

# ‘To Our Own People Only’: Re-owning Original Anglicanism

Churchman 112/2 1998

**John P Richardson**

Some would argue that a certain theological ‘looseness’ combined with a venerable tradition is the essence of Anglicanism. Yet an earlier generation would disagree. Bishop Stephen Neil, for example, wrote in the conclusion of his classic work on the Church of England:

It seems right ... to ask, What are the special theological doctrines of the Church of England and of the Anglican Churches in fellowship with it? The answer is that there are no special Anglican theological doctrines, there is no particular Anglican theology.<sup>1</sup>

It would be easy for some to despair and others to rejoice (prematurely) at Neil’s apparent low regard for Anglican theology. But we must read him carefully, for he does not say there is *no* Anglican doctrine or theology but that there are no *special* Anglican doctrines, there is no *particular* Anglican theology. Indeed, he continues:

The Church of England is the Catholic Church in England. It teaches all the doctrines of the Catholic Faith, as these are to be found in Holy Scripture, as they are summarized in the Apostles’, the Nicene, and the Athanasian Creeds, and set forth in the dogmatic decisions of the first four General Councils of the undivided Church. Firmly based on the Scriptures as containing all things necessary to salvation, it still throws out its challenge: ‘Show us that there is anything clearly set forth in Holy Scripture that we do not teach and we will teach it. Show us that anything in our teaching or practice is clearly contrary to Holy Scripture, and we will abandon it.’<sup>2</sup>

For Neil, the Church of England is ultimately not defined in relation to the ‘Anglican ethos’ but in relation to the *universal* doctrines of the Church, derived from and subject to Scripture.

Yet clearly there is *some* sense in which we can say that the Church of England is peculiarly ‘Anglican’. How, then, are we to identify this? Fortunately, Neil does us another service in pointing out that the Anglican Church represents ‘the Catholic Church in England’. And in this he picks up on the crucial point, now almost entirely forgotten, that ‘Anglican’ is originally a geographical rather than a theological term. Significantly, the *Book of Common Prayer* regularly uses italics when it refers to ‘the Church of *England*’, thereby suggesting that the key distinguishing mark of our Church is its *location*. Moreover, (since an argument from typography alone would not be enough) it is important to point out that the compilers of the Prayer Book clearly regarded it as axiomatic that things could be done in non-Anglican ways in other countries than England. Thus the preface, ‘Of Ceremonies: why some be abolished, and some retained’, contains the following caution:

... in these our doings we condemn no other Nations, nor prescribe any thing but to our own people only: For we think it convenient that every Country should use such Ceremonies as they shall think best to the setting forth of God’s honour and glory, and to the reducing of the people to a most perfect and godly living, without error or superstition; and that they should put away other things, which from time to time they perceive to be most abused, as in men’s ordinances it often chanceth diversely in divers countries.

In a similar vein, Article XXXIV states:

It is not necessary that Traditions and Ceremonies be in all places one, and utterly like; for at all times they have been divers, and may be changed according to the diversities of countries, times, and men's manners, so that nothing be ordained against God's word. [...] Every particular or national Church hath authority to ordain, change, and abolish, ceremonies or rites of the Church ordained only by man's authority, so that all things be done to edifying.

Three things stand out from these quotations. First, Anglicanism is defined *geo-politically* – its strictures are for 'our own people only'. Secondly, variety amongst Churches in 'Traditions and Ceremonies' on the basis of 'diversities of countries, times, and men's manners' is accepted as a matter of common sense. Thirdly, *no* variety is to be accepted in *any* Church, anywhere or at any time, regarding anything which is 'against God's word'. Rather, in every Church 'all things' are to be done 'to edifying'. Thus the *extent* of Anglicanism was originally controlled by *sociological* considerations based on cultural diversity, but the *nature* of Anglicanism (as of every 'particular or national Church') was controlled by *theological* considerations based on biblical teaching.

The true genius of Anglicanism was this avoiding of the absolutist *claims* to truth represented by both the Church of Rome and some reforming groups in the sixteenth century, whilst simultaneously anchoring itself to an absolute *standard* of truth in the Bible. The Anglican *via media* is not to be *neither* Catholic *nor* Reformed but to be *both* Catholic (standing in continuity with the whole Church in every time and place) *and* Reformed (recognizing that that same Church had largely lost its grip on the very truth of the gospel and needed to reassess itself completely from its regained theological perspective).

