

**A BRIEF COMPARATIVE STUDY OF ANGLICANISM
IN THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND
FROM A SPANISH PERSPECTIVE**



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ABSTRACT

English Anglicanism may appear externally and *a priori* to have a weak identity with a lack of doctrine; it seems that it can only be approached intrinsically, as an experience.

This paper argues that, in practice, English Anglicanism as expressed in the Church of England rebukes indifference and requires the active participation of the believer at all levels. Consequently, it can be perceived to have a strong identity that extends to all aspects Church life, expanding from its core (worship) outwards (mission). It is immersed in the English culture, and at the same time it welcomes other cultures universally. Reformed and Catholic, Anglicanism goes to the very heart of the authentic Christian faith.

INTRODUCTION

'History is written by the victors' is a phrase often attributed to Winston Churchill. Where there are no victors or when both sides presume to be the victorious, two very different versions of the same event can appear.

Most would agree that to understand the Church today there is a need to understand its whole history. In Spain in the eighties when I studied the history of the Reformation, through both political and religious filters I had a one-sided reading of history: Charles the first, the Holy Roman Emperor, a man of virtue and true faith. Henry the eighth of England, a libertine, faithless, ruthless ruler who used everything at his disposal for his own carnal enjoyment. His Holiness Pope Clement VII, a holy man of faith who tries to stop the English schism. Thomas Cranmer at the service of the king who had a private agenda over the Church.

The study of Anglicanism itself in my Spanish Faculty of Theology was not much deeper than this caricature of the Reformation. Paradoxically, some of the Anglican divines (C. S. Lewis, T.S. Elliot...) were quoted as theological authorities, not to mention some much admired Anglican biblical scholars, such as Hort, Westcott or Burney.

Once in England, I came to understand that the intentions of our Spanish king might not have been as pure as I had been told; that Henry VIII was not necessarily faithless, but rather had a very strict consciousness that made him believe that he had been cursed by God for marrying his brother's wife. That Pope Clement VII was more probably more worried about worldly political issues than the reform of the decadence of the medieval Church, and that Archbishop Thomas Cranmer was a man of God, trying to reform a Church, agonising over its role and wanting to free it from external intervention.

1. 'FLAT' DOCTRINE AND *LEX ORANDI*

Karl Barth, writing about Anglican Doctrine and how the so-called English 'High Church' came to be, writes:

... It is my impression that it is a matter of necessary compensation at the institutional level for a certain noticeable flatness of doctrine. [...] It will suffice here to state that the problem of Anglican doctrine, which can be cleanly separated from its concept of the church, is the ethical issue, the unity of faith and obedience that is pursued in a process of uncertain groping between scholastic and spiritualistic concepts.¹

Someone who is not familiar with Roman Catholicism would find it very easy to acquire a complete and accurate idea of its doctrine by reading the *Summa Theologica* or some of the many manuals of the Roman Catholic systematic theologians. It's *all* in there, or if not, it can be easily extracted from its general principles. If you go to the Reformed Churches you find a great deal of their thought on the lengthy *Confessions*, John Calvin's *Institutions of the Christian Religion* ... and others that survive to date as doctrinal base for these Reformed

¹ Karl Barth, *The Theology of the Reformed Confessions*. Columbia Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky, 1960, p. 129.

Churches. There is nothing like that in the Church of England. The closest to a confessional statement, but hardly that, are the *Thirty-nine Articles of Religion*, a general declaration of the position of the Church with respect to some of the controversies of the Reformation.

Oliver O'Donovan writes:

But although the Anglican Church is indeed a church of the Reformation, it does not relate to its Reformation origins in quite the same way as other churches do, and its Articles are not exactly comparable, in their conception or in the way they have been used, to the Augsburg or Westminster Confessions or to the Heidelberg Catechism.²

It is more startling to consider how relaxed Anglicans are towards what appears to be their only official doctrinal formulary. Where most religions would understand doctrine as a binding quantity of principles, the Anglican approach is much more relaxed: The Thirty-nine Articles are *agreeable* to the Word of God and *may be assented unto* with a good conscience by all members of the Church of England.³ It is then hardly surprising that Karl Barth described Anglican doctrine as 'flat'.

