

An Episcopal Future? A Theological- Anthropological Stereoscope

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The debate over sexuality has a great deal to do with our theological identity and ecclesiological coherence. But there are other, quieter challenges before us. This reflection seeks to shed light on these with the help of the companion science of anthropology, and with the further test of common sense. Putting the usual clichés about ourselves aside, we ask what are the forms of thought and life which will conduce to renewal in the coming years.

Prelude: The Anthropologist from Mars

What if a friendly alien from Mars were to land suddenly and offer a critique of the Anglican/Episcopal churches that he or she (or whatever) would find in 2009? What might we learn that would help us understand the challenges and opportunities that lie before us as a church? The next best thing is an anthropologist with some sympathy for religious phenomena, and there was no such voice more astute in the twentieth century than Mary Douglas, who in her spare time was a devout Roman Catholic. The contribution of such a social scientist would be that she could bracket the often-vexed substantive questions at hand, and offer insight into our church culture itself. What might such a sympathetic outsider have to say to us? In a chapter called “The Bog Irish” in her book *Natural Symbols*, Douglas punctured the self-satisfied sense of cultural progress that accompanied Vatican II—now we are beyond relics of an earlier era like fish on Friday, and can explain to the simpler faithful in a more up-to-date way what the meaning of these earlier practices ought to be. By contrast, Douglas pointed out how more traditional societies have access to dense symbols like fasting or the Eucharist that we supposed moderns may not. In the essay that follows, I do not intend to deal with the controversy

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over sexuality in our church: enough ink has been spilled! Still, Mary Douglas could have made an observation that might shed a different kind of light. Are same-sex unions capitulation to a decadent culture? Or are they a new and higher step in moral evolution? Here an anthropologist's non-theological counsel deflates self-dramatization on both sides of the aisle. Diffuse and disengaged cultures produce, by a law of homology, diffuse and disengaged ethics. Bodies have porous boundaries, which at times hardly seem like boundaries at all. In such diffuse cultures you can do what you like with your body, and the body politic is likewise indeterminate—give communion to whomever you like, whatever. Identities are commodities; interactions are surface; careers are mobile. We are not surprised if our conceptualities follow suit (though we need to stop ourselves shy of full-bore Durkheimianism). But at least we can, with some humility and even foreboding, note this pervasive, underlying social fact of diffusion, and, as this essay proceeds, see the challenge it will pose in a variety of ways.

On this score, I would make one more observation ancillary to the subject-which-must-not-be-named. For some time revisionists have, in an understandable but vain hope of limiting the damage, been calling for “local option.” Why can't particular contexts simply do what seems best to them, as we do in lesser areas such as matters of liturgical taste? With the eye of the anthropologist we are interested in this desire to solve problems with a “local option.” I am reminded here of the advice I was once given by a spiritual director from the Cowley Fathers: “God punishes us by giving us what we want.” In our diffuse and technologically pointillist culture, the pull of authority is lessened in a wide variety of matters. The falcon, wearing its iPod, cannot hear the falconer. The bonds are loosed, and parishes, and parishioners, will exercise all kinds of “local option” more and more. Who says we can't have that rector, or that we have to keep this one? How, in such a cultural moment, could one teach a theology of marriage, “until we are parted by death,” or a theology of societal obligation, of “being our brother's keeper”? The not-so-clear and present danger is the centrifugal effect in our individual and collective lives.

The First Challenge: Foreclosures and Growth Stocks

I know several friends who call it the “silvertop test.” They look out over their congregation and scan the silver hair in the vista as they

preach—no demographer needed!¹ Our church is aging, and it is not retaining its young in sufficient numbers, or drawing enough new and younger members, to maintain itself. This is obviously not true in each and every parish, but it is true in enough places and in enough dioceses to make the prospects twenty years out worrisome. There are of course ways to mask the problem, even to turn it into a seeming advantage—an aging church could be fertile ground for planned giving (though it usually isn't), and closed church properties can be sold for a short-term gain. Yet these are but the prolonged flush before the death-rattle. The next decade and a half will surely see a wave of insolvent parishes and missions, and some rural dioceses that cannot survive. Most church leaders are aware of this reality, though little is done consciously to attempt to address the issue. This is not for lack of concern. It is, rather, a problem for which we have no obvious remedy, like the paralysis we experience in the face of global warming or the looming Medicare shortfall. A certain wariness about big-frame strategic plans is well warranted, but one of the great challenges of the next generation will be whether or not we can find the candor and creativity to make the process of closure and retrenchment into one that is truly mission-minded. It won't quite do to characterize this by the "maintenance to mission" mantra, since what we face with respect to a number of parishes will be survival, without which, in those places at least, there is no mission. But closures there will be, and we need something more to go on than an extended version of lifeboat situation-ethics. By what "value-added" could this time of seeming constriction become something more than well-managed end-of-life? What more do we have to offer than clichés about "from scarcity to abundance"?

