

Beyond Colonialism - The Future of the Anglican Past in the United States

Rebecca Lyman
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A couple decades ago I was fortunate to have a summer job in my home state of Michigan (the car industry was stumbling even then), and I especially needed money because I was preparing to go to Oxford to start my doctoral studies. One of my dad's parishioners had hired me as a file clerk at an insurance company, and I was introduced to a huge room with floor to ceiling files. The clerk next to me was absent that day, and when my new co-workers described her, the timbre of their voice changed. You know the shift in tone and volume that white people make when they are talking about people of color? The next day she arrived, and we began to talk as we stapled bits of paper into appropriate files for the next eight hours. It turned out that we had been in the same grade school years before in Benton Harbor, and she was Episcopalian. She alone in that office understood and was interested about my going to Oxford to study the theology of creeds. We had a great summer together. I was drawn to the Episcopal liturgy then, but was put off by what I perceived to be the upper class ethos of the church compared to my childhood Methodism or the radical Dorothy Day Roman Catholicism of some of my friends. Her witness about faith and church made a deep impact on me, and we continued to exchange letters when I went to England. The next spring I was confirmed by the Bishop of Oxford, and she became part of the cloud of witnesses who helped get me on my knees at that altar rail. When my head hurts and my spirit droops about the current divisions in the Anglican Communion, I like to think of her, and the unlikely group who witnessed my confirmation that night: my doctoral supervisor, a saintly man many

considered a heretic; the chaplain who prepared me for confirmation who is now a bishop in the Church of England; a fellow graduate student who is now a Windsor and Network bishop; a lapsed Catholic; a semi-practicing Jew; and a minimally churched Protestant. For such is the kingdom of heaven.

I begin this morning with that personal story because I am a historian, and we make sense of the present by framing it through our retrieval of the past. If I had simply told you that I had been confirmed as an Anglican in Oxford, visions of golden Cotswold stone, Sung Evensong, English accents, and scarlet episcopal vestments would have danced in all our heads. Those things were there in all their beauty and tradition, but for me these were not central to my Anglican conversion. Those gathered and diverse faces contained the witness of Christ and the presence of the Spirit. In this time which feels particularly ideologically driven with labels and seemingly daily divisions among bishops, one needs to cut the Church and our communities and our life of faith back to a human scale, back to individual lives and faces. After all the Word took flesh and dwelt among us in an individual human being. Our life is lived the same way in minutes and hours in the transforming power of Jesus' resurrection. We can be nurtured, inspired, and converted by grand ideas, ecclesiastical architecture, and ancient practices, but these only take flesh in our world when they come together in us as we live a particular life of faith each day. Only in following the humility and self-giving of Jesus do we begin to discern the curious leaven of salvation history. Our collective lives are the life of the Church.

As American Episcopalians we walk this incarnate good news each day in two worlds. William Katerberg outlines these complexities beautifully in his recent book, Modernity and the Dilemma of North American Anglican Identities.ⁱ The first is the

contemporary American life of a national identity formed out of unprecedented population movements from diverse continents with at once powerful centralizing forces of economics and politics and the simultaneous fragmentation of traditional culture. The second world is our inherited Anglican tradition which is the overseas export of the politically established and theologically diverse Church of England during the unprecedented rise of a global British imperialism in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. One culture is all about individual choice, diverse populations, and democratic process; the other is grounded in inherited tradition, conformity, and explicit as well as implicit hierarchical authority. Our history of the American church is the negotiation of lived faith within these overlapped and sometimes opposed worlds. Every age of Christian life has faced challenges in living out the gospel in a particular context, and this morning I want to outline how the history of Anglicanism in America has shaped our present experience.

