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THE ANGLICAN UNDERSTANDING OF THE CHURCH

An introduction

Second edition

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Contents

Preface to the revised and expanded edition

This brief introduction to the Anglican understanding of the Church seems to have met a need since it was first published in 2000. My hope then was that it would be useful throughout the Anglican Communion to candidates being considered for ordination, to the increasing numbers preparing for various forms of lay ministry, as well as to clergy who may have had a nagging sense that their ordination training somehow forgot to tell them much about the Church itself and particularly about the Anglican expression of the Church. I stated the hope that many lay synod members, churchwardens and Parochial Church Council or Vestry members would read it. I wanted it to be useful to enquirers, whether they were wondering what the Anglican tradition has to offer them in the marketplace of faiths or whether they were preparing for a process of selection that may lead to training for a recognized form of ministry. I also hoped that this book would assist the understanding of Anglicanism in situations of local ecumenism, such as Local Ecumenical Partnerships, and in the informal discussions and study groups that bring Christians of different church traditions together, especially during Lent. The fact that this little book has remained in print for a dozen years suggests that at least some of these aspirations may have been met.

For this new edition I have revised and expanded the text, updating it to take account of Anglican and ecumenical developments that have brought us to where we are in the second decade of the twenty-first century, enriching the reading lists, as well as giving more endnote references for those who may

wish to follow them up. I have also added some questions for reflection and discussion at the end of each chapter. Since writing the original text in the late 1990s, my own Anglican and ecumenical study and experience have been hugely enriched by deeper research, much writing and opportunities to serve the Church of England and the Anglican Communion in ecumenical and ecclesiological work. I have had the privilege of lecturing in many member Churches of the Communion. But this revision has also given me the opportunity to have some second thoughts about some of the ways that I put things in the first edition. I have also tried to make the argument less focused on the Church of England, in the hope that the book will also be serviceable in many other member Churches of the Anglican Communion.

Several introductions to the Anglican tradition generally or to the history and nature of the Anglican Communion are available, and several of them will be recommended as we go along. But I am not aware of anything similar on the Anglican understanding of the Church at this level and length. I have tried not to make too many assumptions about the reader's previous knowledge. Those who want to go into greater depth will find some pointers to further reading at the end of each chapter, including more advanced studies by the present author. There is also the journal *Ecclesiology*, of which I have the honour to be editor-in-chief (<www.brill.nl/ecso>). So I hope that this modest book will prove to be the start of a journey of discovery for many in the Anglican Communion and in other Christian traditions who may be drawn to it by curiosity about this attractive and infuriating thing called Anglicanism!

Paul Avis

1

The spirit of Anglican ecclesiology

For all its imperfections, Anglican theology has often been marked by a spirit of openness towards other Christian traditions. Christian Churches have sometimes spoken of themselves as though they were the only true Church of Jesus Christ. They have tended to articulate their Church's standpoint as though it were the only true ecclesiology – that is, without creating the necessary space in our minds between what can be said of any particular tradition and what may be said of the Church of Christ as such. This was inevitable where a church's ecclesiology included the claim that it was to be identified without remainder with the Church of Christ and that other ecclesial bodies were somehow outside the catholic Church. That claim has been modified as far as the Roman Catholic Church is concerned as a result of the Second Vatican Council (1962–5), though much ambiguity remains; and now questions are even being raised by some in the Orthodox Churches, though they certainly have not abandoned their claim to be the one true Church. When such absolute and exclusive claims are made for any Church, a truly ecumenical approach to ecclesiology is ruled out. Obviously, the true Church cannot allow the views that 'heretics and schismatics' may have of the Church to influence how it understands itself!

A distinctive feature of Anglican ecclesiology, I suggest, is that it has not been carried on in the insularity that sometimes accompanies absolute and exclusive claims for one's own Church. I do not think that Anglicans have ever made

those claims. The Church of England, even at its most robust (say at the Restoration of the monarchy and episcopate in 1660–62) has never regarded itself as the only true Church; it has always recognized the existence of other Churches – Protestant, Roman Catholic or Orthodox. As a result, Anglican ecclesiology has openly drawn on the theological resources of other traditions; it has been practised in an ecumenical spirit and by a synthetic method. The early English Reformers, however harshly they may have spoken of the Church of Rome, recognized their affinity with the Reformation churches on the Continent, regarding them as sister churches. The Thirty-Nine Articles borrow unashamedly from the Lutheran Augsburg Confession (1530), especially in what they say about the Church. Richard Hooker (d. 1600) holds in his theological armoury not only the thought of St Thomas Aquinas, but the learning of the more recent and contemporary Roman Catholic divines, as well as the Reformers, and deploys them with a good conscience at will.

