

ANGLICANISM – A TWO TUNES APPROACH TO TRUTH

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Definitions of Anglicanism are not hard to find. Some of them have been summed up as follows:

Church of England: The two historic provinces of Canterbury and York, with their origins at least as far back as St. Augustine's mission of 597. Until the disestablishment of the Church in Wales in 1920, the Church of England also included the four ancient Welsh Dioceses.

Anglican: The Latin term "*Ecclesia Anglicana*" was used from the earliest days simply to describe the English Church: it appears in the 1215 Magna Carta and the 1534 Act of Supremacy. But, with one or two 17th Century exceptions, "anglican" seems to have been first used in the mid 19th Century to describe the Church of England in its independence from the Roman Catholic Church.

Anglicanism: This term was used by J. H. Newman in 1838 in distinction to "Protestantism". Later, he wrote: "Anglicanism claimed to hold that the Church of England was nothing else than a continuation in this country of that one Church of which in old times Athanasius and Augustine were members". Sometimes the term was equivalent to Anglo-Catholicism or English Catholicism. More recently, it has simply been used to indicate that type of Christianity which owes its origins to the Church of England.

Anglican Communion: The name given to the collection of "particular or national Churches" throughout the world, most of them owing their origins to the Church of England, and all in communion with the Archbishop of Canterbury.

(Mark Chapman: **Anglicanism – A Very Short Introduction**. Oxford 2006)

But here is something a little more earthy which has been attributed to Martyn Percy who is Mark Chapman's colleague at Cuddesdon Theological College, Oxford:

Anglicanism is a community of civilised disagreement.

Every word there carries weight:

- It **IS** a community in the sense that it has an on-going life in the present and is not merely an historical relic.
- It is **A** community i.e. it has a unity about it which belies the dynamic towards fragmentation which characterises so many corporate manifestations of religion.
- It is a **COMMUNITY** with all that that implies when it comes to the comforts and complexities of life together in a fellowship of shared values, personal preferences and contextual distinctiveness.
- It is a community of civilised **DISAGREEMENT** so that foreclosure on beliefs, rituals, mores and morals is deemed to be counter-cultural and is actively resisted.
- It is a community of **CIVILISED** disagreement – and that word is crucial as an antidote to any kind of anarchic posturing or theological arm-wrestling. It avoids easy conclusions by continuing to engage in courteous cross-examination of received wisdom, and current consensus, in order to generate light rather than heat in the enduring quest for God's truth in human experience. It will gladly sign up to H. L. Mencken's contention that "for every difficult and complex problem there is a solution which is simple, straightforward and wrong!". But it will see this as a positive inducement to embrace disagreement as evidence of ecclesiological fecundity rather than as a counsel of despair.

If we are looking for some kind of analogy to help us understand the essence of Anglicanism, we can turn to the story of Charles Ives who grew up in the small town of Danbury, Connecticut and is now celebrated as the father of American music. Charles Ives could hear two tunes at once. He inherited this ability from his father George who, as the Danbury Band-master, would arrange for his own band and another one to march past each other in Main Street while each played a different piece. It seems that the local population were not sympathetic to George's experiments, which they heard simply as a discordant cacophony. However, his young son heard something that greatly influenced his own creativity as he developed into one of America's greatest composers. Charles Ives is now honoured for his innovative music, which pre-empted European atonal music by several decades, and among his most celebrated compositions are those that recapture experiences in the Danbury of his childhood by the weaving together of simultaneous melodies, harmonies and rhythms. People at the time thought he "had his ears on wrong", and it was not until some years after his death in 1954 that an audience began to

emerge for these daring, sometimes bewildering, but always compelling compositions. Perhaps Charlie Ives was the only one who had his ears on right!

The genius of Charles Ives was to be able to hear two tunes at once and thereby hear something which neither tune could communicate on its own. Our default position in such circumstances is to try and drown out one tune with the other, or else attempt to artificially harmonise them to minimise the conflicting sounds. But being able to hear two tunes at once is a way of dealing with conflicts and contradictions without resorting to either of these default positions. So being disposed to hear two tunes at once is a serviceable metaphor for Anglicanism. It is a way of doing difference differently in a world hard-wired to either drown out one tune with another, or cravenly contrive to artificially harmonise the two tunes so that neither is given its due. It is in this spirit that, for example, the characteristic of Anglicanism as both Catholic and Reformed is to be embraced.

Whether we trace this “two tunes” facility back to the origins of Anglicanism in the maelstrom of Reformation controversies, attribute it to Anglo-Saxon pragmatism or see it as the providential expression for a new and mutually enriching way to engage with infinite Wisdom and unfathomable Mystery, it is surely a way of being together which is worth preserving and promoting as a model to follow in an increasingly fractious and fractured socio-political environment.

And this is why the current debate about whether or not to endorse a Covenant for the Anglican Communion is so crucial. For if Anglicanism is indeed a community of civilised disagreement predicated on a two tunes approach to truth, then it does not need a Covenant because, in its very essence, it **IS** a Covenant. It is the kind of Covenant which enfolds a community of civilised disagreement rather than a Covenant which bares its teeth through however sweet a smile.

The proposed Covenant text does well in its opening sections and articulates some fine theological principles. But the flaw in the process is that these principles do not lead logically towards the final section which talks the language of investigation, judgement and sanctions including an option for at least partial exclusion. Furthermore, the Covenant has its origins in the Communion-wide crisis consequent upon decisions taken in the USA and elsewhere relating to issues in human sexuality. It cannot escape these origins. There are those who declare themselves to have been against earlier even more draconian versions of the final chapter, but are now content with the current more benign recension. But that is a naively optimistic stance given that some Provinces of the Anglican Communion have certainly not moved on from the spirit of those earlier drafts and will almost certainly seek to use any finally approved reading to try and impose their preferred procedures and sanctions. This will inevitably drive the Communion into an increasingly litigious and fractious future.

So even those who are attracted to the Covenant idea in principle would be unwise to support what is currently on offer. Rather, they should support starting over again so that an outcome uncontaminated by a limited set of sexuality-related issues can be sought.

That is an alternative strategy to the one now up for endorsement even if there will remain those of us who believe that the only really satisfactory alternative to having a Covenant is not to have one at all. It is forcing Anglicanism away from that two tunes approach to debates about truth, and strategies for dealing with difference, which go to the heart of what Anglicanism is and what Anglicanism can offer as a community of civilised disagreement where people can be robustly at odds with one another and yet still remain at peace with one another and with God.

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