Have you ever considered that we are only about eighty years younger than the Church of England if you compare the founding of Jamestown in 1607 to Henry's reforming legislation in the 1520s? If anything, both churches began together, but in very different contexts in the final stabilized period of Anglicanism in 1662 after the English Civil War. We like to talk about the balanced Elizabethan Settlement, but it really didn't survive Elizabeth. The drive for Anglican conformity in England and in the colonies came out of the growing imperial culture of Britain, but in our context of varied settlements one church could never be truly established. It was short lived in Virginia and resisted by the already established colonial churches in New England. You remember we had no resident bishop on our side of the Atlantic, so lay power in vestries

became traditional and strong. Regions and cultures influenced the character of Episcopalians: we were despised interlopers in the North (the attempts by the SPG to appoint a bishop helped fuel the revolution: no bishop, no king!); in the middle colonies with Friends and Roman Catholics we were one of many; in the South we were a socially privileged church controlled by laity.

Not surprisingly, the newly named and reorganized “Protestant Episcopal Church” adopted a structure in 1789 which was profoundly a product of the experience of the American Revolution and also reflected the diverse colonial churches. General Convention was modeled to be a unitary form of government to embrace the varied locations and traditions by holding legal supremacy. No essential division of power existed between General Convention and dioceses. On paper at least there was no limit at all on General Convention’s governing powers unless it is the ancient canons and conformity with catholic faith, but theoretically these are also interpreted by General Convention.ⁱⁱ Samuel Seabury is often remembered as the bearer of apostolic succession from Scotland to America, but we are also the children of William White who patiently negotiated between high and low church in order to bring all geographical branches together in a representational governing structure which embraced clergy and laity alike. This centralized identity of the Episcopal Church echoing the nation state is part of modern denominational identity; pulling together into one was the theme of modern progress as well as an echo of Anglican establishment.

In the United States as in nineteenth century England various interpretations of the Anglican past fueled different spiritualities to meet the challenges of the growing country including immigration, slavery, and industrialization. Initially, the evangelicals

were the strongest party which in common with many American protestants emphasized scripture, conversion, atonement, and social reform. In reaction to them as well as in concert with the later Oxford movement, the high church party emphasized the sacramental tradition and episcopal authority, urging the church to turn from worldly protestant reforms to catholic holiness. Bitter arguments began to divide the church over “insular ritualism” or “low church worldliness”. Both sides claimed to represent the true Anglican past and identity. These divisions were heightened by desires to define an authentic American Anglicanism in opposition or in contrast to other denominations in the religious marketplace as much as by theological rivalries within the Church itself.ⁱⁱⁱ

In the Church of England different ecclesiastical perspectives had been held together by the patronage and tradition of political Establishment, but what could hold these perspectives together in the Episcopal Church in the context of American pluralism? As argued by William Katerberg, it is one of the ironies of modern identity that historical consciousness has such a central place in a society devoted to the future i.e. progress, evolution or growth. Looking back in order to move ahead was the natural place for Episcopalians to turn for stability and self-definition, yet this Anglican history was itself an unstable hybrid of Protestant and Catholic practices: there was no one past to recover, no one theme or theology to answer particular questions or justify one ecclesiastical party.^{iv} The conflict came to a head in 1873 when many evangelicals broke away to found the Reformed Episcopal Church. In spite of their hopes, the church has remained rather small, and reduced the traditional strength of evangelical influence in the Episcopal Church. As a result the Episcopal Church grew “broader and higher”. The once controversial vestments or candles on stone altars became commonplace.

At the same time as these conflicts another definition of Anglicanism was also growing. This theological seed was planted by our very own California Missionary bishop, William Kipp: he argued in 1843 that the unique strength of the Episcopal Church and the Anglican tradition was exactly its diversity, i.e. being catholic and reformed. By the 1880's this idea had bloomed into the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral and the self-identity of a group of global churches just beginning to call itself "The Anglican Communion". This "myth of Anglican comprehensiveness" fit beautifully with the modern goals of centralization and unity to contain pluralism. Yet, ironically this model also strengthened the distinct parties in the church by defining them as necessary to its very ethos.^v