Hooker spoke of the various particular or national Churches as being like the oceans of the world, separate but contiguous. Later writers employed the 'branch theory' of the Church to account for the existence of the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches alongside the Anglican. Anglican ecclesiology has never assumed that it is the only one there is and, therefore, has never made the mistake of exclusively identifying what may be said of Anglicanism with what may be said of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church of Jesus Christ. That seems to be an important clue to the distinctive spirit of Anglican ecclesiology. It is captured superbly in some well-known words of Michael Ramsey (later Archbishop of York and then Canterbury) in *The Gospel and the Catholic Church* (1936), which I take as an aspiration for Anglicanism rather than a description of how it is:

> For while the Anglican church is vindicated by its place in history, with a strikingly balanced witness to Gospel and Church and sound learning, its greater vindication lies in its pointing through its own history to something of which it is a fragment. Its credentials are its incompleteness, with the tension and the travail in its soul. It is clumsy and untidy, it baffles neatness and logic. For it is sent not to commend itself as 'the best type of Christianity', but by its very brokenness to point to the universal Church.[1]

However, that still leaves open the possibility that Anglicans may have tended to assume that their ecclesiology was the best available and had more to commend it than the alternatives. I do not think that that assumption in itself is objectionable. Individuals could hardly be expected to give heartfelt loyalty to their particular Church unless they were convinced that it had the edge over its rivals, ecclesiologically speaking. Whatever contingent and imperfectly examined biographical and psychological factors contribute implicitly to one's commitment to a Church, one must at least be satisfied as to its *raison d'être* – its claims must be convincing. But it is when that theological assurance begins to generate attitudes of complacency, superiority and arrogance that repentance and apology are called for. So in suggesting that the spirit of Anglican ecclesiology is marked by a ungrudging awareness of its incompleteness, the absence of the sense of totality and finality, I mean that in an objective sense. The spirit of individual Anglicans, in the subjective sense, on the other hand, may frequently be appalling!

In speaking about the Anglican understanding of the Church, I could not confine myself to the Church of England even if I wanted to. That would be out of the question because the Church of England belongs to the worldwide Anglican Communion of Churches where it is one of many. But it is with the Church of England that I need to begin, though it is not where I will end

up in this discussion. I write as an Anglican who cherishes the worldwide Communion and the friendly links that it has brought me to fellow Anglicans in many parts of the world, especially North America, the West Indies, Southern Africa, the Antipodes and the Far East, not forgetting, closer to home, Ireland, Scotland and Wales. I see myself as speaking from the mainstream of the Anglican tradition and as seeking to articulate a consensus on the Anglican understanding of the Church that will prove relevant and helpful across the Anglican Communion in all its diversity.

Until fairly recently, Anglicans in the Church of England have been able to take their church for granted. Its pedigree goes back long before the Reformation to the beginnings of Christianity in Britain and Ireland. It is still the majority Church, having baptized almost half of the population, and is expected to officiate at most funerals. It has its parish churches and its clergy in every community. It has thousands of church schools. Its history is inextricably intertwined with the history of the nation. It is recognized by the state and connected to the crown. It has its chaplains in schools, colleges, hospitals, prisons and the armed services. Its worship and ministry is woven into the very fabric of the community.

All that is still basically true and needs to be reaffirmed, but it is much less secure than it was 50 or even 15 years ago. In some parts of the nation the position of the Church of England is tenuous. Though in many villages, market towns and affluent suburbs the parish church has a central role and an effective ministry, the work is becoming harder. Even in the inner cities, the parish church is still a significant presence, but its impact on the local community is marginal. Everywhere, however, the Church of England is under pressure from three modern phenomena that go under the catch-all names of secularization, privatization and pluralization.

The complex process that sociologists call secularization refers essentially to the diminished influence of religion in public life and in the common expressions of culture. Secularization does not necessarily mean that people generally are less religious or that prayer is not important to them, or that they do not hold beliefs about sacred or transcendent meanings and values. But it points to the evident fact that religious beliefs and religious authorities no longer figure prominently in many public institutions, such as Parliament or the universities, or in most expressions of cultural life, such as the mass media.

Secularization is related to privatization, which refers to the way that religious beliefs, practices and values, marginalized in public discourse and community activities, are increasingly relegated to the personal and domestic contexts. Religious beliefs and commitments are not thought suitable candidates for public affirmation. They are regarded as a private matter. Public figures very rarely 'do God'. But family life in very many cases is not robust enough to sustain religious faith and practice. So religion misses out on both fronts. For the Christian, one's faith can never be a purely private matter: personal, yes; private, no. The kingdom of God claims allegiance over every part of life, including public life, and God's mission knows no boundaries.

Let me take an example of secularization and privatization that will be familiar to every adult in England and Wales. The decoupling some years ago of the Christian festival of Pentecost (Whitsun) from the Spring bank holiday (Whit Monday) and the resulting confusion in the minds even of churchgoers as to the date of Pentecost is a token of this process. The outcome is that Pentecost has become a second-class festival for the Church, which then has to work all the harder to make it meaningful. This example illustrates how practising Christians are increasingly not assisted by public institutions to observe

their faith (this is an aspect of secularization), but are compelled to observe it in their own time and for their own motives (this is the essence of privatization).

Alongside secularization stands the process (much more long term) of pluralization. It is true that there has never been a time (certainly not since the Reformation, nearly half a millennium ago) when the Church of England had an absolute monopoly of the religious belief and practice of the population. There were always communities who did not identify with the national Church: in Elizabeth I's reign, recusant Roman Catholics and a tiny minority of so-called Separatists; a century later, Quakers and Jews; since 1662, substantial communities of Nonconformists as well as Roman Catholics. The theory was, however, that all members of the community ('commonwealth') were or should be members of the Church of England, and this principle underpinned the Church's involvement in local, regional and national government, education, health care and supervision of moral behaviour.

