

The Elusive Identity

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Discussed in this essay:

Chapman, Mark D., ed. *The Anglican Covenant: Unity and Diversity in the Anglican Communion*. London: Mowbray, 2008.

Avis, Paul. *The Identity of Anglicanism: Essentials of Anglican Ecclesiology*. London: T & T Clark, 2007.

The Anglican Communion Covenant, Third (“Ridley Cambridge”) Draft, and Report of the Covenant Design Group, April 2009. www.anglicancommunion.org/commission/covenant/ridley_cambridge/draft_text.cfm.

Williams, Rowan. “Communion, Covenant and our Anglican Future: Reflections on the Episcopal Church’s 2009 General Convention from the Archbishop of Canterbury for the Bishops, Clergy and Faithful of the Anglican Communion.” July 27, 2009. www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/2502.

“Responses from Provinces to Section 4 of the Ridley Cambridge Draft of the Anglican Covenant.” www.anglicancommunion.org/commission/covenant/responses/index.cfm.

The Anglican Communion Covenant, Final Draft. December 18, 2009. www.anglicancommunion.org/commission/covenant/final/text.cfm.

“Covenant Working Party Commentary on Revisions to Section 4.” www.anglicancommunion.org/commission/covenant/final/commentary.cfm.

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What does it mean to be Anglican? In an increasingly fractious Communion this question seems urgently to demand an answer—an answer that, countless efforts notwithstanding, also seems increasingly elusive. At the same time, given recent trends in church attendance and affiliation detailed by extensive studies in both the United States and Britain, it also appears more and more questionable that finding an answer to this question is necessary, or even useful—at least seen from outside our contentious and litigious family. Denominational identities, even denominational structures, appear less and less compelling as modes of Christian expression. (The one category of growth within the group of churches identified in the most recent American Religious Identification Survey as “mainline Protestant” is—believe it or not—“nondenominational.”¹)

That simple fact has not, by itself, deterred a number of writers from trying to decode the peculiarly knotty strand of Anglican DNA. As the sense of communion between Anglican churches has become increasingly fraught in past years over issues ranging from sexual ethics to the nature and exercise of ecclesial authority, a number of efforts have emerged, the essential thrust of which has been a delimiting one—to define what is, and what is not, “Anglican.” One hears immediately an echo of Mencken, no lover himself of institutional religion: “There is always a well-known solution to every human problem—neat, plausible, and wrong.”²

At the core of these initiatives, it is worth observing, has been a kind of peacemaking hope; it is the aspiration that by articulating, in some authoritative way, the line that defines what “Anglican” *is*—and thereby, what it is *not*—an agreed ground could be established that would put to rest some, at least, of our unhappy divisions. If only we

¹ See, for example, Barry A. Kosmin and Ariela Keysar, “American Religious Identification Survey 2008,” Summary Report (March 2009). In 1990, the figure for “Non-Denominational Christian”—a figure not including Baptist, Pentecostal, Charismatic, or Evangelical/Born Again categories—stood at 0.1 percent of the responding participants; in 2008 it had increased to 3.5 percent. www.americanreligionsurvey-aris.org/reports/ARIS_report_2008.pdf, at Table 1. The *U.S. Religious Landscape Survey* of the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life notes that of all “nondenominational” churches within the Protestant tradition, approximately 20 percent identify in the “mainline tradition,” representing 5 percent of the overall total of such churches. Pew Forum study, at 15 and 17; <http://religions.pewforum.org/pdf/reports-religious-landscape-study-full.pdf>.

² From “The Divine Afflatus,” in H. L. Mencken, *A Mencken Chrestomathy* (New York: Knopf, 1962), 443.

could agree on where the lines are, the thinking seems to go, we might finally be able to describe confidently what it means to be “Anglican,” both among ourselves and to others—or at least define the range of acceptable disagreement.

