

THE VOCATION OF ANGLICANISM²

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To begin our enquiry into the vocation or special calling of Anglicanism, I want to go back a century and a half to one of my theological heroes and mentors, the English Anglican theologian Frederick Denison Maurice, who lived from 1805 to 1872. F.D. Maurice believed that the major Christian traditions each bore witness to a vital truth that was part of the wholeness of the Church. For example, he held that Protestants had made a necessary protest about the importance of the individual conscience, while Roman Catholics had maintained a steady witness to the corporate nature of the Church.³ Maurice also believed that when, as usually happens, a vital truth was elaborated into a theological system, it became seriously distorted. The theological system then served, ironically, to conceal the truth that it was meant to embody. The hardening of a God-given insight into a kind of ecclesiastical dogma was counter-productive because the original truth that had provided the focus for a renewal of the tradition became obscured.

Taking F.D. Maurice's claim slightly further, we might say that when Christian traditions are

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- 1 The Richard Hooker Lectures are given in November each year at Exeter Cathedral and at the University College of St Mark and St John, Plymouth. They are part of the programme of the Centre for the Study of the Christian Church.
 - 2 A shorter form of this paper was given at the Provincial Conference of the Nipon Sei Ko Kai (Anglican Church of Japan) in Tokyo in December 2008; and at Christ Church, Bronxville, Diocese of New York, and at the Mercer School of Theology, Diocese of Long Island, in January 2009. An earlier version was published in the USA in *The Anglican* and a German translation is due to appear in *Internationale Kirchliche Zeitschrift* (Bern).
 - 3 F.D. Maurice, *The Kingdom of Christ*, [2nd edition, 1842] 2 vols, ed. A.R. Vidler (London: SCM Press, 1958). For a recent introduction to Maurice's thought see J. Morris, *F.D. Maurice and the Crisis of Christian Authority* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

being developed, by their exponents, into a systematic form, they tend to define themselves in a defensive way over against other Christian traditions. To have our own identity, we need to be different from others and to elaborate our differences all along the line. These systems, defined and defended in relation to each other, then serve to perpetuate the historic divisions within the Church of Christ, to cement them in place and to justify them. It is then impossible to make progress in ecumenical dialogue and to heal the divisions within Christ's Church.

Without falling into that kind of defensive trap, we may profitably ask whether there is a special vocation or calling for the Anglican tradition and the Anglican Churches in the providence and purposes of God. Does Anglicanism bear witness, as Maurice would say, to certain vital truths of faith or of order in the Christian Church? Does Anglicanism offer a contribution to the commonwealth of churches? I will try to suggest some answers to that question shortly, but before I do, there are some important preliminary matters that I think we should consider.

Maurice's warning, that the development of God-given truths into an aggressive system undermines the very truths that the system is intended to enshrine, is well taken in the case of Anglicanism. Anglican theology is known for its unsystematic character. Some might regard that as a virtue, others as a weakness. Either way, I have no appetite whatever for singing the praises of Anglicanism and no desire to blow the Anglican trumpet. In England members of other churches sometimes accuse Anglicans of smugness. The accusation of 'effortless Anglican superiority' is sometimes thrown at us. There has often been a suspicion of triumphalism, as though Anglicans believed that theirs was 'the best kind of Christianity', somehow morally superior to any other brand. I have to search my conscience as to whether, in what I have written about the Anglican tradition and Anglican ecclesiology over the years, I have been guilty of smugness or complacency. A Methodist colleague says that what I have done is to speak about the *ideal* form of Anglicanism, when the actual form is often rather different – the implication being that the ideal is attractive, but the reality is off-putting. If that is the case – and I suspect that there is more than a grain of truth in it – Anglicans have some serious heart-searching to do. In my own case, I have certainly tried to expose the conflicts,

contradictions and failures of Anglicanism, in history and today, without mystifying them.⁴ I recall that when the proposed scheme of unity between the Church of England and the Methodist Church of Great Britain narrowly failed in the General Synod in 1972, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Michael Ramsey, dared anyone to tell him now that Anglicanism was 'the more excellent way'. It was the Methodists, he said, who were now the leaders in Christian unity – and not for the first time.⁵

