

The *New* Lambeth Conference

The Rev. W. L. Prehn

Bishops from all over the Anglican Communion of Churches will meet this summer in England for the Lambeth Conference. The first Lambeth Conference was called in 1867 by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Charles Thomas Longley (1794-1868). By this time it was clear that there was such a thing as worldwide “Anglicanism.” Although Anglicans insisted that theirs was no more nor less than “the faith of the undivided Church,” a somewhat unique tradition of Christian faith and practice had emerged among many different peoples and races, most of whom had some past or present connection with the British Empire. Since 1867 Anglican bishops have met every ten years.

The 2008 Lambeth Conference will be tense because of the great controversies and disagreements in our branch of the Church Catholic. Some Anglican bishops have promised that they will not attend, protesting that too many other Anglicans—notably the Episcopal Church in the United States—have simply departed from the Catholic faith. In fact, some persons have suggested that this next might be the last Lambeth Conference, so powerful do they take the forces of Anglican disunity to be at this time. It would be too ironic if this occurred (let each of us resolve to pray that it does not); for the first Lambeth Conference convened to consider doctrinal “modernism” and what was perceived to be the growth of heterodox religion in the Anglophone world.

Regardless of the tensions in the Anglican Communion today, the next conclave at Lambeth will be a rather new thing because most Anglicans have begun to recognize just how diverse and pluralistic Anglicanism is and can be in any given part of the world. For better or for worse, it is impossible to say today that “Anglicanism” is one particular thing (e.g. Anglo-Catholic or Evangelical or Broad Church). Hence it is going to be interesting to observe how the gathered bishops will even speak of “Anglicanism,” or how and where well-meaning prelates from the four corners of the earth will draw the lines on the meaning of the Christian faith according to the Anglican tradition.

I have used the word “pluralism” a lot lately. In my own mind, pluralism is one way to describe a population of something. For example, many different kinds of birds live together in a single forest. They are all birds of a feather, and they do tend to flock

together, but—goodness!—there is such variety. Most of us accept this species-pluralism of the forest as a scientific fact and an indication of the wisdom of God. But is it not the case that we have a tough time accepting pluralism when it comes to religion? One reason for our fear is that we know that a few anxious souls can cause simple pluralism to morph into an ideology and thence into an “agenda.” Twentieth-century atrocities and classic utterances such as Huxley’s *Brave New World* ought to have trained us to suspect a “smart set” claiming to see into the future better than the rest of us – perhaps commencing an “enlightened” program to make one kind of bird out of the great variety in the forest an all-new species derived from the inter-breeding of a few favorites birds. I think it is the sinister agenda we fear more than the pluralism itself. The assumption that this new species would be better and stronger than anything that came before it would, of course, be an illusion based on ideology instead of scientific knowledge. It’s the pluralism that brings the health to the species, not the benighted desire to make of the variety a single new species.

Hence we should not advocate “pluralism” as a desired social end. Pluralism can’t really be (in my mind) an agenda, or an ideology, or a goal. The goal I believe we all desire deep down is that glorious life and mysterious unity characteristic of the international human community united in and to Jesus Christ. I am referring to the community that is called the “Church Catholic,” a key aspect of the New Creation God has wrought in the real world, of which we Anglicans are members by grace. It is interesting that Peter Berger, one of America’s greatest sociologists, wrote in *First Things* recently that the evidence accumulated over the last several decades demonstrates that modernity does not lead unavoidably to secularism but to pluralism. He simply pointed to the fact that, 100 years ago, practically all of our neighbors were Christians (mostly Protestants except in certain parts of the United States), and now our neighbors might be any number of things – Protestants, Roman Catholics, Fundamentalist Mormons, Serbian Orthodox, Druids, Wiccans, Episcopalians, or self-consciously irreligious folks “whose god is in the belly” (Philippians 3.19). Berger urges that it would be a grave mistake to think that the world is becoming less religious, but the world is definitely becoming more religiously plural.

