



From the Editor

Anglican Stories: Bible, Liturgy and Church

Andrew McGowan

amcgowan@trinity.unimelb.edu.au

ABSTRACT

While Anglicans differ on many issues, they share not only a common history but a common interest in telling and retelling it. Essays in the present issue exemplify the concentration of these stories on three areas: the Bible, Liturgy and the Church itself. Historical or systematic attempts to define Anglicanism founder if attempts to identify essential elements are too prescriptive; but the shared reality and reflection on it constitute a characteristic form of Anglican theological practice.

Introduction

‘Anglicanism’ is of course a modern invention; as a word or an idea at least, it stems only from the last century or so, and from the idea and reality of a world communion related to the faith and history of the Church of England, dispersed through its colonies and beyond, and with common characteristics widely acknowledged as well as often disputed.

Two of the basic tensions involved in describing Anglicanism, and hence in seeking its necessary future as well as understanding its unavoidable past, are already expressed in that summary. While it is a modern phenomenon, Anglicanism has a much older history; it is not merely polemical to point to Anglican roots older than the Reformation – the Reformers themselves clearly envisaged the renewal of a Church, not its invention. That there is an ‘Anglican’ story, involving many to whom the word would have been meaningless, is therefore not in question; but there are many questions about how the parts of that story determine its meaning.

The other tension is a conceptual relative of these historical ones; it is whether Anglicanism can really be said to have an essential or distinctive character based on something more specific than this

shared history. Most of us answer 'yes', but our particular answers are so different as to risk undermining the apparent agreement from which we began.

Yet Anglican stories still reflect a kinship that is more than accidental; the willingness to tell these stories with the same characters but different plots provides a sort of family resemblance among Anglicans, both in the affinity between the stories and in the fact of telling them.

This issue of the *Journal of Anglican Studies* includes a number of research articles that critically consider these Anglican stories and their implications. Two address the important territory of the ancient Church which, although in recent times it has tended to be the playground of catholic Anglicans, was taken as a model by Cranmer and other English reformers, and was used in the early modern period as a weapon in controversy with the Roman Church as fulsomely as with puritans. Another essay concerns the history of modern Bible translation, and the ways national as much or more than denominational self-understandings could divide as well as connect Anglicans and others. A key story and storyteller of modern evangelicalism are presented in an article which juxtaposes the authority of the work with the complex personal trajectory of the writer. The last addresses contested questions in the recent and ongoing process around an Anglican covenant, which draws implicitly and explicitly on many of these earlier threads.

More broadly, three stories (or stories about three things) are particularly important in the Anglican story.

Stories of the Bible

Anglicans have in common a claim to be biblical Christians, but at present this identifies a focus of very public contention. Less well acknowledged in critical discussion is how underneath that obvious level of debate there lies a more genuinely shared practice of reading, preaching and prayer centred on scripture.

The recent project on *The Bible in the Life of the Church* initiated from the Anglican Consultative Council in 2009 was provoked by the first and more difficult phenomenon, but sought to deepen the second and less spectacular – as well as to acknowledge the many other challenges.¹

1. See Anglican Communion Office, *Deep Engagement, Fresh Discovery: Report of the Anglican Communion 'Bible in the Life of the Church' Project* (London: ACO, 2012; and further Clare Amos (ed.), *The Bible in the Life of the Church* (Canterbury Studies in Anglicanism; Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2013).

The progress made in the second area is reflected in some of the important stories shared in the final report of the project, *Deep Engagement, Fresh Discovery*. The confessedly limited scope of the report ('not a total picture', 'not a set of answers', 'not a prescribed programme') suggests not just a generic postmodern humility, but the difficulty of mapping use of the Bible given the geographic and cultural scope and diversity of the Communion, let alone doing justice to the conflicts arising.²

Alan Cadwallader's study of the politics of the Revised Version can be seen as a case study in such diversity, even though it does not focus on any particular point of interpretation, let alone application.³ Even without particularly deep points of theological and hermeneutical conflict, the difficulties experienced between British and US-based groups of translators in the nineteenth century seem to reflect geopolitical issues more than genuinely theological or even ecclesial ones. It may be worth asking now whether the fact that an American Standard Version was to appear shortly after the Revised Version need be regarded as a failure (granted that the compilers had hoped for a single outcome), rather than as an anticipation of later and more explicit acknowledgement of how different readings – and even translations – can arise from different contexts without undermining a deeper commonality of scriptural witness and engagement.