Recent developments in the Anglican Communion certainly make it impossible to be triumphalist about Anglicanism, even if one ever could have been. It has shown itself to be a struggling communion, wrestling with internal tensions and conflicts, especially over the ordination of women, human sexuality and the authority issues which underlie these struggles. So it may seem that this is not a very good time to ask my question about the distinctive contribution of Anglicanism. On the face of it, this is not an auspicious moment to raise the question of the essential strengths and insights of Anglicanism, that is to say of its special calling.

On the other hand, all things considered, perhaps this is a good time after all, even the right time, to ask our question. The Communion is proving quite resilient. It is tackling its problems with determination. It is not giving up easily. Developments in The Episcopal Church, centering on the Diocese of New Hampshire, in 2003 gave rise to the Windsor Report and the process that has flowed from it, including the proposed Anglican Covenant and a significant project to identify a core canon law that is held in common by all the provinces or churches of the Communion.⁶ It seems that Anglican ecclesiology is rising to the challenge. At the 2008 Lambeth Conference the majority of the bishops of the Communion (roughly three quarters of them) were gathered by the Archbishop of Canterbury for prayer, Bible study, reflection and

4 See especially P. Avis, *Anglicanism and the Christian Church* (2nd edition, London and New York: T&T Clark, 2002); *The Identity of Anglicanism: Essentials of Anglican Ecclesiology* (London and New York, 2008).

5 O. Chadwick, *Michael Ramsey: A Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), p. 341.

6 *The Windsor Report* (London: Anglican Communion Office, 2004). *The Principles of Canon Law Common to the Churches of the Anglican Communion* (London: Anglican Communion Office, 2008).

discussion. The indications are that the Lambeth Conference had the effect of increasing mutual understanding and rapport among the bishops and of strengthening the determination of many bishops to hold together. It was a valid expression of episcopal collegiality in an informal mode. However, the Communion still faces an uphill struggle to resolve the divisive issues and to heal its damaged unity. It is not yet clear whether this will be possible. Perhaps then, after all, this *is* the right time to ask about the distinctive insights or strengths of the Anglican tradition.

We might recall in passing that the first Lambeth Conference, in 1867, was convened in rather comparable circumstances. The presenting issues were identical: biblical interpretation and sexual ethics. Bishop Colenso in Southern Africa was the main protagonist. His biblical criticism (with regard to the Pentateuch) appeared then to be radical and destructive, and his acceptance of polygamy among converts was regarded as shocking. The crisis amounted to a formal schism in South Africa which has not been healed yet.⁷

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So what is the vocation of Anglicanism, if there is one? At this point there must be another caveat. Before speaking of one particular expression of the Church, we should speak of the Church as a whole. What is the vocation of the Church of Jesus Christ, to what is the Church as such called? First, then, we have to say that the whole Church is called to conform itself

⁷ For a brief introduction to the Colenso affair see A.O.J. Cockshut, *Anglican Attitudes: A Study of Victorian Religious Controversies* (London: Collins, 1959), chapter 5. Also O. Chadwick, *The Victorian Church*, vol. 2 (London: A&C Black, 1970), pp. 90-95; P. Hinchliff, *John William Colenso: Bishop of Natal* (London and Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson, 1964). J.A. Draper (ed.), *The Eye of the Storm: Bishop John William Colenso and the Crisis of Biblical Inspiration* (London and New York: T&T Clark [JSOT Supp.]/Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2003) – in depth review in *Journal of Anglican Studies* 7.1 (2009), pp. 116-124. On the first Lambeth Conference see A.M.G. Stephenson, *The First Lambeth Conference 1867* (London: SPCK, 1967) and *Anglicanism and the Lambeth Conferences* (London: SPCK, 1978), chapters 2 and 3, and for a brief account, W.M. Jacob, 'The First Lambeth Conference and the Anglican Communion', *Lambeth Palace Library Annual Review 2008* (London: Lambeth Palace, 2009), pp. 55-68.