Of course, there is no such thing as a peacemaker, even a blessed one, without an agenda. Different proposals have been forwarded for delineating the meaning of “Anglican,” each tending to favor a certain set of aspirations held by combatants in the battleground that has become our church. Is the meaning of “Anglican” to be found in a certain set of canonical arrangements—a juridical definition? Is it to be found in a certain set of agreed theological affirmations—a doctrinal definition? Shall we look instead in the direction of an agreed set of understandings of scriptural authority and meaning—a hermeneutical definition? Or is it merely an accident of imperial history that we now seek to claim as a somehow uniting factor among widely disparate churches—a historical definition?

A comprehensive answer to the question manifestly demands some means of drawing from each of these resources. But the difficulty involved even in scouting out the ground upon which the conversation should take place gives evidence of the enormity of the task itself. Hence the complexity of the effort invested in the development of an Anglican Covenant, an idea first raised (at least in the current iteration) six years ago in the Windsor Report, a proposal that resulted in three major drafts before culminating in December of 2009 in a fourth, “final draft.” As meticulously noted in the successive commentaries issued by the authors of this initiative—a cross-Communion assemblage of theologians known as the Covenant Design Group—each of these drafts has, in turn, set off a new round of disputation and disagreement. Consistent in the responses from draft to draft has been the central question of whether any kind of limitation on the freedom of provinces in the Communion, inherent in any meaningful idea of “covenant,” can be reconciled with an institution that understands itself to be led by the Spirit and not by political expediency.

The Anglican Covenant: Unity and Diversity in the Anglican Communion, edited by Mark D. Chapman, gathers together five papers originally delivered at a conference held just two days after the first meeting of the Covenant Design Group closed in January 2007. To these the volume adds four other reflections—two of which are from other traditions (Roman Catholic and Methodist)—offering their own perspectives on a peculiarly Anglican conversation.

While falling prey to the usual caveats about the uneven quality of collected essays, this volume may well come to be regarded as a kind of first emanation of the thinking that motivated early drafts of the Covenant. Indeed, two of the contributions here are from members of the Covenant Design Group itself, and one may imagine that their essays afford at least a glimpse into their thinking at the very earliest juncture of what became a fractious and difficult (surprise, surprise) process of drafting and discussion. Of particular value is the editor's comprehensive introduction, which lays out a careful and detailed recitation of the events, reactions, meetings, and resolutions leading to the first draft of an Anglican covenant—and does so in a tone all the more remarkable for its adherence to a balance and even-handedness generally lacking in present-day inter-Anglican discourse.

Alas, what might have been a volume presenting a range of views from across both the political and provincial spectrum ends up a collection of sound scholarship from a fairly limited range of voices. There is here one American voice (resident in Europe) and one African voice (trained in the United States and the United Kingdom); the balance of contributions is from British scholars and theologians. Given that the task is to forge a notion of identity that can somehow at least characterize, if not unite, independent churches spread across the globe, the volume falls short of the goal of sketching in the landscape within which that identity will take shape—if it is to emerge at all.

Conversations about the meaning of “Anglicanism” or the substance of an Anglican identity often start—and end—within a limited realm of debate: the authority of Scripture; the social ethics of the gospel and an insistence on the primacy of the message of liberation; the constitutional issues at stake in canonical order. In his study *The Identity of Anglicanism*, Paul Avis has instead chosen a different path into the question of identity, one generally neglected by the parties to the dispute—foolishly, he believes, and persuasively argues.

Avis's chosen focus is given away in the subtitle of his book—“Essentials of Anglican Ecclesiology.” The implied argument here is that we will make no progress if we insist on agreement on such issues as scriptural authority or social ethics, if only because a chief characteristic of what it means to be Anglican is the lack of a magisterium with the capacity to articulate a doctrinal standard, the power to identify the range of acceptable debate, and the authority to enforce its pronouncements. We will have brighter prospects if we focus not on

what we believe, and not even on what we teach, but (to oversimplify, but not by much) on *how we do church*.