For this reason, the things we regard as 'Anglican distinctives' such as the Thirty-Nine Articles, the *Book of Common Prayer*, or episcopacy, are either found not to be distinctives at all (since they occur in other 'particular or national Churches', albeit in a form which takes account of 'diversities of countries, times, and men's manners') or were regarded by the English Reformers as universal truths such as should apply in all Churches (as we see in the claim in the *Ordinal*: 'It is evident unto *all men* diligently reading holy Scripture and ancient Authors, that from the Apostles' time there have been these Orders of Ministers in Christ's Church: Bishops, Priests and Deacons'<sup>3</sup>). The intention of the English Reformers was clearly that specifically *Anglican* distinctiveness would refer solely to 'the way we do things *here*'.

At the very outset of the Reformation process, therefore, we can properly distinguish between Anglican *theology* and Anglican *tradition*. Anglican theology, as Neil recognizes, was (in intention at least) simply that of scriptural Christianity. Its controlling ethos was that expressed in Article VI:

Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation.

Anglican tradition was the result of applying this principle to the English context. From this process came most of the features now regarded as definitive of 'Anglicanism', such as the *Book of Common Prayer*, the parish system<sup>4</sup> and even the Thirty-Nine Articles themselves. However, it is clear from reading the statements in the Prayer Book that the English

Reformers regarded these features as contingent on ‘the diversities of countries, times, and men’s manners’, rather than fixed as if they were in themselves articles of faith.

Of course, in the passage of time the picture became more complicated. First, the definition of ‘England’ had to be expanded to include ‘other [of] his [majesty’s] Dominions’ (Article XXXVII). In the early stages this was, no doubt a modest claim with modest theological implications. With the explosion of English colonial success, however, the ‘other Dominions’ eventually included a quarter of the globe. And it is surely for this reason alone that the Church of *England* eventually felt compelled to act as if it were the Church *Universal*. The result was a division of the entire world into Anglican dioceses and parishes, even if necessity sometimes made this exercise rather unrealistic – as when Australia was originally made part of the diocese of Calcutta. The legacy of this historical accident, however, is the continuing inability of either the Church *in* England or the Church *of* England to regard itself properly in relation to other ‘particular or national Churches’.<sup>5</sup>

The other development surely unforeseen by the original Reformers was the acceptance of denominationalism. Not that they lived in an era without divisions, but the divisions they recognized were seen as reflecting fundamental *errors* in the Churches from which they were divided. The Anabaptists were not simply different but wrong on baptism (Article XXVII) and property (Article XXXVIII), and the Churches of Jerusalem, Alexandria, Antioch and Rome were wrong not only about their traditions and ceremonies but also ‘in matters of faith’ (Article XIX). Since the latter Churches in particular violated the principle of Article XXIV (as well as the letter of other Articles and the theology of the *Book of Common Prayer*) division from them, whilst regrettable, was a matter of urgent necessity. To overlook these matters was to put people in danger of hell itself. Today, however, there is (no doubt rightly) an acceptance that those divisions of the Body of Christ expressed by Protestant denominations are largely based on trivia. Indeed, within Anglicanism itself there is (sometimes wrongly) an acceptance of almost as much diversity as is found outside.

We may be confident, however, that the notion of hard-and-fast ecclesiological divisions based on nevertheless acceptable theological variations would have surprised the Reformers. First, they specifically affirmed that ‘it is not necessary that Traditions and Ceremonies be in all places one, and utterly like’. And this principle was, of course, not a concession to other Churches in the ‘Anglican communion’ but to Churches which were, of necessity, non-Anglican by merit of being ‘particular or national Churches’ in their own right. As we have seen, these Churches were regarded as having authority ‘to ordain, change, and abolish, ceremonies or rites’, and the formularies of the Church of England sought to ‘condemn no other Nations, nor prescribe any thing but to our own people only’. It would seem that an international Protestant ecumenism was the original intention of the English Reformers.

However, secondly, they rejected variety which went against Scripture – not because it was ‘un-Anglican’ but because it was *error*. If we were to apply their principles today (albeit in a situation they did not anticipate) we would thus either ignore denominational ‘boundaries’ or critique other denominations we felt to be similarly in error. That we manage rigidly to maintain the boundaries whilst avoiding any concern for error reflects the immense confusion into which we have ourselves descended. Of course, a few Anglicans maintain that other Protestant denominations are wrong in matters of theology, but usually the questions are more of ‘Traditions and Ceremonies’ – exactly the things which should be of no account. Moreover, in this we also show great inconsistency, since we are prepared to tolerate dissension in our own ranks which we regard as intolerable from ‘outsiders’. The question

that really needs to be asked each time a matter of denominational distinctions is raised is, ‘Do you think people might go to hell over this?’<sup>6</sup> If the answer is ‘No’, we must ask what all the fuss is then about. If the answer is ‘Yes’, then of course we should do all in our power to rescue the sinner ‘from the error of his way’, ‘save his soul from death’ and cover his ‘multitude of sins’ (Jas 5:20) – but the fact that we normally do not react in this way suggests we do not believe ‘Yes’ to be the right answer. In the light of this, our attitude to other denominations smacks more of snobbery than sectarianism.