I think that we Episcopalians need to own our pluralism so that we may have a little mercy on each other. Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury, is adamant that the intolerance characteristic of most parts of the Anglican Communion today (among both progressives and traditionalists) is useless to the advance of the Gospel in a world becoming increasingly fissured along ideological and religious lines. We Anglicans should be as committed to love as we are to our points of view, even while it really is our duty under God to follow our consciences and stick to our deepest convictions. How we shall stick to our convictions and yet remain comfortable in this gumbo of a Church of ours is the great challenge before the bishops at Lambeth.

I believe that one way forward is to remember the limitations of human reason. There is an awful lot we do not know. Christian orthodoxy is not the same thing as intellectual or doctrinal perfectionism. Christian orthodoxy is about a life lived with the Lord Christ and with others, in spite of ourselves and themselves. Bishop Butler (1696-1752) warned his generation and ours that “much doubts are caused by a surfeit of certainty,” and one of the most brilliant Christians who ever lived once excoriated a group of entirely overbearing and sophisticated Greek Christians in the immortal maxim, “Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up” (I Corinthians 8.1). I worry that we Anglicans are currently so puffed up with our respective points of view that we shall soon pop. Besides, we Christians value *sapientia*, “wisdom,” far above mere *scientia*, knowledge – and love is even higher up the scale than wisdom. What I am saying about our rational nature is neither skepticism nor relativism. I’m just hoping we’ll be good Anglicans. So my prayer for the bishops at Lambeth is that they will, at the very least, follow the program of our greatest theologian, Richard Hooker (1554-1600). He stood firm on a “comprehension for the sake of Truth” instead of a mere “compromise for the sake of peace.”

Christians are called to love the truth and eschew falsehood, error, and heresy. Heresy is terrible. As one of our bishops wrote a dozen or so years ago, heresy is “cruel” because it is, ultimately, a form of idolatry by which persons commit themselves to a false reality. It follows that the whole core of a person becomes false, unreal, and dead. Still I believe that schism is worse than heresy because schism indicates that people or peoples really do not have to care about one another any more, and I don’t believe Christians have that option. If a Christian person is committed to getting along with—even loving—those Christians who disagree with him or her on very important matters, then it seems to me that there is hope for the divided world in which we must live for a season.

Moreover, schism is a misunderstanding of the nature of the Church in the present existence. It is very clear in the New Testament that the “wheat” and the “tares” are to coexist in one social reality until the Lord Christ comes to judge the world. The point is that God and God only can judge between the “sheep” and the “goats.” Thus schism often begins in an arrogation of judgment to us mortals. This is a morally serious mistake. This was the burden of St. Augustine’s writings against the Donatists in the fourth century. Their zeal grew into self-righteous indignation.

Most heresy starts out as one group’s rather natural response to the behavior or ideas of another, but a lack of charity allows the response to grow into a reaction that is nine-tenths irrational. Such was the case with the Donatists. Their healthy response morphed into rigorism; their great faith became puritanical intolerance; their love of God became a permission to hate His people. Instead of forgiving those Christians who had once caved to pressure in the face of persecution, they declared that the latter were not Christians at all and that the Church was corrupt because of them. So the Donatists formed their own churches and declared the Catholic Church apostate. Augustine

recognized that the heretics had completely misunderstood the nature of the Church in this present life, not to mention their failure to love and forgive.

Staying together feels threatening but is worth it. The truth is that Anglicans on all sides of many questions have good reason to feel disappointed and angry right now. But let's stay together anyway. I believe that, on balance, the witness of the saints is for staying together because even imperfect unity brings more benefits than breaking apart. Let us then begin to pray for this summer's Lambeth Conference. We Anglicans are in a great position to see something positive happen: Because we are now pretty helpless in the face of a great challenge, and this means we must depend upon God's Grace. What could be better for us? Unity is a gift from God. Will we stop our desperate maneuvering long enough to receive the gift in a new way?

The Rev. W. L. "Chip" Prehn is assistant rector at St. Luke's, San Antonio.