Given this history of Anglican pluralism in America, we may be less surprised at the present divergences within our own church and the claims to authentic Anglican tradition on all sides. In the marketplace of doctrines and cultures like the United States, traditions become commodities to be judged or chosen rather than unquestioned heritages in which one is born. Modern identities are inevitably negotiated and defined often in conflict or counter distinction to another version of Christian identity. Outside the glue of the established church, traditional Anglican pluralism in America has become more centrifugal as each party is sharply defined against one another by reactions to the issues of the external pluralistic and secular society.^{vi} Thus, liberals are "really" Unitarians and conservatives are "really" fundamentalists. One side symbolizes mindless selling out to culture (a great fear within conservative Christianity) and the other side symbolizes mindless selling out to authoritarianism (another great fear within liberal Christianity); being "mindless" is the common Episcopal fear. The traditional common ground of

liturgy or faith in Christ has disappeared; the disagreement has become the center. We cannot hear one other as a fellow Christian seekers because the “other” now represents the very position we must deny to define ourselves in controversial times. Unfortunately, as Christians we also have a heritage of polemical labels ready at hand, so that soon only one theological position can properly represent Anglican tradition. American religious pluralism has diluted the power of any one theology, and to a degree therefore ironically increased the inherent Christian desire to be the correct answer in the marketplace whether liberal or conservative. Unlike the Europeans, sectarianism rather than secularism is in our bones. Unity apart from political structure is the hard part.

Of course this peculiar daily walk of American pluralism and Anglican theological diversity is also happening in the midst of a tremendous global, political and cultural shifts. The old European empires and American markets have given way to new localized forces. The reassertion of local identities and new definitions of unity are being painfully born. Our crisis in the Anglican Communion at the moment therefore draws from many sources including the maturation of global Christianities beyond European or North American missions to new local manifestations and forms as outlined so compellingly by Philip Jenkins and others. Thanks to the former British Empire, we Anglicans are unique in the geographical breadth and cultural diversity of our communion, but without a magisterial center. As the old colonial assumptions and gentleman’s agreements fade, our church is emerging for better or worse as a new face of global catholicity which echoes most strongly the structures of the ancient church in balancing local tradition with a broader communion. And just like the ancient church, achieving unity through councils of independent bishops and diverse traditions is messy,

painful, and lengthy. It is instructive to remember that Trinitarian doctrine emerged after fifty years of division and negotiation from Nicaea to Constantinople, and even that required a new generation of theologians to be born with a fresh theological vision. Yet, even that analogy fails because never in Christian history has such a breadth of cultures and indigenous faith been in dialogue as we are experiencing today. This process of individual local churches as one among equals in theological dialogue is radically new. There is no clear historical or traditional precedent for settling such theological and ecclesiastical diversity. For this very reason we must look forward to lengthy arguments about new structures such as Primates or alternative pastoral oversight and the relation of the global to the local or theology to culture. Americans do have a distinctive polity which embraces the rights of the laity, but we don't break down into easily defined nationalistic groups anymore than all Africans do. And as in every age of Christian history, economics and politics and personalities are woven into our theological conflicts. Now as then there is no obvious solution. Post-colonial theorists would point out that we are finding ourselves emeshed not only in a debate about Anglican theology, but also discovering each church has its own version of opposition and complicity to parts of the Anglican past. Like most colonial systems, we all suffer tremendous pain and exhilaration at the necessity to separate and claim individual identity distinct from the mother country, which is inevitably linked to the historical narrative we tell about ourselves and others.

