we operate, demands that we resist knee-jerk responses in order to do the more difficult work of responding in a balanced and nuanced way to the tension that may exist between a building’s heritage and its present-day Christian mission, taking into account both the historical and aesthetic significance of an object and the painful feelings it may provoke.” (Page 21)

The report sets out a range of options to consider: no change; add a message of explanation; cover up offensive text; move the object to a less prominent position; move it into storage; sell it; make a permanent alteration to it; destroy it. The report recommends the least destructive option should be taken wherever possible and warns that all official procedures should be gone through, such as the faculty procedure.

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.churchofengland.org/resources/churchcare/advice-and-guidance-church-buildings/contested-heritage>

In my own church, All Saints Woodham, I had done a lot of research when producing the church Guidebook and fortunately I did not come across any reference to disreputable pasts of any for whom we have a memorial. The church was built in 1893 and most of our commemorations are of members of the congregation who sacrificed their lives in the First and Second World Wars.

We do however have one controversial item. In our vestment chest we have 30 stoles, which are liturgical scarfs that a priest wears over their chasuble. Among them is this one which has the Latin prayer “miserere nobis” which means “have mercy upon us”, and, controversially, a symbol that looks like a swastika:



The Wikipedia entry for “swastika” explains:

“In Christianity, the swastika is used as a hooked version of the Christian Cross, the symbol of Christ's victory over death. Some Christian churches built in the Romanesque and Gothic eras are decorated with swastikas, carrying over earlier Roman designs. [...] Because of its use by Nazi Germany, the swastika since the 1930s has been largely associated with Nazism. In the aftermath of World War II it has been considered a symbol of hate in the West, and of white supremacy in many Western countries.”

This stole was presumably made before 1930 when the symbol was simply a particular design of Christian cross. But if the vicar walked around church wearing it today, people are likely to be offended, thinking he is wearing a Nazi symbol.

So, what should we do? Should we burn it?

What we have done is simply left it in the draw and the vicar wears one of the 29 other scarfs to choose from that do not spark misunderstanding or upset. I think that is the right decision.

20 May 2021  
Adrian Vincent