

Radical Anglicanism

It is not an easy time to be an Anglican. For not a few times in the past few years, it has been more tempting to scream than to try, yet again, to figure out why it is still worth being an Anglican.

I should begin by saying that, by ‘radical’ Anglicanism, I mean something at the root of Anglicanism that is worth a huge commitment. So I use the term ‘radical’ in two ways: in terms of getting at the root or heart of it all and also in terms of a radical commitment to what *is* at the heart of it all.

So my question is: Is Anglicanism really an excellent way of being a Christian? Is it conducive to living the Gospel or is it an obstacle? Or is it both? Does it lead to a real kind of holiness that the Church needs? Would any of us these days encourage someone to become or to remain an Anglican as a particularly excellent way of following Christ?

One of the things that is sometimes said to hold us back from promoting ourselves, which is to say from promoting our particular gifts, is our belief in provisionality: Anglicans have made much of the fact that they do not see Anglicanism as the paradigm for the whole church, that they could imagine a re-united church evolving that would require some quite significant changes in how *we* do church. That said, I do not entirely buy Stephen Sykes’s idea that Anglican self-deprecation is the cause of much of this, and that this self-deprecation stems from the deeply-ingrained cultural habit of self-denigration on the part of the English educated elite.¹ As a Canadian who has lived in the UK for close to 20 years, it has taken me a long time to realise that the English have an exquisite ability to *seem* self-deprecating *and* to put you in your place at the same time. Just watch a so-called cultivated English man or woman make a complaint: after a litany of self-deprecating apologies for even bothering to bother you, which softens you up and gets you smiling and feeling good about yourself, he or she slips in the matter of his or her complaint, and you find yourself wanting to agree, wanting to please. That’s not self-deprecation; that’s a finely honed killer instinct, where the prey dies smiling, but dies nonetheless. And I still get caught every time. It means complaints take longer than they need to, but the strategy works.

So provisionality may not be fully explained by reference to self-deprecation or self-denigration -- at least not entirely. As many others have said, perhaps we simply need to agree on essentials: so long as we’re united on essentials, united even on a small subset of the really-essential, then we can be fairly relaxed about the non-essentials and so allow everything else to be provisional. But even that feels like a bit of a stretch these days, when we patently cannot agree on *what* the essentials are. And, as Stephen Sykes again has said, it is difficult to pin-down any such fundamentals.²

¹ Stephen W. Sykes, ‘*Odi et Amo: Loving and Hating Anglicanism*’, in *One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism: Studies in Christian Ecclesiality and Ecumenism in Honor of J. Robert*, M. L. Dutton and P. T. Grey (eds), (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), p. 195. As quoted in Paul Avis, *The Identity of Anglicanism: Essentials of Anglican Ecclesiology* (London: T&T Clark, 2007), p. 5.

² See, for instance, Sykes, ‘The Fundamentals of Christianity’, in *The Study of Anglicanism*, Stephen Sykes and John Booty (eds) (London: SPCK, 1988).

So should we even talk of Radical Anglicanism when we are faced with such differences within Anglicanism? Can we talk of Radical Anglicanism without privileging some particular and exclusive subset of Anglicanism?

I want to offer two approaches that may help us to imagine how we can identify something at the core, something that encourages Anglicans to remain Anglican these days, something that may even give Anglicans permission to feel some measure of confidence. One approach is to think of Anglican disagreements in terms of the way that ecumenism has developed. Another is to compare Anglicanism's position within the church in terms of differences among religious orders within the Roman Catholic Church.

Ecumenical Insights

One of the more important things to realise about Anglicanism is that it is not a denomination. Rather it is a church of denominations, in the plural. A famous irony of Anglicanism is that Anglicans are often more open to other denominations, to other churches, than they are to other flavours of Anglicans.