This 'flatness' has a twofold explanation, in that Anglicanism is both a *method* and an *experience*.

A Church is usually defined by the general approach to certain topics by its theologians. This produces assimilation of particular doctrines while others are discarded. The Anglican *method*, however, does not work in this way. Rather, the Anglican *method* can be understood in Richard Hooker's, scripture, tradition (antiquity) and reason. Theological thought that fits in with these three parameters cannot be discarded. In this way Anglicanism is arguably the most evangelical of all Reformed Churches, because it is *always* open to new inspiration and new ways of the Spirit.

Originally in 1536 there were only ten *Articles*. These reduced to six in 1539 and increased again to forty-two in 1552 until the final redaction of thirty-nine in 1563. However, together with the *Articles*, there always was the more important *Book of Common Prayer*. The continental reformers never forgot about liturgy, but they were much more concerned about scripture and doctrine. It appears that in England worship was important to the point at which scripture and doctrine could best be understood within that context, that is, within the life of the Church.

The English reformers well understood that Christianity is not simply the practice of doctrinal, moral or ethical principles, but the *experience* of a real person-God, Jesus. Anglicanism is also a life-based *experience* and such experience can only be made *in* the Church and *through* the Church. In this way Anglicanism is arguably the most catholic of all Catholic Churches, because it doesn't shape the individual for the *experience*, but rather, enables a *place* (the Church) so that the individual can himself/herself discover the *experience*. This method is as old as the Church herself, and it has been formulated classically in the phrase *lex orandi, lex credendi* –which may be loosely translated 'the law of prayer is the law of belief'.

² Oliver O'Donovan, *On the Thirty-Nine Articles. Conversations with Tudor Christianity*, SCM Press, London, 2011, pp. 5-6.

³ Canon A 2 of the *Canons of the Church of England*. Church House Publishing, London, 2012, p. 4.

At the same time we must not forget the books of *Homilies*. These sixteenth century homilies, which are contained in two books of thirty-three sermons developing the reformed doctrines of the Church of England, are nowadays hardly read. Nevertheless, they are not only doctrine-descriptive or explanatory but are also motivating and encouraging for the practical Christian life. Once again we find the doctrine in the context of worship and *experience*.

As I see it, for the development of Anglican theology, worship comes first, and it is through worship that God is encountered and life is transformed. In other more classical terms, worship paves the way for conversion. This is characteristic of Anglicanism and has had a direct effect on the understanding of the *mission* and *pastoral office* of the Church.

The Church of Rome traditionally differentiates between 'mortal' and 'venial' sins⁴. Mortal sins set one apart from the participation in the sacraments *ipso facto*⁵. Some of these mortal sins can be so serious⁶ that forgiveness and absolution is reserved exclusively for the Bishop⁷ or even the Pope himself⁸. Something similar happens in the Orthodox Church, where sacramental confession is expected before the reception of communion⁹. The Anglican practice regarding confession is clearly different and rests heavily on the individual hence the Anglican aphorism 'All may, some should, none must'.

In fact, Anglicans understand confession as a sacrament of healing within the life process, and not just as a sacramental tool to enable the *effectiveness* of other sacraments. 'The Christian needs to live in the continual reality of being a forgiven sinner, a forgiveness that leads to freedom, release and healing – a starting again'¹⁰.

Within the penitential rites at the beginning of the Mass before the Reformation there was included an absolution of sins¹¹. After the Council of Trent these absolutions were understood to be only for 'venial' sins, being the 'mortal' sins reserved to private auricular confession. Archbishop Thomas Cranmer as the principal author of the Book of Common Prayer wanted to maintain the absolution at the beginning not only of the Communion Service, but of Morning and Evening prayer, and an absolution for *all sins*, leaving it to the troubled individual to look for the auricular confession should they need it¹².

