

Unity and Plurality from an Anglican Perspective

A paper offered to the seminar held at the Society Club in Stockholm, Sweden, in February 2007, hosted by the Centrum för Samtidsanalys

Bishop Laurie spoke broadly from brief notes and so what follows is his remembered outline of what was said.

Thank you to the institute for this opportunity to share some Anglican thoughts and for your preparedness to indulge my ignorance of the Swedish language.

1.

We are an island people – we therefore can be very insular in our thinking. At the same time the UK today is perhaps the most 'globalised' nation – we own and control many international and 'foreign' companies, and many of our companies are foreign-owned. Our vast financial markets are definitely global. Indeed we have always been very international – we have remained rich as a direct consequence of owning one of the biggest empires the world has ever known! Our wealth therefore exists on the back of those countries who still suffer now from our exploitation. We have been international even from our earliest history – our first martyr, St Alban, was a Roman Briton who died during the Diocletian persecution.

2.

The United Kingdom is not a united kingdom! In our hearts the true English person is somewhat anarchistic. But God may be happy with that insofar as God creates difference and glories in it. If two people are exactly the same, one must be a fake. Similarly, the New Testament is a testament to conflict and difference and how to deal creatively with that tension. (for example the conflict between Jew and Gentile in Acts and Epistles)

3.

We also have a deep conflict within English religion. When Pope Gregory no longer had influence in the East he sent his missionary Augustine to England (597 AD) who was surprised to find that the English took quite readily to Christianity. But that was because Christianity was there already – even though the Roman Church referred (and refers still) to this episode as 'the Conversion of England) The Irish (sometimes mistakenly called Celtic) Church was there before him. The northern lands were richly inhabited by monasteries (e.g. Lindisfarne, which sent missionaries down the coast to the south) In 664 (contested date) the Synod of Whitby (Abbess St Hilda) determined that the order of the Roman Church would be preferable for UK (there were also theological reasons, but the political reasons are more interesting!) But this tension remains in our faith.

4.

Henry VIII was awarded title Defender of the Faith (Fid. Def. still a title for present monarch) by Pope for antagonism to Luther. The creation of C of E really dates from Elizabeth the First's reign. She was: 1. made Supreme Governor of Church – giving a sense of security to her people since the Italian Pope no longer reigned supreme; and 2. the Act of Uniformity offered not a statement of faith to hold the people together but a Prayer Book (1552) – representing an orthopraxis to hold us together not an orthodoxy. Also she made

sure that Archbishop Matthew Parker was ordained according to Apostolic Succession – to offer authentic identity to her people under God (a belonging)

She adopted a *Via Media* – she did not allow the church to follow Rome nor Geneva and the balance thus struck has remained through generations – just recently the joke was made that in order to maintain the balance C of E bishops are balanced between those who believe in God and those who do not!

5.

Note that when the Methodists split from the C of E during the industrial revolution period, again it was not because of doctrine but on a practical issue and John Wesley remained a committed Anglican to his dying day. Orthopraxis is the key to unity in our Church of England (C of E)

6.

As the Empire grew so colonial expansion demanded some clearer criteria by which this church maintained its unity in the face of such extreme diversity across the globe. It did so by adopting the 'Lambeth Quadrilateral' – viz our insistence on Sacraments, Scripture, Episcopal governance, Catholic Creeds (once again, not on a doctrinal formulation) The Anglican balance of Revelation and Reason has been held through these years.

7.

With the technological revolution of recent years come other tensions. The Empire Strikes Back! The colonies of the old Empire now live in England – come to London and look for a white face! Leicester City is now 50% Black and Asian. My own home parish is now 68%. But God has always known that the world was like this – extreme diversity. At the same time we are wrestling again with the tension between revelation and reason – some offering submission to the Logic of reason, others to the enthusiasms of emotive faith – hence the charismatic revival which to some extent has been owned and internalised by today's C of E . But as the tensions mount so there is more fear of this complexity and a yearning to control it. We fear Chaos.

8.

