

ANGLICAN IDENTITY

Robert Hart

In what follows, I will use the word “Anglican” for the Church of England, and the Anglican Communion that grew out of it, concerning the Reformation and post-Reformation periods even when writing of the times before that word came into use. This is for convenience and simplicity. My paper addresses the topic of “Anglicanism: Orthodoxy in the West, Lost Child of Rome, or Via Media?”

Inasmuch as a good many arguments have been made for all three options, it may seem bold that I prefer to approach the subject by way of Anglican identity on Anglican terms. My friend and fellow *Touchstone* editor, Dr. William Tighe, Professor of History at Muhlenberg College in Allentown, Pennsylvania, has stated that, in his view, Anglicanism is so weak and insubstantial that without stronger influences, it is void of theological content. Very possibly, if several Anglicans, including many the Continuing churches, were asked to refute Dr. Tighe’s remark, they could not. Indeed, it is likely that many would agree with him. I, however, do refute his statement. Anglicanism, as it developed throughout the later half of the sixteenth century, and into the seventeenth century, was in reality as muscular as the very strongest and toughest theological systems in history. To defend their beliefs, the English Reformers and Anglican Divines, had to develop a usable and practical set of Formularies and to produce hearty and robust apologetics. The very reason why so many people have a difficult time perceiving Anglicanism as having fiercely resisted outside pressures to conform is because of the success of the Church of England in maintaining a balance between them all.

Dr. Tighe’s view, that Anglicanism depends on stronger and more aggressive theological systems in order to have any substance, makes our patrimony seem like an ecclesiastical chameleon, taking on the features of stronger systems the way that that little lizard disappears into the background, whatever background that may be at the moment. However, we do not deny that, in modern times, among Anglicans of the official Anglican Communion who are still anchored more or less in the See of Canterbury, it is a useful comparison, and quite accurate; that is, insofar as they have turned their backs on Anglican patrimony. The modern Anglican Communion is made up of people who cannot recite Anglican Formularies except to subject them to outside influences. This is especially true of modern Anglicans who call themselves Evangelicals (or, in a new phrase, Reasserters) on one hand, and of Anglicans who weigh everything by the standards of the See of Rome, on the other.

So it is that in a typical parish of Reasserter Anglicans, material for serious study about the Reformation period, or generations following, have nothing to do with Cranmer, Jewel, Hooker, Andrewes, Laud, Ken, or any Anglican; Rather they are rooted in Luther or Calvin almost exclusively. Any portions of Anglican Formularies used, are carefully selected and studied only through those foreign lenses. Of course, because theological discussions had gone on for centuries, often in academic settings or in an academic context, the use of terminology overlapped. The unfortunate result, for various modern Anglicans, is that they confuse the less

significant overlapping of terminology with what would amount to a more significant agreement on all points.

No more useful book has been produced for modern Anglicans than E.J. Bicknell's work on the Thirty-Nine Articles.¹ A good reading of this book should dispel any notion that Anglicanism was a gutless compromise meant to appease everybody. If the facts are brought out into the light of day, we will see the very opposite: Anglicanism was a brave endeavor to stand for truth against pressure from all sides. For example, Bicknell uses a line from Article XVI to demonstrate that the Church of England refused to teach a doctrine that gave in to outside pressure, in this case to a precept of Calvinism. The Anglican Article says: "After we have received the Holy Ghost, we may depart from grace given and fall into sin, and by the grace of God we may arise again and amend our lives." Bicknell points out that the Calvinists insisted on a stronger teaching, namely that everyone who is among the elect will, unavoidably, arise again and amend his life; to say they "may arise"—which means also that they may not—flatly contradicts what Calvinists believed about election. This is not merely theoretical, for Bicknell points out that English Calvinists resisted the publication of this Article, and failed.