The key shift in ecumenism in the last few decades, or so I have gleaned in part from Paul Avis,³ is that expectations have shifted away from seeing reunification as a 'return to a united past' to seeing the goal as 'a form of unity that respects, indeed that expects, diversity.' The shift has been in appreciating the Gospel's universality not in terms of a single way of being church for all time in all places, but in terms of the Gospel's way of coming alive at all times and in all places. The universality of the Gospel is precisely its universal applicability, its universal relevance, its universal challenge, its promise of grace in all times and in all places. And this is more than inculturation, at least as the term is often used or misused to describe how things are culturally-adapted or translated. Rather, it is a type of universality that can coexist with some radical, even incommensurable, local differences, differences perhaps as radical, as Avis says, as those found in the four gospels, or as radical as the differences between Peter and Paul, or as radical as the various apostolic churches as they first emerged.

For a long time, many of us thought that church history evinced a trajectory towards catholic order (after all, we saw clear traces of it already in the New Testament itself); we thought that the true church was unfolding providentially, under the sure influence of grace, as it coped with becoming larger, as it coped with the challenges of staying together as key theological arguments emerged. It was becoming clearer; a structure was coalescing. But the church obviously did not remain united. And the result, the ecclesial reality, is a *series* of churches, of denominations, each emphasising different facets of the Gospel. Ecumenism today, arguably when it is at its best, does not want even to imagine a united church without these different facets, without these different emphases – even if they are in tension with each other. Rather, the ecumenical movement is espousing recognition of each other as legitimate and as legitimately different – at least as a first step.

Ecumenism is not espousing relativism here: ecumenists anticipate that some of the distinctiveness will involve rival, conflicting truth claims, but without mutual

³ Avis, *The Identity of Anglicanism*.

excommunications.

So that's my first point, or rather that's Paul Avis's first point. If ecumenism is onto something by inviting and celebrating diversity and distinctiveness, then perhaps Anglicanism, with its own internal denominations, ought to be doing so as well. More than that, perhaps Anglicanism has *always* been doing this, though not always with a happy heart.

Of course, there's something about 'distinctiveness in unity' that is at the heart of it all. Our central insight into the Trinitarian nature of God suggests as much – or frankly demands as much. At the same time, arguments within a family are bound to be more painful than arguments outside. So adopting an ecumenical model for Anglicanism is not easy.

Now, this is neither earth-shattering nor very original, but that does not take anything away from the importance for Anglicanism of 'distinctiveness in unity' nor from the claim that this makes being an Anglican an excellent way of being a Christian. It is an openness not just to the anonymous other out-there-somewhere, but to the familiar, irksome other who is right next-door, or even in the same family. It is a commitment to being the sort of church that invites diversity, that does not insist on uniformity, that enables and permits strong disagreement, dare one say even on fundamentals, without anathematising one another. It is a church that welcomes profound and costly conversation, not just a parroting of the same old stuff amongst familiar friends who all think the same way. This may sound like a liberal, pluralist model, but it need not be: rather it is the model of a church that expects the conversation to be getting somewhere over the longer term, that believes truth can and will emerge without using sticks, that stays together despite important differences because the truth will not emerge without the conversation. Indeed, a large part of the truth *is* engaging in the conversation, because that is where we actually experience the Holy Spirit working in those with whom we disagree. So we have common ground not so much at the level of our agreements, but at the level of attending to what God is enabling in us all.

Religious Orders

I'd like to expand this first model further by considering a different model -- religious orders. I could make the points I want to make by referring to Anglican religious communities, but I can speak a bit more knowingly about RC religious orders, having been in one for half of my adult life.

Each religious order in the Roman Catholic Church has its own charism; and the charism stems from the founder or foundress of the order. It is quite personal in that sense: and so each order has a different personality. Each charism is a particular, perhaps even an exaggerated, take on one aspect of the Gospel for the sake of the whole Gospel. Thus the Capuchins, or Friars Minor, stress being lessor or minor, a Christ-like kenotic humility that opens them up to experiencing the privilege of serving the other. The Dominican charism emphasises contemplation of the scriptures in order to proclaim the gospel with appropriate care and integrity. The Jesuit charism is radical availability, the freedom to be willingly sent on a mission anywhere in the world to serve the Gospel – as seen in the Jesuit fourth vow, which is based on the mission of the second person of the Trinity's being sent by the Father. I could go on, order by order, but the key insight is that each of the historic Roman Catholic

orders has a charism, the charism of its founder, which is a kind of practical wisdom, a path of holiness, which focuses on one or other aspects of living the Gospel radically – it is not just a division of labour in the Church; it is rather an eschatological witness. You focus and exaggerate to draw attention, without thereby suggesting that the exaggerated model is a model for everyone, much as the vow of celibacy focuses attention on everyone's need to be single-hearted, without thereby being a model for everyone; or as the vow of poverty challenges our values and priorities without thereby ruling out private property.