For all its generous references to the place of the Bible in worship, however, *Deep Engagement, Fresh Discovery* implies that the rather modern activity called 'Bible Study' is both the focus of difficulty and the likely source of progress. The assumptions of its central case studies, on the Anglican 'Marks of Mission' concerning the environment and unjust social structures, had already been queried by at least one scholar (and consultant to the programme) as rather 'instrumental' in character.⁴ While these case studies produced some very encouraging results, the possibility that the disagreements characteristic of present Anglicanism might actually be owed in part to an increasingly shared hermeneutics of scriptural instrumentalism, wherein texts are brought to the issues we choose independently of worship and probed until the desired result appears, is more sobering.

2. Anglican Communion Office. *Deep Engagement, Fresh Discovery: Report of the Anglican Communion 'Bible in the Life of the Church' Project*, 5.

3. "'Advisers or Fellow-revisers': Recognition, Status and the Revised Version', this issue.

4. Ellen Bradshaw Aitken, 'Relentless Intimacy: The Peculiar Labor of an Anglican Biblical Scholar', *Anglican Theological Review* 93, no. 4 (2011): 563–80; also published in Amos, *The Bible in the Life of the Church*, 112–32.

Stories of Worship

Most Anglicans still hear most of their Scripture in Church. Worship is the most fundamental matrix of interpretation, however implicitly, and however well reading or preaching are undertaken.

The fact that the (or at least 'a') Prayer Book has been the most distinctive and central artefact across Anglicanism and within national Churches – more so than any English version of the Bible – reflects first that prayer and celebration of the sacraments have always been the constitutive activity for Christian life in general. And for all its fundamental authority, even the Bible takes its place within the characteristic Christian, and not just Anglican, practice of common prayer.

Recognition of that fact has been an Anglican characteristic. Barrington Bates's essay in this journal reminds us, however, that there are different understandings of this liturgical heritage, particularly as concerns the ancient Church, and points to how some models that may still persist, and indeed have influence among those who draft and propose texts, are no longer viable.⁵

The ancient Church has a particular authority in Anglicanism, not only because of the recovery of interest in Patristics among the founders and successors of the Oxford Movement, but because of the reformers themselves, for whom the Church of Chrysostom and Augustine was, while not above criticism, a more accurate reflection of divine intent and scriptural witness. Bates points out some of the tensions within common Anglican ways of thinking and speaking about the liturgy, from Cranmer's pursuit of a pristine apostolic idea to the more modest quests of modern liturgical reformers.

The ancient Church itself was not particularly uniform in liturgical specifics. As the work of Paul Bradshaw indicates, the diversity of ancient Christian practice can be striking.⁶ This need not mean despair for the prospects of identifying aspects of commonality, or seeking inspiration in ancient models. Just as historical Jesus scholarship was famously described by Albert Schweitzer over a century ago as tending to reflect the image of the researcher, so too the images of ancient liturgy we construct owe something to our own imaginations

5. 'On the Search for the Authentic Liturgy of the Apostles: The Diversity of the Early Church as Normative for Anglicans', this issue.

6. Paul F. Bradshaw, *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship: Sources and Methods for the Study of Early Liturgy* (London: SPCK, 2002); *Reconstructing Early Christian Worship* (London: SPCK, 2009).

and our own interests; but we do not give up seeking either Jesus or the stories of his ancient followers.