In this spirit worship may well come before conversion, and conversion can come from worship. Post-baptismal sin is a reality and we are in need of conversion daily, but we also need to be fully aware of the power of the resurrection. We cannot stop celebrating the

⁴ Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §1854-1863.

⁵ Cf. Council of Trent, Session XIII (11th October 1551), Decree on the Eucharist, §7.

⁶ I am not speaking here of public notorious offences, but rather private personal sins.

⁷ For example, abortion (Cf. *CIC*, 1398).

⁸ For example, sacrilege (Cf. *CIC*, 1367).

⁹ Cf. Bishop Hilarion Alfeyev, *The Mystery of Faith*. Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd. London, 2002. Page 143 and Timothy Ware (Bishop Kallistos of Diokleia), *The Orthodox Church*. Penguin Books. London, 1997, p 290.

¹⁰ Christopher Gower, *Sacraments of Healing*. SPCK. London, 2007.

¹¹ The prayers «*Misereatur vestri omnipotens Deus...*» and the following «*Indulgentiam, absolutionem et remissionem...*».

¹² The possibility of auricular confession is included as part of the "visitation of the sick". The first *Book of Common Prayer* of 1549 included the following rubric: «*and the same forme of absolucion shalbe used its all pryvate confessions*». It was removed on the second *Book* of 1552 and successive editions, but as in practice, this was the authorised form if private confession was requested. In the provinces of the Anglican Communion authorised forms for private confession are provided, as did the Church of England in 2000: *Common Worship*.

victory of Christ. I wish to argue that this is in effect contemporary practice in the Church of England.

Ergo, Anglican doctrine is not flat, but rather the opposite: *open, catholic* ('according to the whole'), and we should say also *inclusive* and *ecumenical*, nevertheless *well defined*.

2. THE HOLY SPIRIT.

It is quite striking that the inspirer and gift-giver of the Church is also as it were the most unknown of the three persons of the Trinity. There are abundant books and treatises on God the Father, countless numbers on Jesus Christ, the Son (a whole theological discipline: Christology), but relatively few on the Holy Spirit. One of the very few theologians to write a treatise solely on the Holy Spirit was Basil of Caesarea. However, the Church tends to refer quite often to the Holy Spirit when it wants to legitimize her authority. A study of how a denominational Church understands the action of Holy Spirit can give us an insight into her own ecclesiology or, her own self-understanding.

The Church of Rome is definite and clear on this point: 'This power of the Supreme Pontiff is so far from interfering with that power of ordinary and immediate episcopal jurisdiction by which the bishops, who, *'placed by the Holy Spirit'* [cf. Acts 20:28], have succeeded the apostles, as true shepherds to individually feed and rule the flocks assigned to them, that the same (power) is asserted, confirmed, and vindicated by the supreme and universal shepherd...'¹³. Note here that in the Church of Rome exclusively the Pope appoints the bishops¹⁴.

Paul Avis, an Anglican writer and theologian, states that, 'in [Lancelot] Andrewes the life of the Church can be seen as a perpetual Pentecost'¹⁵. This defines very well the vision of Anglicanism. The Holy Spirit dwells and acts in the whole of the parts of the Body of Christ, and for this reason the Church of England may be viewed as a conciliar Church. The synodical structure of the Church extends upwards from the deaneries and involves the exercise of genuine power. On the other hand, the presence of an episcopate with its ancient office of oversight also plays an important role in the government of the Church.

Interestingly, this understanding, respect and true belief of the action of the Holy Spirit in the Church, has facilitated active ecumenism. For example, I cite the welcome into the wider Anglican Communion of churches that were originally Congregationalist and Presbyterian in the Church of South India, although this happened not without some struggle. Latterly also, there have been agreements of full communion with some Lutheran churches as in the Porvoo Agreement in 1992 and the similar 'Called to Common Mission' full communion agreement between the American Episcopal Church and the American Evangelical Lutheran Church.