So the religious orders 'contain' diversity: they provide a means of remaining in union with one another precisely by 'containing' or 'focussing' or 'legitimising' this diversity. They provide a way for those who might otherwise leave the church to live, what to their mind is, a less compromised life within an order *within* the church (at least they may start out that way, until they discover their own weaknesses). But the thing is: the diversity is good. Jesuits do not dream of a day when all Dominicans will see the light and become Jesuits; in fact there are fairly strict rules against order-hopping.⁴

It is probably fair to say that most of the great theological differences that once characterised the Franciscans, Dominicans and Jesuits are behind us (differences on such diverse things as grace, tyrannicide or probabilism/probabilianism), but such differences did exist, and there are still some dramatic differences in how the orders live their communal lives, how they understand their missions, how they follow Christ practically, which aspect of discipleship they emphasise. They do not argue about which is the best. Rather they have a sense that each is the best for some people, and that each could be the worst for other people.

Could it be that the most radical thing about Anglicanism is not the radical fervour of any one of its 'more correct' internal denominations, but the very fact of its having space for each of these denominations? Could it be that each internal Anglican denomination focuses on, and perhaps often exaggerates, some aspect of the Gospel, and that this could be a good thing – a way of reminding the whole church of something truly vital? And could it be that such a limited focussing will always imply a distortion of some sort – a distortion that will become most obvious if one mistakenly claims that one particular way will and must fit all? But more on that later.

Holiness and Graciousness

There is a grace, a type of holiness, that can underpin this openness to diversity. All grace is concrete, and that's perhaps why it is often best communicated by narrative. Hence I want to change pace and recount two very simple, and admittedly personal, encounters with two brothers. These simple examples were chosen because the grace is very simple too, even if living according to such grace requires incredible heroism.

⁴ Of course there are rivalries, as shown in that famous joke, where a Franciscan, a Dominican and a Jesuit were arguing about which order is the greatest. There's a huge thunderbolt, and a little piece of paper floats down. The three of them pick up the paper and read: 'All orders are equal.' It was signed, 'God, SJ'. (There may be *three* versions of the same joke, but one hopes not, as it would undermine the play on the Jesuits' well-known virtue of humility.)

The first encounter was when I was a college student back in the early 70s. A number of us used to visit Benedict Vanier, a Trappist monk at Oka, just north of Montreal. Benedict happens to be Jean Vanier's brother. We used to bring a picnic lunch, and Chris Elliot, our theology lecturer, used also to insist that we bring the ham sandwiches we'd normally bring to a picnic. Now Trappists do not eat much at the best of times, but when they do eat, they are vegetarians. So we'd bring our ham sandwiches, offer one to Benedict, and he would eat it, smiling and complimenting whoever had made the sandwich. I am not sure whether Chris was doing this as a playful joke on Benedict; whether it was to enable Benedict to choose hospitality over regulations (which Benedict invariably did); or whether he did it to show *us* how hospitality trumped such rules. Whatever the motive, I have remembered the encounter for almost 40 years. I presume that Benedict was committed to his vegetarianism, but what an unusual commitment. How many vegetarians eat whatever is served them, without so much as a comment?

The simple point I want to make is that there was a graciousness about Benedict: he was able to accommodate our meat-eating without making a point of it. He did not abandon being a vegetarian even when he ate our sandwiches; not at all; he simply made us feel comfortable being meat-eaters. I have to say that, as older teenagers, our being meat-eaters was the least of our sins, but he did not require us to change to share a meal with him. His freedom around food-rules made us, however, ask important questions about our own freedom.