On the other hand, the opening sentence of Article XIX "Of the Church," is lifted practically verbatim from Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.² In other words, the English were willing to borrow from Calvin and Luther, but only to a point. According to Bicknell, it is significant that they stopped short of Calvinist extremes and of Lutheran extremes, even when making use of work put forth by these foreign Reformers. It demonstrates independence, and a firm understanding that the Scriptures, as read with the aid of the earliest Catholic doctors and bishops, presented the standard of doctrine rather than their contemporaries, with whom their agreement was limited. The fact that the Articles followed a Lutheran format only makes this all the more significant; for, whereas they followed the Evangelical German format, they produced their own content. The fact that they stopped short of full agreement, even with a borrowed format, is very significant. This is true of the Ordinal also; for whereas the English Ordinal was, in its format, based on the German Ordinal produced by Philip Melancthon, the content of the English Ordinal was not Lutheran. The divergence in the Ordinal, as in the Articles, is very significant, and would be less significant if there was no similarity, no use of these other formats, and no overlapping of terminology. It is their selected use of formats and models by the Continental Reformers that makes the English divergence from those models highly significant, and so too the overlapping of terminology. It may get close, but never simply mimics or parrots the teachings and practices of the Continental Reformers. They remained independent, even when most closely approximating outside influences.

The English Church established a carefully maintained balance between Rome, Calvinism, Lutheranism, and Zwinglianism, criticizing and rejecting various ideas in each of these systems. This in turn kept the Anglicans in a state of at least some amount of opposition to everybody all the time. Each of these camps saw the Church of England as accepting error by adopting or maintaining some of the ideas and practices of Rome, or some of those belonging to Calvin, or some of those belonging to Luther, but never to the satisfaction of loyalists in any of those parties. At one point, the most extreme group of the Calvinist camp, Cromwell's Puritans, made war on the Church of England as well as on the Crown; executing the king, finally, for refusing to abolish episcopacy, before turning their wrath on the Archbishop of Canterbury. William

Laud was executed by means of a Bill passed by Parliament, for they had nothing, in the way of a criminal charge, of which to convict him. The King and the Archbishop suffered religious persecution because they were loyal Anglicans.

To call Anglicanism a “lost child of Rome” might seem convincing to a loyal Papist (to employ the terminology of the times). But, to the Puritans and to the Calvinists in Scotland, the teaching and practice of the Church of England was unacceptable and was called, by Knox, “Papism without the Pope.” It seems that one man’s Protestantism is another man’s Roman Catholicism. Richard Hooker, writing very late in the sixteenth century, in Book IV of *The Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, defended the rites and ceremonies of the English Church against the charge that they were too Roman: Book IV begins with the heading: “CONCERNING THEIR THIRD ASSERTION, THAT OUR FORM OF CHURCH POLITY IS CORRUPTED WITH POPISH ORDERS, RITES, AND CEREMONIES, BANISHED OUT OF CERTAIN REFORMED CHURCHES, WHOSE EXAMPLE THEREIN WE OUGHT TO HAVE FOLLOWED.” At times, throughout the first four books of Hooker’s *Laws*, it is evident that some of his arguments weigh as much against a group of Anabaptists as against Puritans; nonetheless, what remains obvious is that the Church of England was perceived, by radical elements, as being far too “popish.” The very structure and the Orders of the English Church offended the most radical Protestants. Hooker, again, in Book VII of his *Laws*, defended the episcopacy, and in doing so defended not only a polity in structure, but a doctrine: That doctrine is the Apostolic Succession as following the pattern taught in Scripture, and having been known to the Church always and everywhere since Antiquity.³

“The first Bishops in the Church of Christ were his blessed Apostles, for the Office whereunto Matthias was chosen the sacred History doth term *episkopen*, an Episcopal Office.” (VII.4.1)

“And yet the Apostles have now their successors upon earth, their true successors, if not in the largeness, surely in the kind of that Episcopal function, whereby they had power to sit as spiritual ordinary Judges, both over Laity and over Clergy where Churches Christian were established.” (VII.4.3)

“...Presbyters must not grudge to continue subject unto their Bishops, unless they will proudly oppose themselves against that which God himself ordained by his Apostles, and the whole Church of Christ approveth and judgeth most convenient.” (VII.5.8)

“And what need we to seek far for proofs that the Apostles who began this order of Regiment by Bishops, did it not but by divine instinct, when without such direction things of far less weight and moment they attempted not?...Wherefore let us not fear to be herein bold and peremptory, that if any thing in the Church’s government, surely the first institution of bishops was from heaven, was even of God, the Holy Ghost was the author of it.” (VII.5.10)