(or, properly speaking, to allow God to conform it) to the four credal marks, notes or dimensions of the Church: unity, holiness, catholicity and apostolicity.⁸ The fact that these marks are given in the Creed (actually in the Creed of Nicaea-Constantinople, AD 381) has three crucial implications.

First, in the context of the Creed, the notes of the Church are affirmations of faith, not merely descriptions of what we happen to see before us. They are fiduciary, not empirical statements. No one looking at the Church as we know it would say (for example), 'Ah! I can see for myself that the Church is united and I can see that it is holy.' Much empirical evidence may deny what the Creed affirms. Nevertheless, the marks are true in the purposes and promises of God and will be fulfilled eschatologically, when God brings all things to completion. That is what we are affirming in the Creed.

But in the context of the Creed, second, the credal notes are also statements of truth or fact. They tell what the Church is here and now. There is a unity and a holiness (for example) that belong to the Church and that can never be taken away. Its catholicity and apostolicity are equally inalienable and indestructible attributes of the Church. Without them, the Church would not be the Church. A real unity and holiness, a real catholicity and apostolicity are manifested in the Church in the midst of the world, that is to say, experienced in this life, but it is very incomplete and often obscured.

In the context of the Creed, third, the four dimensions of the Church are imperatives for us to work for. We live out our faith, including our faith with regard to the Church. As has so often been said in the ecumenical movement, the unity of the Church is both gift and task, God's gift and our task. It is God's work, but we must strive in God's strength to bring it about. The holiness of the Church is God's gift, not a human achievement, but we are called to be holy as God is holy, and to work out our salvation with fear and trembling.

So, like all Christians and all churches, Anglicans are called to dedicate themselves to

⁸ H. Küng, *The Church* (London: Search Press, 1968) calls them dimensions.

realising more fully the four marks or notes of the Church. What that amounts to is to say, 'Let the Church be the Church as God intends it to be.' We need to do this in ways that are compatible with our own tradition and congenial to it, but also in ways that challenge our tradition and help to reform and renew it. I offer now a few topical reflections on how, as Anglicans, we might respond to these marks today.⁹

- First, the vocation of Anglicanism is to witness to and to serve the *unity* of the Church. The Church and its unity are a mystery hidden in God, but revealed through Jesus Christ. Because he is the incarnate one, 'Jesus Christ come in the flesh' (1 John 4.2), the Church's unity must be an embodied, visible unity, expressed in time and space, in flesh and blood. Disunity clouds our understanding of the mystery of the Church. Disunity is a contradiction in terms, a denial of the cross, wherein all have died (2 Corinthians 5.14), and a denial of what God did in raising Christ from the dead. 'Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up ... He spoke of the temple of his body' (John 2.19, 21). God will judge those who destroy God's temple (1 Corinthians 3.17).

- The vocation of Anglicanism is to witness to and to serve the *holiness* of the Church. Today there is debate about how we can do this and about what way of life, especially with regard to the expression of human sexuality, does appropriately reflect this holiness. Christians across the world and within our own churches are divided on this matter and there is much that remains uncertain. But there is one thing that is clear: holiness belongs to the Church; it is the Church's holiness that we are talking about. It is not simply a matter of individuals making a choice or of one small part of the Church deciding how to interpret what must be true of the whole Church. So there is a need for patience, for consultation, for restraint and for avoiding actions that are unacceptable and provocative to other parts of the Church, tearing the body of Christ apart.

9 A fuller exposition of these matters is found in P. Avis, *Reshaping Ecumenical Theology: The Church Made Whole?* (London and New York: T&T Clark, 2010).