The situation in which we live is, however, more complex than merely a slow decline of a mainline church. For there is still evidence that young people, young Christians, are attracted to Anglicanism, that debris has not choked off the Canterbury Way. A friend claims to know, by anecdote at least, that a sizeable plurality of undergraduates at a prominent evangelical college call themselves "Anglicans," though they may well not attend the Episcopal Church (or any church for that

¹ In fact, Episcopal writers like Dean Kevin Martin of Dallas can provide the statistic substantiation of this worry. See his *Five Keys for Church Leaders: Building a Strong, Vibrant, and Growing Church* (New York: Church Publishing, 2007).

matter). The emerging church movement, with its insistently anti-institutional edge, claims to have rediscovered the importance of ambiguity, liturgy, and symbol: whom does that remind you of?

In our predominantly romanticist church culture we may expect, along with the valorization of the expressive, even the bohemian, a wistfulness for the venerable as well. So, in our segmented cultural scene, we find the phenomenon of the twenty-something who prefers the cadences of the Cranmerian Prayer Book. The catch, of course, is that those who are so attracted are looking precisely for the depth of a tradition, in which case theological revisionism might represent running away from our main point of attraction.

The Second Challenge: Bone Density

In the face of the gradual constriction of a plethora of parishes, and the looming (if largely unacknowledged) demographic challenge, we find considerable enthusiasm for a number of strategies to reverse this trend. Natural Church Growth seeks to raise the congregation's own self-consciousness about its attractiveness for a newcomer. The church seeks to appropriate elements of the emerging church movement. Others go to Willow Creek-sponsored events to focus on leadership and growth, or study other examples of the church growth movement. Especially popular now is the expansion of initiatives from the evangelical wing of the Church of England, the Alpha movement and Fresh Expressions. In each case there is much legitimate to learn, and Episcopalians for too long have turned up their noses at evangelical neighbors who were indeed growing. Still, there remain questions which attend these appropriations: How does one bring Willow Creek into the Anglican scene? And, similarly, how does one draw the successful Fresh Expressions group at Starbucks into relationship to the sponsoring parish? These are not just questions of institutional benefit, but rather of the connection of technique to ecclesiology.

And behind these questions lies a deeper observation. There is a reason that these movements have sprouted where and as they have. Though they have journeyed beyond their original precinct, they were all born in evangelical homes. They are the ones who have the "bone density" of piety, Bible study, and evangelistic concern to start such movements. You cannot transplant them as techniques and disregard those underlying conditions that made them possible, for those same

conditions may be prerequisites for their continued, long-term success. We may want a prescription for growth, but in fact long-term therapy in formation in the gospel and discipleship is what is called for. Now it is easy to say this, harder to do it—for patients in the ICU, where some parishes find themselves, long-term healing may not seem plausible. And of course, as long as we think of evangelistic measures as a means to shore up the church, their effectiveness is (rightly) curtailed.

The Third Challenge: Late Adolescence

With all these predicaments, one might easily conclude that we have no time or luxury for ivory-towering and navel-gazing. Add to this the common, and doubtless accurate, observation that for most newcomers (and for a lot of the folks long in the pews, too) denominational affiliation means less and less. Who has not made a church attendance decision at some point in life based on the sweeter choir, the less soporific preacher, and the youth group less likely to occasion resistance from your teen? We might blithely conclude that worry about what it means to be an Anglican may now be jettisoned. Isn't this kind of self-consciousness a kind of neurosis? And aren't we really about "mere Christianity," by one account, and a more just world, by another—in either case rendering Anglican identity secondary?

Can we rush to this dismissal quite so quickly? After inveighing against pragmatic go-with-what-works-ism, let me indulge for a moment. In many a small town, if the newcomer judges denominational preference based on the aforementioned choir/preacher/youth group criteria, we will lose. And as soon as conflict erupts, as it is bound to do, those newcomers who do come may find their choice more dystonic, and skedaddle. At a more theologically serious level, we may observe that intense conflicts over issues, our lurching here and there, have to do with our deeper but latent confusions over the nature of our Christian tradition. It would seem that we will be required to answer all three of these challenges together, under pressure and on the fly. So it is to the third that we will turn our attention first.