Hooker went on to describe the ways in which the Episcopal order is superior to the presbytery, declaring “what principal duties belonging unto that kind of power a bishop might perform, and

not a presbyter.” (VII.6.1) This he did in terms acknowledged by the Church in every age, and in perfect accord with the only practice and teaching we have ever known to this day. What could be clearer than this? Hooker saw the episcopacy as coming from Christ through the Apostles, and he saw the origin of this office recorded in the Scriptures. True to form, as a son of the Church of England, he never once presumed to supply some new definition to the three Orders of ministry, but rather simply affirmed an unbroken line, not only historically, but doctrinally as well. The Continental Reformers, however, set aside episcopacy, and the radical elements in England sought to uproot it altogether. The Church of England, however, maintained it, guarded it, and by law insisted on it, allowing no man to presume to act as a presbyter or deacon without Episcopal ordination. As we see in Hooker, this was no mere political formality, but a matter of doctrine in which they resisted outside influences from other Reformed churches and from radicals at home.

A Lost Child of Rome?

It is more accurate to say that the Church of England kept its Catholic heritage, sharing some common ground with Rome that other Reformed Churches did not, but not as a spineless compromise: Rather, the Anglicans were as deliberate and discriminating in what they refused to part with, as they were with what they did throw away. What appears to be inconsistency to so many people, even to this day, is more accurately the result of honesty and of genuine conviction. **So, we may indeed use the term *via media***, the middle way that avoids the unreasonable demands, and even dictatorships, of extremism. But, first we must look at how that term has been used, and what serves as a more enlightening definition as we apply the term to the Church of England in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Hooker’s apologetics for English polity were directed at the most radical extremes of Protestantism, which indicates how we ought to apply the term *via media* to his Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity. This work represented a *via media*, not between Rome at that time and Continental Reformations; but between the past and the most extreme departures from tradition in his own day. This helps us in our own time to answer the question of Anglicanism as the *via media*. If we endeavor, in our own time, to walk a *via media* between Rome (both in regard to its adherence to tradition and in regard to its own particular innovations) and extreme Protestant departures from tradition, we are allowing others to define us even to ourselves. If our road is chosen for the sake of truth, what others do must be as immaterial as necessity demands. Where Rome has created innovations (and what Anglican would say they have none?), and where various Protestant bodies have also created innovations, whether we walk a middle way, a contrary way, or simply a different way altogether, depends largely on our concern for the unchanging truth of God’s revelation against the specific teaching and practice that is in question. We cannot define ourselves by the *via media*, but must, when appropriate, walk a *via media*, and that not for the sake of the road itself, but for the sake of the truth.

Were I to be asked who first conceived of *via media*, I would answer St. John Chrysostom. In his *Six Little Books on the Priesthood*⁴, the saint gives advice about preaching. He advises that, when refuting error, it is necessary to refute the error most opposite as well. Otherwise, we appear to endorse that opposite error by refuting its opposite. Translating his work into the

language of our own time, if we refute a harsh and demanding legalism, we must refute the libertine error also, or we may appear to endorse the doctrine that we ought to continue in sin that grace may abound. It is necessary, according to St. John Chrysostom, always to attack both extremes if we are to denounce either. This is exactly the spirit of *via media*, of refusing to turn to the right hand or to the left, maintaining balance between extremes.

In our age we must not try to be identified as the people of a *via media* between modern teachings of Rome and modern forms of Protestantism, but as walking a road that runs between all extremes. Simply by standing for truth, we can maintain the same independence of mind that earlier Anglicans did maintain; to know the truth according to Scripture as interpreted by universal consensus and antiquity, the Vincentian Canon. The real *via media* in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was not between Rome and the Continental Reformers, or even between Rome and the radical Protestants (Anabaptists, extreme Puritans, etc.), but between what was the recent past and the ancient past; also between the past and the innovations of their own times. To narrow our options as “lost child of Rome or *via media*,” is to put everyone else, all those outside influences, in the driver’s seat. That is precisely what the English Reformers and Anglican Divines resisted, holding out in more than a *zweifrontenkrieg*; they held out against war from all sides.