“I sometimes wonder,” Avis speculates in his opening paragraphs, “if Anglicans have faith in Anglicanism and whether they really want a future for the Anglican Communion” (p. 1). To frame the problem in this way is to make evident a bias that the full expression of the Christian faith depends in some essential way on a denominationally grounded set of institutions within which it is lived out. Avis seems either unaware or dismissive of a world beyond intramural disputes over the meaning of Anglican identity, where the continuing salience of Christian community grounded in specific, denominationally located or nationally defined polities is exactly the challenge that is being raised—and, at least in Europe and the United States, with increasing force. Whether it is possible to respond to such questions with appeals to a certain way of organizing and being church seems, frankly, doubtful.

But if it ever *does* succeed, Avis’s work will get us a good deal of the way there. By approaching the question as he does, Avis manages to hold up the idea that there are first principles we are forgetting—an approach to Eucharist, an approach to baptism, an understanding of the nature of ordained ministry—able to provide resources for shaping a sense of identity that does not at the same time insist on denying the very real differences between the constituent churches of the Anglican ecumene.

Avis’s language is often a bracing departure from the platitudes of Communion documents and provincial resolutions: “I gib at the phrase ‘global church’ . . . for the Anglican Communion. . . . The Communion is not constituted as a church, but as a family or fellowship of self-governing but interrelated churches” (p. 77). Accepting the kind of wise limitation with which Avis would restrain our claims to global significance might make considerably easier the business of giving shape and substance to an “Anglican identity.” Easier, perhaps, but at the cost of substance.

Unfortunately, Avis’s interests do not seem to encompass this sort of ecclesiological conversation taking place in other parts of *ecclesiae Anglicana*. Here, again—as with most of the authors in the Chapman volume—it seems that to Avis what it means to be “Anglican” is, or at least derives from, what it means to be English. In developing a hopefully uniting notion of Anglican ecclesiology, it never seems to occur

to Avis to investigate whether some of the “self-governing but inter-related churches” *outside* the Church of England offer different ecclesiological approaches to Eucharist, baptism, and ordination (to point to his own major themes). We may surmise from a brief aside—“The significance of the truth that the Eucharist presupposes baptism and that baptism contains a theological dynamic and momentum that leads to the Eucharist needs to be developed” (p. 103)—what position Avis would take on current debates within the Episcopal Church (and others of those “self-governing but interrelated churches”) on the question of open communion. In contrast, extended attention is accorded here, for example, to the response occasioned by the publishing of *One Bread, One Body*—a pronouncement on eucharistic theology of the Roman Catholic bishops of England, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales from the House of Bishops of the Church of England.

Avis’s focus on the sacramental aspects of ecclesiology curiously overlooks one area deserving of comparative study among churches sharing an Anglican identity—specifically, the question of ecclesiastical *governance*. This was, after all, a principal concern of the earliest Anglican theologians, particularly Hooker; and it might be argued that in many ways the current controversies between different churches of the Communion are tensions arising from differences not so much in ideas of authority, but in governance—the living out of that authority. Differences in the authority exercised by bishops and the laity, the extent to which the governing councils of diocese and province involve democratically elected lay participation, even the question of whether such councils are competent to legislate matters within the realms of theological guidance and doctrinal pronouncement—the evidence points to a wide variation of how authority is understood, organized, and exercised within the many churches that identify themselves as “Anglican.”



The central focus for Avis seems to be the insistence that in all sacramental essentials, at least, Anglican ecclesiology stands as the legitimate equal of that found in Orthodoxy or Catholicism. By drawing attention to this point, Avis sheds light on a topic frequently overlooked by (or, perhaps, simply uninteresting to) many partisans in the contentious conversation through which different voices now seek to exercise dominance over the shape and substance of what is

“Anglican.” It is too easy to conclude that the only reason for enduring such an exercise is to gain some sort of *internal* cohesion—to know whom to invite to the family reunion, and who gets left off the invitation list. But at the same time there is an external audience waiting (or, in view of Benedict’s recent overtures to disaffected Anglicans, not waiting) for us to sort out our affairs.