- The vocation of Anglicanism is to witness to and to serve the *catholicity* of the Church. Its catholicity is its wholeness, its embrace of all sorts and conditions of God's children when they come, through faith and baptism, to belong to mother Church. One form of this wholeness is the universality of the Church – it is a Church for the whole world – and this inevitably brings us back to the mark of unity, for these four marks or dimensions are interrelated. Catholicity and unity belong together. So do holiness and catholicity, for holiness is a mark of authenticity for the whole people of God. However, there may be a tension between catholicity and holiness in the way that we work these out in our particular circumstances. For catholicity involves a certain inclusiveness. Every believer should be enabled to feel that the Church is their home and to know that they are welcomed and accepted. There is no doubt that, in his own mission and ministry, Jesus Christ reached out to all without partiality. He welcomed all comers, condemning none, except those Pharisees who condemned that very approach. He went out of his way to associate with and to identify with those who were condemned by the religious authorities and who were treated as outcasts and as defiled and unworthy to belong to the community. That is where Jesus placed himself and that is where he places himself today.¹⁰

- The vocation of Anglicanism is to witness to and to serve the *apostolicity* of the Church. Its apostolicity is the Church's link with the mission and teaching of the apostles. This link is not simply one of aspiring to emulate what they did in spreading the gospel of Christ: 'We must try to be like them.' Like the unity of the Church (and like holiness and catholicity, for that matter) apostolicity must be visible, tangible. The real, visible connection between the Church of today and the Church of the apostles is forged in several ways. As the sixteenth-century Reformers stressed, apostolicity is above all a matter of being faithful to the message and teaching of the apostles, true to the gospel. That means grounding our theology in the New Testament writings that were judged by the early Church to have apostolic credentials, and in the theology of

¹⁰ See R. Burrige, *Imitating Jesus: An Inclusive Approach to New Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007).

the early Fathers, who were closest to the mission of the apostles. Apostolicity refers not only to faith but also to order. We seek to be apostolic in terms of the order of the Church, its structures of ministry and of conciliarity. While recognising much diversity in the beginnings of Christianity, we also acknowledge some linear development in the way the apostolic and post-apostolic Church ordered its life. We find this sense of primitive order in the historic threefold ministry of bishops, priests and deacons and in the pattern of the bishop in council or synod, working collegiality with presbyters and communally with the lay faithful. In these and other ways, we must be able to trace our visible, historical continuity back through the centuries to the beginnings of the apostolic community that Jesus founded, a community or society that has spread to all nations and will remain forever (according to the doctrine of the indefectibility of Christ's Church that all mainstream churches hold). So apostolicity is about the Church's *intended visible continuity* with the Church of the apostles.

Needless to say, what I have said about the vocation of Anglicanism is true of all churches. The vocation of the whole Church to realise the four credal marks is the vocation of all manifestations of the Church. I am not suggesting for a moment that this is some kind of unique Anglican privilege. In ecumenical dialogue, Anglican churches have been able to recognise or acknowledge certain other churches as authentic expressions of the one Church of Jesus Christ and as belonging to the apostolic mission of the people of God. That means, I think, that Anglicans are able to see the presence of the one Church of Jesus Christ in those churches, and that must mean that they are able to discern the credal marks of the Church in them. When this is possible, it is right to confess this fact publicly to each other and so take a step nearer to the unity of the Church.¹¹

¹¹ See for example *The Meissen Agreement* between the Church of England and the Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland (1991); *Called to Common Mission* between The Episcopal Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (2001) and *An Anglican-Methodist Covenant* between the Church of England and the Methodist Church of Great Britain (2003).

Now at last we are able to return to our specific question and challenge: what is the vocation, the calling of Anglicanism, if there is one? If F.D. Maurice is right, each major tradition of the Christian Church, in its concrete expression, bears witness to an enduring truth concerning the Church. So we would expect Anglicanism to bear witness to certain truths. I believe that it does, even though it may not always be very successful at putting them into practice. Along with some previous interpreters of Anglicanism, especially Michael Ramsey,¹² I believe that the key to the Anglican tradition is that it attempts to hold together or bind together aspects of the Church that in other traditions are allowed to drift apart, or become polarised. Specifically, Anglicanism reveals itself to be catholic and reformed, episcopal and synodical, universal and local, biblical and reasonable, traditional and open to fresh insight. In these ways Anglicanism holds together what we believe God intends to belong together. It holds truths together in order that it may hold people together. Let me now make some very brief observations on each of these.