A return to the self-understanding of the English Reformers would liberate us in two directions. Their regulation of the Church of England involved the particular application of universal principles ‘to our own people only’, based on their understanding of God’s ordering of society and a sensitivity to cultural variation. Re-adopting this attitude would, first, allow us *as Anglicans* to welcome all those from whom we have no theological reason to be divided, whether they are in this country or abroad.<sup>7</sup> This welcome would express itself in an acceptance of members and an acceptance of ministries. We would not insist on a formal or liturgical expression of ‘Anglican membership’ from those whose original allegiance was to other denominations. Similarly, provided they were suitably qualified in other relevant respects, we would not insist on ‘re-ordaining’ the validated ministers of other denominations who now wished to work as ministers of word and sacrament in an Anglican context.<sup>8</sup>

Secondly, a return to an essentially *geo-political* view of Anglicanism would allow us to assess our own practices more usefully. So often today (as for example in the recent report on ‘lay presidency’<sup>9</sup>) the starting-point of debate is ‘Anglican tradition’. But for the English Reformers there was no ‘Anglican tradition’ as *we* know it, and such traditions as there were, they were quite happy to overthrow if they were deemed unscriptural. And their guiding light in this, as we have seen, was ‘the setting forth of God’s honour and glory, and . . . the reducing of the people to a most perfect and godly living, without error or superstition’ by applying scriptural principles to the ordering of the Church within their cultural context. If we took the same attitude regarding issues such as the wearing of robes, the use of the official lectionary or even the recognition of parish boundaries, we would be guided *as Anglicans* by asking what is the best way of ensuring that God is glorified in people’s lives, taking into account the society, generation and culture with which we are dealing.

In doing this we would, of course, lose much that is currently regarded as distinctively ‘Anglican’. But we would be returning to the spirit of original Anglicanism. Thus, when we ask ‘What is Anglicanism?’ the answer should not be in terms of tradition. Instead, Anglicanism should be defined as ‘a form of church order and practice derived by applying universal scriptural principles within a particular cultural context with the aim of effecting God’s honour and people’s godliness’. This may not be the answer people expect, recognize or accept, but it is the answer which produced the Church of England.

**JOHN RICHARDSON** is the Anglican Chaplain to the University of East London.

- 1) S Neil *Anglicanism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1965) p 417
- 2) S Neil *Anglicanism* p 417

- 3) Emphasis added. Whether this claim is itself justified is another matter. The point is that episcopacy was not endorsed for its 'distinctiveness' but for its validity.
- 4) The parish, as a geographical and administrative sub-unit of a diocese, is not a 'biblical' concept but (presumably) a *tradition* which the English Reformers thought to be helpful and worth retaining.
- 5) This difficulty is particularly highlighted by the retreat of the British Empire having left large sections of a Church whose 'Supreme Governor' was formerly the English monarch under other rulers. The theology behind Article XXXVII would suggest that ECUSA has been, since the American Revolution, 'the Church of *America*', and that its current Supreme Governor is *de facto* Bill Clinton, since he has been given the prerogative, to 'rule all estates and degrees committed to [his] charge by God, whether they be Ecclesiastical or Temporal'. Similarly the Anglican Church in Australia is 'the Church of *Australia*', subject to the Australian premier, and so on. That Anglican churches remain across the globe is, we are suggesting, an 'accident' of English and local history, not a necessity of 'Anglican' theology.
- 6) This question has the double advantage of embarrassing the theological liberal and focusing the evangelical mind. Naturally, there are very few issues dividing denominations over which people think others are actually in danger of hell. Indeed, we might suggest denominational divisions are so deep because the issues are so trivial.
- 7) Of course, it is possible that a grouping whose stance *Anglicans* can accept may itself reject Anglicanism. This might be the case with, for example, the Baptist Union or the Lutheran Missouri Synod. Where this happens Anglicans must, of course, show charity, rather than exercise a 'tit-for-tat' attitude.
- 8) Naturally, if we felt that the Lutheran insistence on a doctrine of the 'real presence' of Christ in the elements of Holy Communion put them in danger of hell, we would not be able to accept Lutherans or Lutheran ministers, and would pray for their conversion. But by the same token we should seek rigorously to convert or correct those of our own denomination who take a similar view. If we do not do the latter, we clearly do not believe strongly enough to do the former.
- 9) The House of Bishops of the General Synod of the Church of England, *Eucharistic Presidency: A Theological Statement* (London: Church House Publishing 1997)