Response I: "Deep and Wide"

Let us begin with that same small-town church shopper—why might he or she choose the Anglicans after all? For a few it may be

because we appeal to the town progressives, because we are the liberal Democrats-at-prayer. With respect to the present controversy, we may assume that neither the newcomers (nor the lifelong members for that matter) have much sense of being in communion with New York City, not to mention Lagos—even historic Canterbury will present at best a shadowy connection. Still, for many newcomers the Episcopal/Anglican church will be appealing because it seems, at some visceral level, to be legit. It offers an alternative which is a “deep and wide” version of the Christian faith. In contrast to the shinier evangelical prayer center across town, it transcends the immediate place and time. This is an intuitive sense of what ecclesiology calls “apostolicity and catholicity.” We didn’t just make this stuff up. This common sense apprehension is of considerable theological importance—we will correlate it to the catholic strain in Anglican self-understanding. Now in this regard we may have an answer to those who often say that the rank and file could care less about the Anglican Communion. Maybe so, when the question is put a certain way, but one can readily find a reason why they should care about catholicity, and in our time the Windsor struggle is involved in that mark of the church.

What then of what might be called the “evangelical” dimension of our tradition? Is there a way of putting the matter which is in fact available to both those who call themselves “evangelicals” and “catholics”? And could that way of putting the matter address the theological problem that lies beneath the self-laceration which has been the same-sex blessings debate in the Episcopal Church? Here, as is usually the case, a tradition renews itself as it turns *ad fontes*, as it returns to its source. For us that is the Prayer Book tradition as a way to hear and live the gospel. And at the heart of Cranmer’s Prayer Book is a strongly Augustinian doctrine of sin and redemption. Is it what newcomers think they want to hear? Hardly. But will seekers be in fact drawn when the church offers a message of salvation instead of the weaker tea of affirmation? Of course. And, as I say, this goes to the very heart of our confusion as well, for we as a church are in large measure amnesiacs when it comes to the doctrine of sin. We know that we live in a society full of compulsion and addiction; we know that the best intentions turn into bad wars; we know that normal economic competition merges easily into toxic greed. Yet we have a hard time connecting these examples of what theologians have meant by “sin” to the doctrine itself—it all

sounds judgmental to many. That this vocabulary is simply the converse of “amazing grace” is a conclusion as logically ready as it is culturally difficult. This message has both appeal and affront to our culture. But before we can evangelize our culture at this point we had better relearn our own grammar of sin, grace, justification, and sanctification ourselves. Of course this language of sin and redemption is not the possession of evangelicals as a subgroup any more than it is of Anglo-Catholics. But it is at the heart of the gospel, and so its reclamation can be a point of common cause for evangelicals and Anglo-Catholics together. And as a theological presupposition it is what makes the Good News good.

It is valuable, finally, to give some account of the third stream of Anglicanism, in addition to this way of describing the catholic and evangelical. Anglicanism has allowed, even encouraged, a “latitude” of opinion and exploration, though the condition for this possibility has been a conservatism and caution on matters of doctrine. Liturgy as a means of preserving and encapsulating that doctrinal inheritance has been a means both of this doctrinal conservatism and of a certain generosity of opinion of a more speculative sort. We ought to be disconcerted by the jokes about being “Catholicism lite” or “Catholicism without the guilt.” Still, there is something valid about the encouragement to explore that attracts many newcomers. Another way to put the matter is that Anglicanism at its best has meant an engagement of the gospel with culture, at its worst a mere chaplaincy to dominant culture—for the discrimination between the two we need systematic theological work (which we often disparage). The liberality of spirit we value is undone by the aggressive revisionism that belies the liberal name. In short, recovery requires an apology for our tradition which can touch down in the perceptions of ordinary parishes, and this can only be found in a generous-minded, Communion-oriented retrieval of our inheritance.

Response II: The Rabbinate

Though we are blithe to invoke terms like “postmodern,” “post-Christendom,” even “exilic,” could one think of a denomination less likely in structure and regnant theology to fit that profile? What then is the most strategic and decisive of places in the life of the church where seeds of renewal might be planted? The answer is the seminaries,

endangered species though they may be at present. In their very marginality they can be the incubators of alternative futures for the church—our revisionist present was, after all, hatched there.