Significantly it is not a point lost on Rowan Williams. The archbishop’s reflections on the 2009 General Convention of the Episcopal Church, issued almost immediately after the close of that gathering, make plain even in the title—“Communion, Covenant, and our Anglican Future”—a sense that the successful articulation of the Anglican idea must in some way be bound up with the development of an agreed-to set of principles that at least give us a means to agree on how to disagree.

Williams offers in these reflections a characteristically comprehensive (if at points surprisingly uncomprehending³) essay. It is a powerful, and at times poignant, expression of what is, after all, one of the primary tasks laid upon the Archbishop of Canterbury—to speak the Anglican view authoritatively in ecumenical councils. To read through his essay is to have a sense of how truly impossible is the task of a twenty-first-century Archbishop of Canterbury. Williams is a person called on to serve as the global voice for a group of self-governing churches—all of which reserve to themselves the right to make their own pronouncements—in the broader contexts of both ecumenical and interfaith conversations. To the holder of this office falls the unenviable complication of articulating the “Anglican view” of Christian faith and social ethics, and setting it out among other expressions of the Christian faith as something distinct and coherent.

It seems plain that the priorities that necessarily characterize the work of the archbishop do not have much resonance at the level of the provinces—or at least of the church in the United States. The reverse also seems true. When Williams writes that “the issue is not simply about civil liberties or human dignity or even about pastoral sensitivity to the freedom of individual Christians to form their

³ When Williams writes of gay and lesbian people that “their chosen lifestyle is not one that the Church’s teaching sanctions, . . . the question is not a simple one of human rights or human dignity. It is that a certain choice of lifestyle has certain consequences” (paras. 8 and 9), he posits a voluntarism underlying sexuality apparently uninformed by either the experiences of gay and lesbian people or the continuing scientific exploration of the origins of human sexual orientation.

consciences on this matter” (para. 6), he is setting out an implicit critique of the foundational values upon which the conversation in the American church has been built. And when he points to the limits inherent in the view that “what we determine together is more likely, in a New Testament framework, to be in tune with the Holy Spirit than what any one community decides locally” (para. 13), he is pointing to a larger ideal of unity that evidently has little traction for a church shaped by the American cultural milieu.

None of this should be read as saying that Williams’s critique of the values orienting the decisions of the American church is unfounded, or that his insistence on the transcendent significance of something larger than a local church answering to the pressing needs of its own context is misplaced. It is simply to observe that the ideas present in our intramural Anglican conversation about how our different teachings on social and sexual ethics offer an authentic response and witness to the gospel are more often than not simply talking past each other. It does not seem possible to deny that the sort of American exceptionalism so often critiqued, in countless resolutions, pastoral letters, and pulpit pronouncements, by the Episcopal Church—in matters of war and peace, economic justice, or environmental rapaciousness, for example—is precisely the explanation many Anglicans outside the United States now find accounting for the seeming determination of the church in America to pursue its chosen path, unconstrained by appeals to restraint or the higher demands of unity.

For our part, we say, and we deeply believe, that issues of sexual ethics are matters not just of individual preference but of the full realization of God’s creation in every person. But even in believing this we stand on a cultural deposit that insists on the full development of the sovereign individual as a fundamental and inalienable right. In claiming this we are no better and no worse than any other voice in this conversation shaped in important ways by a set of culturally informed values of which any of us can only be partially aware. There are other expressions of Christianity, even Anglican Christianity, in cultural contexts where the claims of the community have far higher status, in which the process of social change is necessarily slower, and in which the expression of prophetic witness against injustice takes substantially different—but by no means less valid—forms.

This point is significant because the construction of identity at the level of the individual—and no less at the societal level—involves both an autonomous *and* a social dimension. Of course our identity is

something deeply and critically implanted in our innermost being, something we spend a lifetime discovering, developing, and refining. That much is consonant with our ideal of the sovereign individual. But “in developing their identities, people draw on culturally available resources in their immediate social networks and in society as a whole.”⁴ So it is for organizations as well.