1. Anglicanism is both catholic and reformed. It seeks to hold these two elements together in synthesis. It is catholic because it stands in continuity with the catholic church going back through the centuries to the Fathers and martyrs of the early Church. It was not invented in the sixteenth century. It embodies the catholic canon of Scripture, the catholic creeds, the catholic threefold ministry, the catholic sacraments and structures its life and worship by means of them. But Anglicanism also recognises its debt to the Reformation; it acknowledges that it has been significantly shaped by the sixteenth-century reform movement and by its abiding principles, namely the paramount place of Scripture in the Church, justification by grace through faith and the royal priesthood of all the baptised. The catholic and the reformed impulses interact within Anglicanism and moderate each other. For example, the creeds, received from

12 A.M. Ramsey, *The Gospel and the Catholic Church* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1936) and discussion of this phrase 'binding together' in P. Avis, *The Anglican Understanding of the Church* (London: SPCK, 2000), chapter 5.

the early Church, are upheld because they are grounded in Scripture;¹³ there is a sacramentally ordained ministry, but it is a representative ministry (representing both Christ as Head and his Body) and a sign of what the whole Church is; the Eucharist always has a priest or bishop to preside, but it is the whole congregation that celebrates the sacraments corporately under the presidency of a bishop or a priest. Of course Anglicanism is not the only church tradition that does this and it does not always get the balance right.

2. Anglicanism is both episcopal and synodical. It seeks to hold these two elements together in synthesis. Bishops are the chief pastors of the Church and the principal ministers of the sacraments. Their task is to teach, to sanctify and to govern the faithful. But they do not do this in an autocratic way. The bishop exercises leadership in council or in synod, in consultation with the presbyters and with the laity, for they too play their part, appropriately expressed, in the tasks of teaching, sanctifying and governing. Anglicanism reveals itself as the heir (along with all the historic churches in the West) of the Conciliar Movement of the fifteenth century, with its key principles of constitutionality, representation and consent.¹⁴ So bishops lead the Church, but they also consult the faithful and seek to carry the people with them. Anglicanism embodies the three modes of oversight identified by the benchmark ecumenical text *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*: personal oversight, collegial oversight and communal oversight.¹⁵ Of course, it is not the only church tradition that does this and it does not always get the balance right.
3. Anglicanism holds together the universal and the local. It is a global communion made up of a number of provinces or, as I would prefer to say, churches. The provinces or churches are themselves made up of dioceses, which are the ordered communities of

13 The Thirty-nine Articles of Religion, article 8.

14 See P. Avis, *Beyond the Reformation? Authority, Primacy and Unity in the Conciliar Tradition* (London and New York: T&T Clark, 2006).

15 *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (Geneva: WCC, 1982), M26.

Christians gathered by their bishop. The universal and the local are mutually constituting: the one cannot exist without the other. The local expression of the Church is ordered to the universal and the universal to the local. They co-inhere. A universal Church that has no local content is meaningless and a local church, say a province, that does not have a home in the greater whole is cast adrift, cut off. The collegiality of the episcopate and various structures of conciliarity help to hold the local and the universal together. Of course, Anglicanism is not the only church tradition that does this and it does not always get the balance right. In fact, at the present time the Anglican Communion is struggling to hold the local and the universal together, looking for models and structures ('bonds of affection' and 'instruments of unity', as they have been called) to enable this.