¹³ Session IV of the General Council Vatican I (18th July 1870): Dogmatic Constitution I on the Church of Christ, chp 3.

¹⁴ Cf. *CIC*, 1013.

¹⁵ Paul Avis, *Anglicanism and the Christian Church*. T&T Clark. Edinburg, 1989, p. 132.

3. THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND, ANGLICANISM AND ENGLISHNESS.

There are few cultures that have been able to remain faithful to their identity and at the same time adapt to changing times. It is even more difficult it is to absorb other cultures without significant effect, yet the English people have been able to do this to a remarkable degree.

In the congregation where I usually worship on Sundays, in the West End of London, there are people from *every continent*. I have met people from Latin America, Iceland, Japan, Nigeria, South Africa or even Singapore. This is a clear reflection of the society of London, where one can find people from almost *every* country and culture. The Church consequently reflects the culture in which it exists and this is possible only because the local church is both, local and universal. There is perhaps here still a working outcome of the close relationship between Church and State that has characterised the Church of England since the Reformation. This is not always evident in other national churches.

4. THE VOCATION OF THE TWO THOMAS MARTYRS.

Most histories of England before the modern era follow a structure based on the Kings of England. Alongside them, the Archbishops of Canterbury play an important role in the history of the English church and people as a vital part of its own and national identity. Often against the odds, the link between the monarchy and the Church has worked quite well, as a general rule, for the Church of England. A few of the medieval kings even promoted the reform of the Church when it was most needed, and this has been true also for Archbishops of Canterbury: a constant reform *Ecclesia semper reformanda est* of the Church is necessary in order to move forwards in its mission¹⁶.

At this point I focus on the concept of *calling* or *vocation*. We usually apply these terms to the vocation of the deacons or priests. In fact vocation has a double dimension; a calling from God, where the individual develops a sense of calling that the Church will help discern, but also a calling from the Church, who calls and appoints the minister in the day of his/her ordination. In the case of bishops, the second calling, that of the Church, is always prominent, and the vocation to become a bishop (or archbishop) is only discovered *a posteriori*. Let me offer two examples: that of the 12th century Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas à Becket, and the 16th century, Thomas Cranmer.

Both were unlikely candidates before their election, but nevertheless they were chosen and enthroned. They were both given a separate agenda that had little to do with the Church, and both had an external superior authority that constrained the Church, the King in the case of the former, the Pope in the case of the latter. In both cases, and most unexpectedly, they exercised a mission to shake off from the Church this intromission of power in order to move forwards with reform.

The two Thomas's may well have had some sort of awareness that such a reforming mission could cost them their own lives, but nevertheless decided to remain faithful to their *vocation* to the end. They both ended being martyred by 'supporters' of the Church.

¹⁶ Just to quote some as an example, Theodore of Tarsus (†690), Dunstan (†988), Edmund Rich of Abingdon (†1240)...

Although we must admit honestly that it is certainly not exclusively the Church of England that is open to reform, nevertheless, the Church of England shares relatively easily in the process. This is actually a characteristic of the very origins of the Church and subsequent struggle for change. For example, Peter, the chief of the disciples wasn't easily able to accept the Gentiles into the Church, in contrast Paul understood that his *mission* was to the Gentiles.

I perceive that although there are certainly examples of periods of Anglican inertia and lassitude these have usually precipitated reform. To cite but two, there is the Evangelical movement of the 18th century and the Oxford Movement of the 19th.

5. CONCLUSION.

Christians believe that God fulfilled his revelation in the Incarnation. There is nothing closer to the human experience than the Incarnation of God. The disciples encountered a human person in Jesus who also showed them divinity.

Dare this outsider suggest that such an encounter may also be accessible through the surprisingly conducive ethos of Anglicanism - an *experience* leading to God, fostered by the local national manifestation of that version of Christianity in the so often maligned Church of England? If so, I offer thanks for this extraordinary institution discovered through a chance mishap on my part.