Stories of Church

If ancient Christian writers tended to be strong on liturgical uniformity even while they knew significant diversity, something similar is true about ecclesiastical unity and coherence; the rhetoric of coherence was able to coexist with, and may have been required by, considerable diversity of ancient belief as well as of practice.

In his essay on 'The Consent of the Faithful', Benjamin King tracks how rhetoric about consensus was drawn from pre-Christian rhetoric by such as Cyprian, and has served in somewhat different ways across a history that includes Hooker and the Oxford Fathers, among others.⁷ But 'the faithful' was not always a faintly patronizing euphemism for 'the laity' – in the ancient Church, competing claims to orthodoxy meant this was a way of distinguishing faithful and the faithless, not laity and hierarchy. King makes the point that claims to ecclesiastical consensus have often been at least as much about defining who the real faithful were, as about describing their common opinion.

The evangelical strand in Anglicanism has had a curious relationship with the visible Church; evangelical Anglicans have tended to claim, on the one hand, that the Book of Common Prayer and particularly the Articles of Religion put a clear reformed stamp on the whole Anglican tradition, but also that the visible and institutional Church was only loosely related to the real community of the faithful. G.R. Balleine's *A History of the Evangelical Party in the Church of England* was a popular and influential account from a point of view that evangelicals were 'a section of a larger society united to carry out the objects of the whole body on principles and methods peculiar to itself'.⁸ Andrew Atherstone's account juxtaposes this loyal partisanship with the career of Balleine himself, who came to need the scope of the 'whole society' of Anglicanism as his views changed.⁹

King's observations begin and end with the use of ecclesiastical rhetoric in recent Anglican documents, including the proposed

7. "'The Consent of the Faithful' from 1 *Clement* to the Anglican Covenant', this issue.

8. Quoted from *Fraser's Magazine* of January 1878 (p. 22) in G.R. Balleine, *A History of the Evangelical Party in the Church of England* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1908), p. v.

9. 'George Reginald Balleine: Historian of Anglican Evangelicalism', in this issue.

Covenant, which is also the subject of Paul Avis's essay herein.¹⁰ Avis suggests Anglicans do share an ecclesiology, and defends the application of Covenant language to the instrument that emerged from the Windsor process as allowable (relative to biblical models in particular) and necessary (relative to 'communion' as a gift of the Spirit). This amounts to a relatively 'high' theology of the Anglican Communion itself, and perhaps a relatively new one. It could be contrasted, for instance, with a view like that of first executive officer of the Anglican Communion, Stephen F. Bayne (whose work informs Barrington Bates's essay) to the effect that the Communion is 'not an eternal fact, but rather only an accidental historical configuration'.¹¹ He did, however, also regard that accident as linked with a kenotic vocation, that of disappearing as the divisions of the Church are healed.¹²

The difference between these two views could stand more elucidation. Avis's defence of the Covenant idea includes the same ecumenical vocation Bayne claimed, if from a different standpoint. Yet debates about the Covenant proposal and its ecclesiology tend to skip past the less glamorous implications of Bayne's view (i.e., that what is not actually a 'Church' might not take itself quite so seriously), to arguments about what is (e.g.) genuinely or authentically Anglican, all the while assuming that Anglicanism in itself is enormously important.

These differences also point implicitly to one important reason that the Covenant idea should not be dismissed simply because we did not have one before, whether or not the present proposal has sufficient merit; namely that there is little in Anglicanism that can rely merely on a narrative of continuity and consensus. Anglican history is one of disruption, conflict, and change. Little can be determined by a resort to identifying what is, and is not, Anglican; those who take the Communion to the next phases of its life will be those who most convincingly articulate stories of what Anglicanism can and must be.

10. 'Anglican Ecclesiology and the Anglican Covenant'.

11. Stephen F. Bayne, *An Anglican Turning Point: Documents and Interpretations* (Austin, TX: Church Historical Society, 1964), pp. 303–304.

12. Bayne, *An Anglican Turning Point*, pp. 303–304.