They were not weak and lacking in substance, needing to draw strength from the outside. Rather, they were strong enough to deal honestly and seriously with outside influences, all the while resisting the pressure to conform. The strength of Anglicanism, as it emerged, was in its strength to be both Catholic and Evangelical in a way that was entirely unique. And that is Anglican Identity. For this reason I have, with some measure of humor, proposed on the blog, *The Continuum*, that we adopt a mascot for genuine Anglicanism. That mascot is not the chameleon, but the Duck-billed Platypus. About the example set by this brave little nonconformist animal, I have written on our blog: “He bravely defies all simplistic categories, such as mammal or bird, Catholic or Protestant. He just is.”

After much learning, what emerges crystal clear is that one thing makes Anglican theology distinctive: It has ‘no distinctive theology of its own, but only that of the Catholic Church,’ *quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est* (“*That faith which has been believed everywhere, always, by all*”). Scripture and Tradition inform the mind’s Right Reason, along with its understanding. These also form the conscience, for it is the duty of every believer to have the conscience so formed. Rome and most kinds of Protestantism are built partly on the Catholic Faith, but partly on innovations that have no basis in Scripture and Tradition. The reason to be Anglican is to be free from innovations.

Is Anglicanism Orthodoxy in the West?

It is time now to consider this question. Certainly, from the time of Lancelot Andrewes, in the early seventeenth century, the English Church enjoyed a growing friendship with the Orthodox Church. Study of the Greek Fathers in English scholarship quickly became unparalleled in the West. The Orthodox Church (especially the Greek Orthodox Church) enjoyed a closer

relationship with the Church of England than with any other church of the West, certainly more cordial and friendly than the relationship they had with Rome.

Nonetheless, it would be more than a mere overstatement to argue that Anglicanism is Orthodoxy in the West: Rather, we may consider the features it has in common with Orthodoxy, and the reason for common ground to such a degree that it produced a larger degree of cooperation with Orthodoxy in the years between 1922 and 1976, than any other Western church body can claim to have enjoyed. However, in 1978, after it became clear that churches within the Anglican Communion were “ordaining” women and intent on spreading this heretical innovation, Orthodox Archbishop Athenagoras remarked: “...the theological dialogue [between the Orthodox and the Anglicans] will continue, although now simply as an academic and informative exercise, and no longer as an ecclesial endeavor aiming at the union of the two churches.”⁵

Looking back at this, in the context of many theological discussions, what comes as a surprise to many is the fact that the leaders of the worldwide Anglican Communion and the Patriarchs and other chief Bishops of the Orthodox Church had been discussing the prospect of joining into one church at all. It would be an understatement to say that reference to this historical fact often meets with incredulity. Nonetheless, the serious discussion of combining the Orthodox Church and the Anglican Communion of Churches as one Church began in earnest at least as early as 1922. Just how much hope one should have had in that endeavor, either in how practical it was or how long it would have taken in the most promising of circumstances, seems less important than the fact of the effort itself. What does it tell us that for decades the hope of union between Orthodoxy and Anglicanism was pursued, not by well-meaning people on the fringes, but by the highest levels of leadership in both communions? And, why did it take only one issue, women’s “ordination,” to bring it to an end, so that only a mere “academic exercise” could remain as a sort of fossil that testifies to this extinct animal?

In some places where Orthodox churches could not be found, with special letters of permission, the laity of the Orthodox Church were allowed to receive sacraments from Anglican clergy. This is due to common ground between the Anglicans and the Orthodox (and maybe to some degree that common ground had everything to do with the official relations both communions had with the See of Rome. It does make sense to ask, might the Orthodox Patriarchs and Archbishops have recognized Anglican Orders, at least in part, because Rome would not.). Here is another *via media* that Anglicanism once provided, and that we should try to restore whenever and however it may be possible: A *via media* between East and West. We are not Orthodoxy in the West, just as we are neither Roman nor Continental Protestant (be it of Geneva, Germany, etc.). But, we do have common ground with the Orthodox, and historically have had even better relations with them than with Rome.