Theories of identity formation and its significance have typically been the domain of developmental psychologists or sociologists (and, more recently, cognitive neuroscientists), but to us it is equally plain that identity must also have a theological dimension. The God who has made us and who calls us each by name has instilled within each of us a unique identity; the God from whom every family in heaven and earth takes its name has set us within communities and cultural contexts so that we might fully explore and realize the significance of our uniqueness. Our identity is neither merely the sum of our baptismal gifts nor limited by the view of ourselves and our role we receive from our historically situated social contexts; it rests on both, animated by the Spirit in baptism but set within the community of the baptized.

In countless ways—through literature, poetry, plastic arts, opera, symphonic music, and (especially) popular culture—dominant themes in the Western narrative make us comfortably familiar with the great struggle of self-realization, of the unyielding drive of the individual to realize a destiny nearly always understood in personal, and personally designated, terms. Not surprisingly, the autonomous aspect of shaping our identity is therefore what we are most comfortable with, and it comes naturally to us to cast it in theological terms. We make our appeal to the authority of individual dignity and human rights, which we understand to be grounded in that which is divine in each individual. Others make the same appeal, and just as naturally, to the principal need of the community for coherence and the claims of society on expectations of obedience and conformance to the wisdom of past generations, which is itself understood to be a means of mediating God’s work throughout time and history—ideas that seem somewhat alien or even suspect to us. Yet the gospels record Jesus offering a critique of both the sovereign individualism of the rich young ruler,

⁴ Stephen Frosh, “Identity,” entry in *The New Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought*, third edition, ed. Alan Bullock and Stephen Trombley (London: Harper-Collins, 1999), 413.

and the oppressive social conformity of the Pharisaic authorities. Hence both of the components necessary to identity formation are thus liable to interrogation by the gospel's vision of justice.



One way to understand the work of the long and arduous process that has recently brought forth a final draft of “The Anglican Communion Covenant” might be to view it as an effort to create a means by which to hold together in relationship these two very different approaches to the business of claiming and articulating the identities God has given us as churches and communities of faith, in the pursuit of which we engage in our work as co-creators.

This is not the place to recount the story of how the Covenant Design Group was formed out of the 2004 Windsor Report; how it offered a series of three drafts for comment and critique by provinces, dioceses, and individuals; how it took this bewildering variety of comment on board in each next iteration of its work; and how the process of its work has been viewed by some as expressive of the best qualities that characterize Anglican Christianity, while decried by others (not least in the most recent round of responses to the penultimate draft) as inviting “a disfiguration of Anglicanism.”⁵ Space does not permit it, and in any case there has emerged a gnostic-like feeling reserving to a clerisy of Communion Office or province designees any legitimate utterance on the intent or meaning of the text itself and the work that produced it.

Yet a few observations seem pertinent to the present exploration of the connection between the (evidently) felt need to express a distinct and meaningful Anglican identity, and the distillation of that longing in the form of a covenant setting out the ways in which the autonomous and self-governing churches gathered together in a “Communion” are expected to relate to one other.

Since the second (“St. Andrew’s”) draft of the Covenant text, the link between identity and covenant has been expressed in the language of an introduction to the document:

⁵ A comment found in the singularly interesting response of the Anglican Episcopal Church of Brazil (at para. 2.2.4), specifically with respect to the idea of permitting Christian churches outside the Communion to declare their adherence to the principles of the Covenant.

