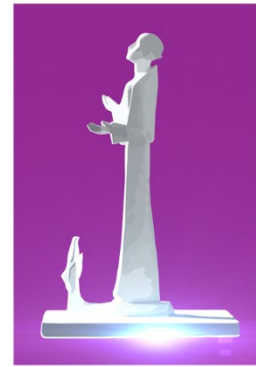


Episode 5 The Middle Way

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SFC
SHORT COURSES

The original text

This common sense flavour and inclusive character also have a moderating influence in Anglican thought and life so that it's not uncommon for Anglicans to end up somewhere in the middle on any issue. This has become known as the Anglican via media, or middle way.

This inclusive, balancing approach runs deep in Anglicanism. So an Anglican leader's answer to a question will often be 'On the one hand ... but on the other ...' And you hear frustrated commentators, who want lines drawn in the sand or black and white answers to complex issues, referring to Anglicans nailing their colours firmly to the fence!

The first sentence in the Preface to the Book of Common Prayer of 1662 says:

'It hath been the wisdom of the Church of England, ever since the first compiling of her Publick Liturgy, to keep the mean between two extremes, of too much stiffness in refusing, and too much easiness in admitting any variation from it.'

'What would happen in the development of Anglicanism would be that this "mean" for coping with liturgical change would be expanded into a principle applicable even to doctrine' (Wolf, 1979b, 145).

But it's important to be clear what the via media is and what it isn't. Some have made the mistake of thinking that finding a middle way is simply compromising on matters of principle for the sake of peace, of giving up on the search for truth in the interests of institutional unity. As I mentioned, you sometimes hear it said that you can believe anything you like and still be an Anglican.

But that's not really what's going on at all.

At the heart of Anglicanism is a constant tension between these three perspectives where each challenges and corrects the others. So rather than a laissez faire, anything goes kind of attitude, right

at the heart of Anglicanism is a process of dialogue which requires a great deal of effort and energy to sustain.

At the Lambeth Conference of Bishops in 1948 the orthodox churches, a bit confused about Anglicanism, pushed the bishops to be clearer about what they meant when they described the Anglican Church as comprehensive. If it didn't mean 'anything goes' what did it mean? The bishops said this:

'Comprehensiveness is an attitude of mind which Anglicans have learned from the thought-provoking controversies of their history. ... Comprehensiveness demands agreement on fundamentals, while tolerating disagreement on matters in which Christians may differ without feeling the necessity of breaking communion. In the mind of an Anglican, comprehensiveness is not compromise. Nor is it to bargain one truth for another. It is not a sophisticated word for syncretism. Rather it implies that the apprehension of truth is a growing thing: we only gradually succeed in "knowing the truth." It has been the tradition of Anglicanism to contain within one body both Protestant and Catholic elements. But there is a continuing search for the whole truth in which these elements will find complete reconciliation. Comprehensiveness implies a willingness to allow liberty of interpretation, with a certain slowness in arresting or restraining exploratory thinking. We tend to applaud the wisdom of the rabbi Gamaliel's dictum that if a thing is not of God it will not last very long (Acts 5.38-9). Moreover we are alarmed by the sad experience of too hasty condemnation in the past (as in the case of Galileo). For we believe that in leading us into the truth the Holy Spirit may have some surprises in store for us in the future as he has had in the past.'(Lambeth Conference 1968, 140-41).

Archbishop William Temple was stronger when he said,

'There is always an initial presumption in favour of the tradition for it represents the deposit of innumerable individual apprehensions. None the less it must be remembered that it is by fresh individual apprehensions that the tradition has been developed, and to reject the new intimation may be, not the suppression of human aberration, but a quenching of the divine spirit.' (Temple, 1940, 344).

So at the heart of Anglicanism is a process of constant dialogue and -

'It fails if it becomes a search for some innocuous common denominator and for compromise in principles in the interests of institutional unity. It can sometimes be taken hostage by extremists in any one of the four camps who become absolute about their perspectives and motivated either to convert all others or to exclude them from the communion. The dialectical process implied here is no mere juxtaposition of different views. The talk about the via media is really only a description of the dialogue as though it had come to rest in some invisible equatorial point. But the reality behind the dialectical process demands continued discussion, never a premature resolution of the tension as imagined in most concepts of the via media. From the very nature of multilateral dialogue there must be vigour, imagination, persistence, determination, respect for differences and a spirit of reconciliation. ...

No one of the four groups should be missing from the dialogue, nor should any be excluded by the others. What is required is not an exhausted and hostile state of non-communication, but the enduring of the tension in the confidence that truth will emerge from the dialogue' (Wolf, 1979b, 152-53).

'What is required by the very nature of the dialogue is not compromise for the sake of peace, but comprehension for the sake of truth.' (Wolf, 1979b, 154).

It is difficult to remain engaged with those with whom you differ. It requires a maturity to maintain respect, openness to the truth of their insights, preparedness to disagree and to stay in relationship.

That's why the Anglican Church has been called an ecumenical movement in and of itself.

