

Anglican Theology

The Rev. Sam Todd

There is no Anglican theology. That is to say, the Episcopal Church does not intend to teach any doctrine that is peculiar to it.

The Anglican attitude was expressed by Bishop Thomas Ken in the early 18th century: “I die in the Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Faith, professed by the whole Church before the disunion of East and West. More particularly I die in the Communion of the Church of England as it stands distinguished from all Papall and Puritan Innovations...” (Clarke, *A Life of Thomas Ken*, p. 223)

Anglicanism emerged during the late 16th and early 17th centuries as the Church of England felt her way between Roman Catholicism on the one side and, on the other, the extremes of Puritanism. In reply to Roman criticisms, Bishop John Jewel, in his *Apology* of 1560, pointed out that the Church of England had retained the Scriptures, creeds, sacraments and three fold ordained ministries of bishops, priests and deacons of the historic Church.

The most influential defense against the Puritans was Richard Hooker’s *The Lawes of Ecclesiastical Polity* of the late 1500’s. The odd title is due to one of the points at issue, namely whether the Church should abolish bishops as the Puritans demanded. Hooker emphasized several things that have remained characteristic of Anglicanism. He makes a distinction between the essentials of the faith which are relatively few, and matters of lesser moment which may change from time to time and place to place. Puritans would prohibit things like vestments, organs and stained glass windows because they were not specifically warranted in Scripture. Hooker found to be permissible that which was not prohibited in Scripture.

Hooker also identified Scripture, Tradition and Reason as sources for doctrine. It is not Scripture alone (solo scripture) but Scripture as interpreted by the Fathers and Councils of the early Church, which is seen as normative. Cranmer had anticipated the distinction in his main theological work published in 1550: *A Defense of the True and Catholic Doctrine of the Sacrament of the Body and Blood of our Savior Christ ... as Grounded and Established upon God’s Holy Word and Approved by the Consent of the most Ancient Doctors of the Church*. Scripture, Tradition and Reason have been misleadingly called our three-legged stool, but that image obscures the fact that Hooker regarded Scripture as foundational, Tradition as secondary and Reason as tertiary.

A third emphasis of Hooker was upon the Incarnation as the central fact of the faith. “As our natural life consisteth in the union of the body with the soul, so our life supernatural consisteth in our union of the soul with God.” And there can be “no union of God with man without that mean between both which is both” namely the Word made

flesh (E.R V l). Hooker speaks of our participation in the divine nature. (cf. 2 Pet. 1:4) Of the Eucharist Hooker says, "this sacrament is a true and real participation of Christ, who thereby imparteth himself even his whole entire Person as a mystical Head unto every soul that receiveth him, and that every such receiver doth thereby incorporate or unite himself unto Christ as a mystical member of him." (Y, bcvii, 7) Belief in the Incarnation leads to a high valuation of the sacraments. Bishop Lancelot Andrewes concludes a Christmas sermon by saying that as the Son of God took our flesh and blood in the Incarnation, so we take his in the Eucharist.

But the great achievement of the English Reformation was neither a work of systematic theology like Calvin's Institutes nor prophetic diatribes like those of Luther but rather a prayer book. To this day the only official theology of the Episcopal Church is that found in *The Book of Common Prayer*. The character of Anglican worship has had an effect on our theological attitude as well.

From the beginning Anglican worship was marked by comprehensiveness. As the Tudor dynasty united the houses of York and Lancaster, so Queen Elizabeth wanted the Church of England to be one in which Catholics and Protestants could worship. Thus the Church maintained a strong grip on both word and sacrament in an age when passionate partisans were pitting one against the other. And thus Anglican liturgical language puts Catholic ("the body of our Lord") and Protestant ("take and eat this in remembrance") phrases side by side, united by a happy ecumenical "and." The community which has prayed together has been able to stay together despite significant theological disputes.

Where the Divine is primarily related to in adoration rather than in theological or legal terms, a keen appreciation of the mystery of the Divine being and activity is not surprising. Here Anglicanism has been more akin to Eastern Orthodoxy than to its Western brethren. A correlative of our sense of Divine mystery is an axiomatic denial of infallibility to any human agency. No person has been deemed free of error as happened in Rome. No man's writings have gained a de facto sacrosanctity as Luther's and Calvin's did in other churches. The Bible itself has not been read with bibliolatrous eyes.

A great freedom of inquiry and belief has been allowed in theological matters. No one's writings have been suppressed by curial authority. Heresy trials have been few and ineffective in our Church. Theological aberrations are left to die a natural death from criticism and ridicule. We have a basic trust in the guidance of the Holy Spirit and in the mind of the Church as a whole over the long haul. Of innovations in doctrine and practice we have tended to follow Gamaliel's advice to the Sanhedrin: "If this plan or undertaking is of men it will fail; but if it is of God you will not be able to overthrow [it]. You might even be found opposing God." (Acts 5:39)

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