In the providence of God, which holds sway even over our divisions caused by sin, various families of churches have grown up within the universal Church in the course of history. Among these families is the Anglican Communion, which provides a particular charism and identity among the many followers and servants of Jesus. We recognize the wonder, beauty and challenge of maintaining communion in this family of churches, and the need for mutual commitment and discipline as a witness to God's promise in a world and time of instability, conflict, and fragmentation. Therefore, we covenant together as churches of this Anglican Communion to be faithful to God's promises through the historic faith we confess, our common worship, our participation in God's mission, and the way we live together.⁶

In its four sections, the Covenant's final text sets out statements on three aspects of Christian life shared by all churches in the Communion: faith, drawing on such historic resources as the Preface to the Declaration of Assent, the Thirty-Nine Articles, the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer*, and the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilaterals of 1886–1888; mission, grounded on the 1999 *MISSIO* report; and interdependence of life, an assertion of the historic commitment of Anglicanism to a common life linked together by the four instruments of communion.

It is the fourth section, "Our Covenanted Life Together," that has emerged as the focus of greatest contention (and, perhaps, suspicion), chiefly because it sets out the means by which the language of the Covenant would be used to realize, not to say enforce, an Anglican identity. That is to say, Section 4 of the Covenant creates a process for *becoming* Anglican (a "church of the Anglican Communion, as recognized by the Anglican Consultative Council, is invited to enter into this Covenant," 4.1.4), for *being* Anglican ("The Anglican Communion is a fellowship, within the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church, of national or regional Churches, in which each recognizes in the others the bonds of a common loyalty to Christ expressed through a common faith and order, a shared inheritance in worship, life and mission, and a readiness to live an interdependent life," 4.1.1), and for

⁶ The Anglican Communion Covenant, "Introduction to the Covenant Text," para. 4. It should be noted that "the Introduction to the Covenant Text, which shall always be annexed to the Covenant text, is not part of the Covenant, but shall be accorded authority in understanding the purpose of the Covenant" (para. 4.4.1).

maintaining that identity by providing for a means of raising and resolving disputes over adherence to the Covenant's terms.

As noted in the Commentary accompanying the final text of the Covenant—written by the “Covenant Working Group,” a subset of four members of the original Covenant Design Group appointed by the Archbishop of Canterbury at the request of the fourteenth meeting of the Anglican Consultative Council in May 2009 (got all that?) and, interestingly, including no representatives from the Episcopal Church—this aspect of the document was the most difficult to craft:

Not all developments aid and nurture deeper communion. From our recent history it is evident that some developments bring dispute, disruption and tension. The clear majority of responses [to the third draft, which included this fourth section for the first time] demonstrated that [sic] a section of the Covenant which seeks to provide an ordered way for the Communion to approach disagreement remains a necessary feature of the Covenant. (Commentary, Section 4.2)

Changes in the institutional arrangements in the Anglican Communion necessitated some revisions in the language of Section 4 between the first and final drafts. With the emergence of a “Standing Committee of the Anglican Communion,” the existence of the “Joint Standing Committee” of the ACC, which was to have been the chief institutional guardian of the Covenant, has come to an end; this reality is reflected in the amended text of the Covenant's final draft.

Still, it seems impossible to avoid concluding that what the Covenant offers is little more than recommended ways to disagree—and a few guidelines for thinking about the meaning of disagreement. In this the language of the Covenant sounds considerably less like canon law (which, at any rate, it never claimed to be) and more like a ready-reference to be taken home from the marriage counselor's office. It stipulates exactly who has standing to raise questions about a given church's actions or decisions is stipulated (a church itself, another church, or one of the Instruments of Communion—4.2.3), and identifies where grievances are to be lodged (the aforementioned Standing Committee), which in the first instance is tasked with seeking to resolve the dispute (4.2.4). The powers given to the Standing Committee are highly limited; it may “request a Church to defer a controversial action,” and, in the event its request is declined, “recommend to any Instrument of Communion relational consequences

which may specify a provisional limitation of participation in, or suspension from” that body (4.2.5). It may declare, on the basis of solicited advice, that a given action is “incompatible with the Covenant”—the sharpest rebuke provided for in the text (4.2.6). Following this, however, the Standing Committee’s role seems again to return to that of offering “recommendations as to relational consequences which flow from an action incompatible with the covenant” (4.2.7).