4. Anglicanism is both biblical and reasonable. Since the Renaissance and the Reformation it has held Scripture and reason together. These twin movements of thought in Western Europe – the Renaissance and the Reformation – drove scholars back to the Bible and to the writings of the Fathers – *ad fontes* – but they used the most sophisticated hermeneutical tools of their day to establish what the Bible and the Fathers were saying. The Reformers were not fundamentalists, but critical scholars, and Anglicanism has continued their tradition to this day. However, we need to note that the classical Anglican understanding of reason is very different to the individualistic, secular, analytical concept of reason that we are familiar with in the post-Enlightenment, technological world. For Anglican theologians from Richard Hooker onwards, reason stands for a collective act of discernment that is formed by Scripture and acutely sensitive to tradition. It is a godly reason, 'the candle of the Lord'. Of course, Anglicanism is not the only church tradition that seeks to be both biblical and reasonable and it does not always get the balance right.
5. Finally, Anglicanism attempts to be faithful to tradition and at the same time open to fresh insight from non-theological sources. As the Church of England's Preface to the Declaration of Assent puts it: the Church of England 'professes the faith uniquely revealed in the holy Scriptures and set forth in the catholic creeds, which faith the

Church is called upon to proclaim afresh in each generation.' We cannot be open to fresh insight unless we are grounded in tradition. It is the community in which we are placed, under-girded by its traditions, that gives us our standing ground. However, tradition does not stand still. We stand within the living stream of tradition, but it carries us forward to new shores. Fresh insights should only be embraced when we have wrestled long and hard with Scripture and tradition, in an ecumenical community of interpretation.¹⁶ We need a corporate dedication to the study of Scripture as the only valid basis for a corporate discernment of the way ahead. The Holy Spirit will guide the whole body of the Church into all truth, so we need to be in communion to receive the guidance of the Spirit.¹⁷

Above all, it might be true to say that the vocation of Anglicanism today is to work out what it means for Christians and churches to be in communion, even when they differ on important issues in the interpretation of the faith. I contend that our primary obligation to our fellow Christians is to seek to be – and to remain – in communion with them. Breaking the communion of the Church must be an absolutely last resort, one for which we will have to give an account one day. Anglicans are having to work out whether communion can be maintained in spite of differences about order (the ordination of women as priests and bishops) and particularly about morals (the appropriate expression of human sexuality). I am not going to attempt to address the substantive issues here, but whatever our views, when we attempt to promote them or to implement them, we should be mindful of the communion of the Church that was purchased with the precious blood of Christ.

On the eve of the 1998 Lambeth Conference I said in an article published in *Theology* and which Archbishop of Canterbury George Carey quoted to the bishops assembled in

16 S.E. Fowl and L. G. Jones, *Reading in Communion: Scripture and Ethics in Christian Life* (London: SPCK, 1991). E. Radner and P. Turner, *The Fate of Communion: The Agony of Anglicanism and the Future of a Global Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006).

17 Cf. P. Avis ed., *Seeking the Truth of Change in the Church: Reception, Communion and the Ordination of Women* (London and New York: T&T Clark, 2004).

Canterbury:

Though the member churches of the Anglican Communion are legally autonomous ... the invoking of autonomy and the claiming of independence are hardly the language of Zion. More appropriate in the speech of Christians and churches is the rhetoric of communion, consultation, bearing one another's burdens and interdependence. To practise the grace of walking together without coercive constraints is the special vocation of Anglicanism in our pluralistic world.¹⁸

Developments since then have made us see that what I called 'walking together' as Anglicans is not as straightforward as it seemed a few years ago. It needs to be supported by a sense of shared responsibility, by mutual commitment and mutual accountability – which in my view is precisely what the proposed Anglican covenant is attempting to provide – and these bonds of communion can only be entered into freely by each member Church of the Communion deciding to do so through its own canonical procedures. But I have not changed my mind on the essential point and I believe that it still stands: 'To practise the grace of walking together without coercive constraints is the special vocation of Anglicanism.'

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18 P. Avis, 'Anglican Conciliarity and the Lambeth Conference', *Theology* vol. CI, no. 802 (July-August 1998), pp. 245-252, at pp. 251-2.