The work of one Orthodox bishop, a man canonized relatively soon after his death in the twentieth century, demonstrates a serious approach to Anglican doctrine and liturgy as a model for Orthodoxy in the West. Much was owed in those days to the relationship that Archbishop Tikhon had with Episcopalians, such as Bishop Charles Grafton, and the effort to create a kind of Western Orthodoxy after an Anglican model. The Liturgy of St. Tikhon, also known as the Orthodox Western Rite, is officially approved by the Archdiocese of Antioch, and is used in

some Antiochene Orthodox churches in the United States. It is largely the service of Holy Communion from the 1549 Book of Common Prayer (by way of the American Book of Common Prayer arranged according to the 1928 edition), and conforming quite a lot to the Missal with its extended ceremonial. The rite contains a few predictable and obvious changes; the epiclesis has been worded specifically to emphasize the change of the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ, and, of course,⁶ the *Filioque* clause is deleted from the Nicene / Constantinopolitan Creed, and the word “holy” is restored for the Church.⁷

A Big Difference

It is worth noting that the Liturgy of St. Tikhon and the so-called Anglican Use approved by Rome, have a very noticeable difference, one which shows a different approach to Anglicans and a different attitude about our patrimony. The Anglican Use Rite approved by Rome has nothing that approximates the perfectly sound theology, drawn clearly and obviously from the Epistle to the Hebrews, expressed so powerfully in these words: “O God heavenly father, which of thy tender mercie diddest geve thine only sonne Jesu Christ to suffre death upon the crosse for our redempcion, who made there (by his one oblacion once offered) a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblacion, and satysfaccyon, for the sinnes of the whole worlde...” (1549 BCP) But, the Liturgy of St. Tikhon contains the American version of this part of the Canon.⁸

To whatever degree we may have common ground with Rome, and aside from other differences, any real union with them would make it necessary that they receive from us a good healthy dose of this Biblical Doctrine: Christ’s sacrifice full, perfect and sufficient. This does not take away from the sacrifice of the Church on its many altars; rather it gives it its context and meaning. This example demonstrates that our Faith is Biblical, Patristic and thoroughly Catholic in ways that can enrich Rome, and that has been affirmed within Orthodoxy. In a rite designed to attract Anglicans, the removal of this irrefutably true doctrine, as though it needed to be subjected to some correction, shows that we have further cause, at present, to maintain our distinct identity. The line that provides the context of the sacrifice, the meaning of it and the joining of our own worship to the actual sacrifice of the cross on Calvary, indicates that we are better able than Rome, at this time, to declare the Gospel in its fullness with the power of directness and simplicity.

Anglican Identity

We are not Western Orthodoxy, we are not a lost child of Rome, and we are only on any given via media relative to religious and theological extremes that reveal, above all, the reasonable independence and strength of Anglican identity. Let us be as non-conformist as the truth requires, just like the brave little platypus of song and legend.

References:

1. E.J. Bicknell, *A Theological Introduction to the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England*, 1919, Lowe and Brydone (Printers), Ltd., London
2. The first of the two sentences of Article XIX says: “The visible Church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men, in the which the pure word of God is preached and the sacraments be duly ministered according to Christ's ordinance in all those things that of necessity are requisite to the same.”
3. In recent years I have read over and over that “Hooker did not believe the episcopacy to be of Divine origin.” Whoever invented this mantra, and all those who fall for it, must not have read Book VII.
4. Available in English from St. Vladimir’s seminary Press.
5. As quoted in *Anglican-Orthodox Dialogue: The Dublin Agreed Statement*, (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1985), p.3.
6. The words used in the Liturgy are: “And we beseech thee, O Lord, to send down thy Holy Spirit upon these offerings, that he would make this bread the precious Body of thy Christ, and that which is in this Cup the precious Blood of thy Son, Our Lord Jesus Christ, transmuting them by thy Holy Spirit. AMEN, AMEN, AMEN.”
7. Correcting nothing more significant than an old copyist error, nothing doctrinal, as “the holy Catholic Church” in the Apostle’s Creed demonstrates.
8. “ALL glory be to Thee, Almighty God, our heavenly Father, for that Thou, of Thy tender mercy, didst give Thine only Son Jesus Christ to suffer death upon the Cross for our redemption; who made there (by His own oblation of himself once offered) a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction, for the sins of the whole world.” That this gives sacrificial context and evangelistic meaning to the celebration, is further indicated by the words that follow: “... and did institute, and in His holy Gospel command us to continue, a perpetual memory of that His precious death and sacrifice, until His coming again.”