Taking into account the four points within which the architects of an Anglican Covenant were obliged to work—the existing instruments of Communion, the inheritance of such bedrock resources as the Thirty-Nine Articles and the Chicago-Lambeth statements, the fundamental characteristic of the member churches as constitutionally autonomous, and the context of our recent fractious history, one aspect of which was to give rise to the drafting process itself—it must be said that it is hard to imagine that a better result could have been achieved from the nearly five-year-long process that brought about this draft. For many of the participants and partisans in the debate, of course, it is very easy indeed to imagine improvements; but how these various preferences could be accommodated within the natural laws of the Anglican universe is not immediately evident.



That said, it is not clear that the text of the Covenant we now have before us offers much by way of an answer to the question with which we began: What does it mean to be Anglican?

At least part of the answer may lie in places we have not yet thought to look, or in dimensions we have not considered. When Rowan Williams speculated, in his reflections on the 2009 General Convention, that “perhaps we are faced with the possibility . . . of a ‘two-track’ model” for the Anglican Communion, he set forth (perhaps unintentionally) a metaphor that may have considerable explanatory power. After all, tracks are laid down for the purpose of movement; they define a path and make a journey possible.

Perhaps, then, what it means to be Anglican is not to be captured by juridical, theological, liturgical, historical, or even doctrinal categories. Perhaps Anglicanism is a *movement*—or, more accurately, perhaps Anglicanism is at present *two* movements, traveling alongside each other on tracks that often run in parallel, sometimes diverge

widely, and occasionally seem destined to collide. Perhaps what it means to be Anglican is to be a participant in a self-conscious movement, a church seeking to proclaim the gospel within a history that is ever moving forward into the plan of God.

This would not be a remarkable, or even novel, way of understanding the church. Sociologists and anthropologists have for decades explored the similarities of social function and impact between religion and political movements. Kenelm Burridge's 1969 study of millenarian movements explored the redemptive function of political movements—a category of human experience deeply rooted in religious meaning.⁷ Jacob Talmon, contributing to the study of the rise of totalitarianism, identified the emergence of political messianism, and the notion of a politically referenced image of a perfectible human society, as a critical aspect of this twentieth-century phenomenon.⁸

In a strikingly perceptive 1973 review of literature on social and political movements from the perspective of anthropology, Ralph Nicholas described the social function and processes of movements in words that one imagines many Episcopalians would find a fitting and fair description of the church. To begin with, Nicholas points out, movements are understood as a gathered group of persons, a *body*, that acts as an entity. Nicholas takes up easily what to us would be the obvious parallel to Paul's image of the church as the body of Christ, and notes that medieval European kingdoms translated the image of the mystical, undying body into the realm of the political. Drawing on the work of Paul Wilkinson, Nicholas sets out three basic qualifying criteria for these movements:

- They are a deliberate, collective endeavor to promote change.
- They must evince “a minimal degree of organization,” ranging from grassroots movements to “the highly institutionalized and bureaucratized.”
- Their commitment to change is premised on conscious volition, commitment to the movement's aims as a matter of

⁷ Kenelm Burridge, *New Heaven, New Earth: A Study in Millenarian Activities* (Oxford: B. Blackwell, 1969).

⁸ J. L. Talmon, *Political Messianism: The Romantic Phase* (Bolder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1985).

normative engagement, and active participation on the part of their members.⁹

Beyond these criteria, movements exist in time; they have a trajectory that moves from one state of affairs, or period of time, to another. “This movement may be conceived as marking the end of time as it was previously known and the beginning of eternity, or as the transition to the good and just society, or as the return to the uncontaminated life of the ancestors.”¹⁰ In these different expressions of how movements navigate time, one catches glimpses of both an emphasis on social justice, as well as the evangelical fervor for a return to “Bible truth.”