It's a bit like the story of the four blindfolded men who were each led to an elephant. One got hold of a tusk and insisted what they were dealing with was a spear. Another had hold of a leg and insisted it was a tree. The third was convinced that the elephant's side was a barn, while the fourth had no doubt that the tail was a piece of rope.

Each, understandably, grasped only part of a larger truth which when seen in its entirety resolved all apparent paradoxes and contradictions.

The danger that Anglicans live with constantly is the tendency of one part to see its own particular emphasis as the whole truth and the others as containing no truth at all. That can lead to the twin

tragedies of that part either flying off by itself or exerting coercive power to exclude different emphases, in an attempt to maintain its pure truth unadulterated by the errors of others.

Were this to happen, the whole dynamic system would fragment and disintegrate because it's only when each part is in tension with the others and held in its proper orbit by the others that the system as a whole hangs together.

The image of an atom or a solar system isn't a bad metaphor for Anglicanism. There are various elements moving in relation to each other, exerting force and influence on each other, keeping each other in balance and on track. The elements of the system are not really in opposition to each other but complementary. Remove one and the whole thing changes and is at risk of collapsing.

Truth is often paradoxical. Take, for example, doctrine of Trinity: God is three and God is one; or our affirmation that Jesus Christ is truly human and truly God; or that human beings are predestined by God and yet exercise free will. Was the resurrection bodily or Spiritual? There is evidence in the NT for both views. In Luke (24.40) when the risen Jesus appears in the upper room he eats with them and says 'Look a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.' And yet Paul talks about the body being 'sown a physical body [and being] raised a spiritual body' (1 Cor 15.44).

Anglicanism tries to live with paradox and ambiguity not by resolving things in lowest common denominators, but by affirming the truth present in various positions which are in tension with one another. Anglicans attempts to live with apparent contradictions and paradoxes in the belief that God's spirit will lead us more fully into the larger truth in which ultimately they will be resolved.

Now, you might think I'm biased but I think this Anglican ethos has a lot going for it and a lot to offer people in our society and world. It's inclusive and comprehensive in the best sense. It is open to new apprehensions of the truth, while not allowing us to dispense too lightly with what has been received. It's future-oriented while respecting our inheritance. It pursues the truth with vigour, while resisting the temptation to absolutism. It values artistic, imaginative, intuitive, synthesising modes of knowing alongside the cognitive, rational and analytic. It holds together the importance of the individual and the significance of community. This Anglican ethos is both classical and contemporary, catholic and reformed, orthodox and open. What more could anyone want? It sometimes surprises me that the whole world isn't Anglican!

In the view of some this voice is weakening and even at risk of disappearing in the face of current evangelical ascendancy and the diminished influence of Anglo-Catholicism in Australia and internationally. Brisbane Diocese is almost uniquely placed in Australia to foster and strengthen this perspective. I believe we should intentionally inculcate it in our parishes, schools and other institutions because it is a rich and deep and valuable perspective which can make an important contribution both to the Church, nationally and internationally, and to the wider community and the world.

Understood at depth, owned with confidence and offered generously and imaginatively, this perspective can stand against secular materialism, it can respond to the rising thirst for spirituality in our society, and it also offers an alternative fragmentation and exclusion as means of dealing with pluralism.

I commend this identity and culture to you as a key means of building interest and trust in Anglican Christianity and our organisations.

The Discussion Questions

- a. What strengths (or otherwise) flow from the Anglican Via Media approach?
- b. How do you see this “inclusive balancing approach” to faith expressed in the life of your Anglican context? (Parish/School/Agency/etc)
- c. Archbishop Phillip uses the image of an atom or Solar System in balance to describe the via media. What are some other appropriate analogies?
- d. In what ways is the Middle Way a new concept for you?
- e. How does it inform/enrich your understanding of the role of Anglican Church in the world today?
- f. What areas of your life could use an approach like the Middle Way: to provide balance, insight or peace?
- g. A key concept in the “Via Media” is “comprehensiveness” – this demands agreement on fundamentals while tolerating disagreement on matters in which Christians can differ without feeling the necessity of breaking communion. Take this concept with you today and be conscious of its possibilities in your life.

h. A common question asked during discussions about The Middle Way is this: “What is more important - unity or truth?” What do you think? Or is this an unfair question? Is it necessary to choose one over the other?

Extra content – Some more to think about...

The Reformation: England and the “Middle Way”

In England, the Reformation began with Henry VIII’s quest for a male heir. When Pope Clement VII refused to annul Henry’s marriage to Catherine of Aragon so he could remarry, the English king declared in 1534 that he alone should be the final authority in matters relating to the English church. Henry dissolved England’s monasteries to confiscate their wealth and worked to place the Bible in the hands of the people. Beginning in 1536, every parish was required to have a copy.

After Henry’s death, England tilted toward Calvinist-infused Protestantism during Edward VI’s six-year reign and then endured five years of reactionary Catholicism under Mary I. In 1559 Elizabeth I took the throne and, during her 44-year reign, cast the Church of England as a “middle way” between Calvinism and Catholicism, with vernacular worship and a revised Book of Common Prayer.

<https://www.history.com/topics/reformation/reformation>

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