It is no easy moment for the seminaries. They must survive in a competitive market where students, and church leaders too, want more flexible and local options. To what extent is this consistent with a more “contextual” kind of education, and to what extent are we putting the best face of diffusion pursued for other reasons? In an adamantly non-theological church they seem irrelevant, but are for this very reason quite the opposite. Each has Anglican ordination training as its deepest memory, and each must diversify or die. On terrain such as this, how can they fulfill the calling required of them?

Surely the desiderata are many, but let us focus on one thing needful. Theological education needs to imagine itself as training into a Christian rabbinate, the students being apprentices in the study of the divine Word. Each of the usual disciplines becomes in turn a dimension of the midrashic enterprise—the history of interpretation (church history), the interrogation of one text against another and against the claims of the surrounding culture (systematics), its proclamation and its balm (pastoralia). Such an understanding is consistent with the most classical theological education and with the best of our Reformation tradition. It captures the very heart of the insight that ours is an “exilic” situation as it makes plain our deference to Jewish history, from which we have much to learn on this topic. But it does these things in a humble way. If God will use our studying, and then our ministering, to cure the ills we have described—all praise be his! But what is incumbent on us is to study the Word we are given. Having said this, what might we hope to see as a result? Congregations who know better the biblical story, and so know better who they are. From this might follow, in the power of the Spirit, all kinds of avenues for the renewal of the church.

Response III: The Baptismal Covenant, Meaning All of What We Say

The Baptismal Covenant has been seen for a generation as lying at the heart of the Episcopal Church’s vision of ministry. This has mainly to do with its emphasis on the ministry of the whole people of God, and on the equal prominence given to social witness to the “dignity of every person.” We do well to applaud both of these themes.

But the Baptismal Covenant also calls us to practices which will seem more challenging. At the heart of the “baptismal paradigm”² is the observation that baptism is best thought of as a process from catechuminate through mystagogy. The condition for the whole process is first, a church that evangelizes, and second, a church that understands the Christian life to be sufficiently distinct from the surrounding culture to require an extended process of detachment from the culture’s assumption and re-formation in “the Way.” That formation includes learning the central affirmations of the faith (in the early church in the form of the repetition of the Creed) and the distinctive ethical commitments of a Christian. All of this would require of us a commitment to a discipline of catechesis we do not at present have. At a yet deeper level this discipline has as its condition a theology of culture and conversion which we in our cultural accommodation also lack (in spite of our rhetoric of post-Christendom and counterculturalism).

It is easy to toss these kinds of critiques and solutions. As a former parish priest who struggled to get inquirers to buy into more ambitious programs, I know that actually making progress toward an expectation of catechesis is harder. But we need to labor, by little and by little, in this direction. This in turn leads on to my fourth proposal.

Response IV: The “One Thing Needful”

My own interest in theology is missiology, in which considerable effort has been rightly expended in recent years by thinkers from across the spectrum in affirming the seamless garment of mission that includes witness, social action, solidarity, and so on. But we must go on to ask, in a self-critical way, how this affirmation of “holism” is then deployed. We find something similar in the dialogue between the religions, where a term like “inclusivism” can mean a number of things and so cover a multitude of unclaritys.

In a similar way, does our affirmation of a holistic vision of mission serve as a way to evade the actual discipline of sharing our faith with others? Such a discipline may not be all of mission, but it remains a crucial part. In fact, in a denomination with this neuralgia, a vigorous parish commitment to evangelism is the *sine qua non*, the litmus

² As used, for example, in Paul Avis, *Anglicanism and the Christian Church* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1989).

test, for the credibility of all the other, wider things we might claim about our mission. Where there is no practice of actually sharing our faith, the wider claims sound more and more hollow. This practice happens to be one with which the evangelical wing is most able and likely to offer help to the church as a whole—but is the Body willing to say to that particular hand “we have need of you”? And in that answer, lived out in the behavior of the leadership of our church, will be revealed to what extent we truly grasp a “liberal” and Maurician vision of the comprehensiveness of the church.

We have heard in this reflection mostly of quandaries and difficulties. We would do well, at the very least, to be humble about our situation and prospects. Though we denigrate “maintenance” (as opposed to “mission”), our denomination over the past decade has not even managed that! But a sense of the incapacity of the church is itself a gift of grace. At the very least it is an antidote to the triumphalism we Americans have no little proclivity toward. We need the gift of hope too, for the renewal we look for will not come from our listing, or even our enacting, remedies, but rather from the work of the Holy Spirit with “ah, bright wings.”