Moving the clock forward quite a few years, a few months ago I welcomed Jean Vanier to St Chad's College, in Durham. Jean happens to be Benedict's brother. This was the second time I'd met Jean Vanier in 35 years, but each time I have encountered Jean, I have noticed two things (similar to what I noticed in Benedict): one is a sense of his acceptance of me, even though I hardly live up to his example; and another is a sense of being called to integrity, without being made to feel guilty -- a wonderful, if too-rare, experience.

In Jean Vanier's case, I am tremendously inspired by his simplicity, by his joy, which enables him to be present to people of all sorts. I'm challenged by such simplicity of heart; I frankly want some of it myself. There is a sense that the authenticity of his life *is* a sort of judgment on mine; but rather than feeling accused I feel energised by recognising something stirring in me that seems in sympathy with the good I see in Jean Vanier. He doesn't try to convert me. He is content to live with his lights, confident that the grace that causes and enables the good in his life is the same grace enabling me to do something equally good (but different) in mine -- and to do so in God's own time. One could imagine that Jesus might have had a similar, though perhaps even more intense, effect on the people he met.

The point of recounting these two reminiscences is to suggest that this type of simple-but-real holiness you see in the Vanier brothers is exactly the sort of holiness that ought to characterise a radically gracious Anglicanism. It urges the question of whether there is a way of living with differences, of remaining in conversation, such that 'the other' feels at home? Is there a way of recognising that 'something' stirring in me when I encounter the other on the other side of a vexing issue? Can we trust such 'stirring' and let it lead wherever it does

lead, instead of demanding instant capitulation to my view? Can we engage with each other so that we do not allow our differences to prevent our sharing ham sandwiches? Or the Eucharist? Can we find some way of disagreeing with one another without trying to make each other feel guilty? Is there any way of appreciating that some of our differences emerge because we actually do emphasise and even exaggerate different but nonetheless real aspects of the Gospel? Can we allow each other to do so without recrimination?

Radical Anglicanism

‘Radical Anglicanism’ can truly evince an authentic type of graciousness, but it can also, and all too easily, get confused with good manners. That was one of the gentle criticisms made of one of Paul Avis’s most recent books, but I think Avis got it exactly right: there is an Anglican knack, an Anglican genius, for holding things together in diversity – and not just for the sake of expedience. It is more than a knack, of course; for this sort of graciousness is real holiness. And this sort of graciousness ought to be appreciated as cutting to the very heart of the Gospel, because it turns on a profound belief in the priority of grace. We did not cause our faith; we were called; and what’s more, we were called while we were still sinners. That same priority informs a Catholic understanding of the sacraments, and it ought also to inform the way Anglican Christians relate to one another. We do not use sticks (or bibles or mitres) to beat each other up because God works by gracious invitation. God knows what God is doing; and we should take the cue. The Anglican Communion needs jaw-dropping generosity -- the kind seen in those who are profoundly committed to what they believe and yet do not make those who espouse something different feel any the less. How? By disagreeing, yes, but not by excluding or demonising. We do not exclude, we cannot demonise, because we know in our bones that we are not more worthy.

Just as each religious order has a charism that focuses on one or a few aspects of the Gospel and so distorts it by stretching the Gospel a bit in one direction rather than in another, so too, if graciousness is *the* Anglican charism, then focussing on graciousness will distort things too. Graciousness and breadth will seem like a lazy accommodation of contradictory views, a sloppy acceptance of incoherence, an indecisiveness or fudge that causes others to judge Anglicanism as something impossible to pin-down. But this ought to be an expected and acceptable cost of having an intense focus on *one* aspect of the Gospel rather than an equal focus on all the other aspects at the same. Thus our ‘gracious’ accommodation with those who do not recognise the orders of women means that we do truly lack something key in terms of coherent unity; but we tolerate this very real and incredibly frustrating lack as a way of witnessing to a more radical prior commitment to graciousness – a more fundamental touchstone, again reflecting the fundamental belief in the priority of grace. And this witness is made, with all its attendant difficulties, for the sake of the whole church. Other churches will focus on other things – on permanence, on truth, on our redeemed fallenness – but Anglicans can focus particularly on the fact that we were *called* together, whether we always like it or not, because fundamentally there is only one Spirit, one Body of Christ. Graciousness in the face of diversity is our humble way of letting God work on keeping Anglicans together.