And yet without the interplay of Chaos and Order there can be no life nor growth nor creativity. If all is order then there is no place for change. If all is chaos then we do not have sufficient order to act knowingly. (This necessary interplay is indeed why pain and suffering exist) So we seek to control the truth of difference – and can do it in at least three ways as follows: a. Imperialism – the use of dominant force. b. Democracy – where the majority may rule over the minority and hurt them. c. Consensus – where we pretend there is really one truth only. If we want none of these then we must find a fourth way – for which I will argue later.

9.

Today there is the great pressure for global uniformity – go to a High Street and see all the same shops, or to a city and see all the same architectural shapes – the MacDonaldisation of the world. This leads human beings to strike back for their own identity lest it becomes submerged. This can lead (as in the Balkan states) to an atomisation and unilateral

declarations of independence – ‘Balkanisation’. It leads too to Jihad (not just struggle for faith, but fight for identity) We see our social cohesion under threat in our cities (gated communities or violent terrorists) It stems from this Fear of the Other.

10.

This Fear of the Other can issue in different responses:

- a. Fundamentalism – imperialistic truth statement (catholic or evangelical etc) These statements can sometimes be heard as nonsense as the deep emotional hurt of marginalisation issues in statements which in better days would be regarded by even the speakers as foolish or just plain nasty.
- b. Commodification – when Punks offered a strong rebuke to capitalist society within weeks punk clothes could be bought in the boutiques of wealthy capitalists. Often whole cultures are condensed into saleable trinkets.
- c. Allow the Overwhelming – it is this for which I yearn.

The Christian comes to worship precisely to be overwhelmed by the Other! If we do this in Church why do we not transfer that spiritual experience to the streets? The ultimate transcends us in worship and in that experience we draw nearer to love. God creates difference in order that we may learn to love – without ‘the other’ there can be no love, only love of self, which is not perfect love.

Hence our appreciation of the mystery of the Trinity – where God’s love demands that God be three and not One – and yet God is one by virtue of that love within the Three.

11.

Truth is therefore not a statement but a relationship. The truth of the formula ‘ $2 + 2 = 4$ ’ is not to be found in the aggregation of the 2+2 but in the equals sign – the relationship. This is why we can say that in Godhead “ $1 + 1 + 1 = 3$ ” because the truth is to be found in the relating sign not in the additions. The dancing *perichoresis* of the Trinity (viz Rublev Icon) establishes the Unity in Diversity which is our God. We are created in this dynamic inter-relating image in order that we should allow ourselves to be confronted by our own Other and by the Other out there. In this way we have a chance to become what God has put it in us to be as social beings. (cf Eucharistic unity given to us by God, even if we pretend we are ‘out of communion’. Similarly Apostolic Succession, ‘En Christo’, etc.) This truth is the truth of Orthopraxis not Orthodoxy (as earlier)

12.

There are four Gospels because the complexity of our lives (especially our social lives) demands that we hear many voices together. Hearing many voices, in loving attention, offers us opportunity to come near to the reality of complex life and not crassly to simplify it. If we adopt any of the other responses outlined above, we are not true to the reality but take for reality the imperialist illusion (borne of fear) that we have imposed upon it. Our listening must include listening to the broken relationships as well as to the healed and healthy ones! Our fear of conflict can often stop us doing this essential listening – we simply don’t like being sworn at, even if it is an authentic voice that is doing the swearing.

13.

If we listen to all voices, we have more chance of constructing a real picture of society. Once we have this better approximation to the reality, we are better placed to address the ills of that society. So Mission is not so much a Truth Affair (pushing opinions and Orthodoxies – note plural!) but it is a Love Affair of relationship enhancing. It will include Conflict Transformation (cf Corremeela training from Belfast) It will include what the Faithful Cities report alludes to as going beyond Bonding and Bridging with those of like mind to Linking with those who are very dissimilar. This is true Community Development. It will also involve what the English Church calls 'New Ways of Being Church' whereby the listening turns to affirmation – "you are already church here even though the shape of your community does not follow *our* style!"

Conclusion

Being overwhelmed by the Other is a Spiritual affair and will demand much of us as we take that attitude out from worship into the conflictual world. It demands of us therefore that we Pray, Worship and listen to the Triune God – the ultimate unity in diversity.

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