For American Episcopalians particular pain comes from what appears to be the failure of both a century old theological construction of Anglicanism as uniquely comprehensive and the authority of General Convention. Such a view gave coherence

to the separate pieces of American church and fit well with the emerging definitions of Anglican global communion over the past century. But as liberal and conservative Christianities increasingly came into conflict by the middle of this century, as Roman Catholicism itself changed with Vatican II, as the realization of global independence and local culture profoundly shaped Christian practice, the gospel walk changed again for our high and broad church through our encounter with particular issues. For many of varied parties what was called “comprehensiveness” could be simply a version of a static or political status quo which did not in fact address or resolve the new theological difference emerging in dialogue with issues of contemporary culture. As we struggle together now to understand scripture, authority, or polity, one of the great gifts of the new post-colonial reality is to displace old categories of static identities, and instead to acknowledge how our identity is in fact formed dynamically in relation to one another, and we are closer to one another than we often care to admit. Most of us in our Episcopal tradition are not one thing, but we are a hybrid of catholic, liberal, and evangelical dimensions when we approach scripture, tradition or reason. This understanding of dynamic identity formed through lived relation with one another rather than in theological opposition is critical in this transitional time as we seek to remember our common ground as much as our differences.

The gift of modern pluralism and this centrifugal world may be for us to rediscover together the power of the risen Christ to heal and unify: Greek and Jew, male and female, slave and free, gay and straight, liberal and conservative. There is no political establishment in global Anglicanism or the Episcopal Church to bind us together now, only the love the children of God owe each other. As Max Warren of the Church Mission

Society once said, “It takes a whole world to know the whole gospel”. Or as Irenaeus said in the second century, “Our very disagreement confirms our agreement in the faith”. Or as Archbishop Ndungane said in Westminster Abby earlier this week, our readings of scripture have changed about money, about slavery, about women, about sexuality, but our belief in the centrality of Jesus, the face of God’s self-offering love, does not.^{vii} Division moves against the heart of God if it delivers us to an easy and safe sectarian self-righteousness in which we may demonize rather than repent and forbear and continue to struggle to understand. We may well break apart, but how and why we do it matters a great deal.

These are extremely painful times for our church and for us. You are here in the midst of the struggle. Like family arguments, church conflicts are personal and cut us to the heart. These are not strangers, but brothers and sisters whom we know and love. I find it helpful as a historian to realize that there is no clear historical or theological precedent for this crisis, so we all must live together into the new future of global catholicity. Like the Christians before us we will find our way if we continue to struggle with “peaceable minds” as Richard Hooker called it.^{viii} Welcome to another age of Reformation with all its fears and conflicts and creativity. We must live through the conflict with as much charity and openness and creativity as we possibly can. Following Jesus was never about comfort or certainty or ease. It was about proclaiming the hope of the suffering community, acknowledging that in our pain and struggle resurrection happens. The God who is faithful to you every day in every breath is not absent from the turmoil of the Church. The name of this organization beautifully sums up what we must do: remain. This is one translation of the Greek word “meno” which has a rich resonance

throughout the Gospel of John. “Meno” means to “dwell with”, “to live with”, “to hang out”, “to party”, “to tarry”, “to abide”, “to persist”, “to await”. God took flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth. Jesus talked and ate and argued with everyone. No one was excluded or pushed aside. They were healed; they were forgiven; they were loved; they were transformed. Through resurrection the many were formed into a community the world had never seen before. This is the gospel way we seek to walk. This is the future church we wish to affirm.

ⁱ Modernity and the Dilemma of North American Anglican Identities, 1880-1950 (McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2001), 5-6.

ⁱⁱ David Holmes, A Brief History of the Episcopal Church (Trinity Press, 1993), 55.

ⁱⁱⁱ Katerberg, Modernity, 28-30.

^{iv} Ibid, 69; 211.

^v Ibid, 77.

^{vi} Ibid 78; 6-10.

^{vii} Max Warren in “The Exigency of Times and Occasions” by Ian Douglas in Beyond Colonial Anglicanism. The Anglican Communion in the Twenty-First Century (Church Publishing Company, 2001), p. 41; Irenaeus in Eusebius, Church History 5.24.14; Archbishop Ndungane’s Sermon at Westminster Abbey 20 June 2007 Anglican Communion News Service 4293.

^{viii} “Be it that Cephas hath one interpretation and Apollos hath another, that Paul is of one mind and Barnabas of that. If this offend you, the fault is yours. Carry peaceable minds and ye may have comfort by this variety”. Sermon on Justification II