In the end, graciousness ought to be synonymous with Anglicanism. It is an evangelical stance, inasmuch as it captures what is at the heart of the sinner’s experience of

undeservable forgiveness; and yet it is also quintessentially Catholic because divine antecedent grace or graciousness is the essence of the sacramental life, of the sacramental church. We are gracious because we have been graced. And the more conscious we are of being graced, the more conscious we are of our own sin, and so the less likely we should be to exclude others. And even if we, as a church, do not agree on what gratuity looks like when it ramifies through our theology, even if we do not agree on how gratuity and inclusiveness interlink and get expressed in our doctrines or morals, still we can insist that our polity, our practical communion, be defined by graciousness-in-action. If we do so, then we've struck the kind of radicalness that is worth looking for, the kind of radical graciousness that is well-worth committing to, the kind that gives God some proper credit for keeping Anglicans around a shared table.

But this sort of Radical Anglicanism is costly. How do we live a more gracious, welcoming type of Christian life in a Church that may itself be less and less welcoming of diversity? This is the old challenge of how to be tolerant of the intolerant, of how to be critical of intolerance without being seen as superior or as intolerant ourselves.

Perhaps the only sufficient answer is to trust what we experience when we encounter the Vaniers of this world. Perhaps we need to rediscover the holiness of hospitality, of profound graciousness, and the humility that makes these possible in the first place. The scriptural bases are already there: preserve unity in humility by 'putting on the mind of Christ Jesus' (Phil 2.5) or 'bear with one another charitably, in complete selflessness, gentleness and patience' (Eph 4.2): but we need to see and be pulled by the compelling beauty behind these tags. After all, God bears with us. We need to keep on being graciously inclusive, by including those who are currently outside or feel on the fringe, as well as by including those who want to define the boundaries more exclusively. Being gracious does not mean backing down when there are threats to inclusiveness. No, the challenge is to stand up with honest, disarmingly gentle, non-violent graciousness, even at the cost of some coherence.

All of this means being very strategic at times; it may mean accepting further division while insisting on continued mutual recognition by newer, more tightly-defined 'denominations' within Anglicanism: achieving such mutual recognition will require not just graciousness but also some deft political insight. Should the Communion, for instance, absolutely rule out the possibility of recognising ACNA or other emerging groups (as painful as that might be)? But graciousness would require that any recognition of these new groups be conditional on their agreeing to re-enter into some admittedly-imperfect communion with ECUSA (again the differentiation of newly-emerging religious orders can be a clue to how this could occur). The key thing is that this sort of insistence on a gracious arrangement should be required as the Anglican way, though it should also be regarded as provisional, as a less-than-satisfactory way-station on the way to reconciliation. This is perhaps the proper context for discussing Anglicanism's provisionality: the concessions made in the name of graciousness are assented to as ways of keeping the larger, longer unitive conversation going until the differences are either overcome or recognised as legitimate.

To conclude, our communion needs the new, more generous insights into diversity that mark modern ecumenism – we ought especially to learn from that movement because it has been so much a part of recent Anglican history. We also need the permission felt by the

traditional religious orders to distinguish themselves from others: while remaining in the church, they tried to live the Gospel radically, but they did so in different ways, in ways that stretched the Gospel in certain (non-universalisable) directions rather than others. There could be some wisdom there. But if we want to recognise and enable any such diversity, then we'll need to embrace the gracious holiness that we find when we encounter truly holy women and men. We need not apologise for accepting this divine grace: there is a beauty to breath-taking magnanimity, to huge-heartedness, to a humble commitment to costly catholic universality. For, without patient, forbearing, humble, expectant holiness, Anglicans will be reduced to fighting; and if there are winners and losers, then we are all losers.