We might pause right here to observe that for many in the church today, this is both an accurate description and an appropriate aspiration for something called “church,” and comports perfectly with the church we believe God is calling us to be—a church advocating for justice, a church moving society closer to the vision of God. At the same time, however, for many others these criteria might instead be adduced as a summary of the essential failures of the church today. Nowhere here is there room for transcendent mystery; nowhere here is there a submission to humility demanding constant interrogation of our agenda for change to assure that it is not (merely) a clever way of theologizing our self-indulgent social objectives. Perhaps, then, by looking more closely at what movements are and what they do, we can see more clearly the terms of disagreement *within* the Episcopal Church over essential questions about the purpose of the gathered community of the faithful. Is it for awe, or activism? Is it for reverence and repentance, or resistance and rebellion? Faithful people often see one or another of these categories as having life-changing urgency, and nearly as often have difficulty acknowledging that an alternative view could have equally valid significance to those who hold it.

With this as background, to describe Anglicanism as a movement seems a more accurate way of describing the kinds of tensions that have emerged to divide both the American Episcopal Church and the

⁹ Paul Wilkinson, *Social Movement* (New York: Praeger, 1971), 27; quoted in Ralph W. Nicholas, “Social and Political Movements,” in *Annual Review of Anthropology* 2 (1973): 69.

¹⁰ Nicholas, “Social and Political Movements,” 70.

Communion. This is not to say that the issues at stake are merely political. Rather, it is to observe that one consequence of the politicization of Christian faith in the American context—chiefly the result of a now three-decades-long emergence of a clear political identity by the religious right in the United States, itself another movement—may be a felt need for mainline traditions, the Episcopal Church included, to step forward with equally clear, if distinct, political identities. Said in other words, mainline churches have become—by reflex, by reaction, or by dint of a pained sense of lost relevance—a refuge for Christians whose politics cannot be reconciled with a polarizing, right-leaning movement.¹¹ But those left in the middle are abandoning both camps.

Thus the current direction of the Anglican movement in the United States is one that must be seen within the larger context of the engagement of faith with politics—just as identity itself comes about both from internal and external sources, autonomous and social dimensions. The only problem is that this encounter seems to be changing something essential about what is, or was, Anglicanism—the quality of creating community among those differing not only in background, heritage, race, class, or identity, but *conscience* as well.

Framing our identity as a movement might therefore resonate more easily with many within the majority of the Episcopal Church—at least the majority of the moment; but it also seems to give up something important about our historic aspirations as a distinct kind of widely tolerant Christian community. For, despite a number of changes undertaken with a view to increasing the diversity of our church, in one immensely significant way it has become *less* diverse. When *The Boston Globe* reported on the decision of the bishop of the Diocese of Massachusetts to permit priests in the diocese to solemnize weddings between same-sex couples, it observed: “There are relatively few vocal critics of same-sex marriage left in the local Episcopal Church because many conservatives have left the denomination.”¹² Exactly; and the essential division in the church can be summarized by observing that for some among us this is the problem, while for others of us it is—truth be told—a victory.

¹¹ On this point, see, for example, A. James Reichley, “Faith in Politics,” in *Religion Returns to the Public Square: Faith and Policy in America*, ed. Hugh Hecl and Wilfred M. McClay (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2003).

¹² Michael Paulson, “Episcopal Role OK’d in Gays’ Weddings,” *The Boston Globe* (November 30, 2009).

To return to the archbishop's railroad image, the people on our train are of a greater variety of backgrounds, identities, and orientations; but they are of increasingly one set of views on social issues. As Woody Guthrie sang,

This train don't carry no gamblers,
Liars, thieves, no big shot ramblers,
This train is bound for glory, this train.

These days, this train don't carry no conservatives, either.

It was Erik Erikson who argued that the difficult and stressful task of shaping identity was a necessary gateway to maturity. Erikson argued that this task was the great defining characteristic of late adolescence. Perhaps that is where we are—high school. No wonder we are so difficult to be around just now.