Today, on the other hand, Anglicans in England are one faith community among others. We may be the largest in terms of nominal membership, but we are not dominant. Our beliefs and values have to compete in the marketplace of faiths, which includes non-Christian religions, notably Islam and Hinduism, as well as other Christian communities such as the Roman Catholics, Methodists, Orthodox and Baptists, and with aggressive secularism and atheism. While the relationship between the Churches is generally excellent and practical co-operation is strong, the existence of a plurality of faiths has the effect of relativizing the claims of each: as one option among many, no one of them has a prima facie claim to credibility.[2]

The related processes of secularization, privatization and pluralization mean that as English Anglicans we can no longer take our Church for granted. Its claims and position in society

are not assured any more. We know that our message will not be heard, our ministry will not be received, our values will not survive, unless we grasp the challenge of mission and evangelization with both hands. The competitive situation in which as Anglicans in England we now find ourselves means that we cannot assume that people both inside and outside the Church know what we stand for. Often they have the haziest and craziest ideas about the Churches and the Christian faith.

On the whole we are not winning the battle. In spite of much spiritual vitality in parts of the Church of England and imaginative mission initiatives, known as 'fresh expressions', decline is the order of the day. The drift is steadily downwards. The presence and impact of the Church of England and of all Christian Churches is steadily being eroded, even in their heartlands. That is not a counsel of despair, but a rallying cry to meet the challenge. To do so we need several things: effective leadership, a laity galvanized for mission, clergy who will reinvent themselves as apostles to the unchurched, attractive worship and persuasive apologetics. But even all those things, if we had them throughout the length and breadth of the Church, would not be enough unless they were held within a framework of good theology. What we need, among other things, is a firm theological grasp of our message, our ministry and our values.[3]

So far I have talked only about the Church of England. I needed to start from that point. But Anglicanism is a worldwide expression of the Christian Church. The other – approximately 40 – member Churches of the Anglican Communion (for ecclesiological reasons, I prefer to speak about 'member Churches' rather than 'provinces') are already familiar with the challenges that the Church of England is beginning to face. Their circumstances have generally been rather different from those of the Church of England. They are not usually majority Churches.

They are not usually established by law. They do not, in most cases, have many centuries of history behind them. They are not, generally speaking, territorial Churches in the same way as the Church of England is, with its parochial structure going back to Anglo-Saxon times. Many do not have substantial inherited resources to help finance their mission. Most Anglican Churches have always had to pay their way and fight their corner. They are more aware than we English Anglicans are of the need to know what we stand for, to be aware of what is distinctive about our doctrine of the Church. This introduction is meant for them too.

But there is another factor that challenges us to grapple with the doctrine of the Church and the Anglican tradition of interpreting that doctrine. Anglican self-awareness has been raised further by the ecumenical movement. As Christians from different traditions have come together in theological dialogue and practical co-operation – as centuries of suspicion and alienation have been broken down – they have all been compelled to ask: What do we stand for? How is our view of the Church distinctive? Where do we disagree with others? Where do our basic beliefs come from? Who decides and on what authority? Possibly, this kind of ecumenical engagement has proved more of a challenge to Anglicans than to members of some other traditions. In this way we become acutely aware that we need an Anglican ecclesiology. Our next task, then, is to explain this technical term 'ecclesiology'.

Questions for reflection and discussion

1 Why is theology important to the identity and mission of Anglicanism?
2 What are the symptoms of institutional decline in the member church of the Anglican Communion to which you belong and what are the signals of vitality?

For further reading

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2

Why do Christians need to understand the Church?

Ecclesiology is the theological study of the Christian Church. Ecclesiology focuses on the Church as it appears in Scripture and in historical theology. It studies the Church of today in all its diversity, and it looks to how the Church should develop in the light of the challenges that it faces – the past, present and future of the Church. The word 'ecclesiology' is made up of the Greek *ekklesia* (assembly) and *logos* (discourse), to stand for ordered speech about the Church (just as the word 'theology' is made up of the Greek *theos* (god or God) and *logos* (discourse), to stand for ordered speech about God and the things of God. We meet the Greek term *logos* most familiarly in the Prologue to St John's Gospel: 'In the beginning was the word (*logos*) . . .'

In its original meaning *ekklesia* is a secular term for an assembly of people and is derived from the verb to call (together). It was employed by those who translated the Old Testament (the Jewish Bible) from Hebrew into Greek before the coming of Christ. This version, known as the Septuagint (LXX), used *ekklesia* to translate the Hebrew *qahal* (assembly), which in turn derives from the Hebrew for voice (*qol*). Incidentally, the Septuagint also used *sunagoge* (cf. synagogue) to translate *qahal*. In both Hebrew and Greek, then, the words used to stand for the church mean the assembly of those who are called – called together to worship God, or called out of the world, to serve God. It is worth noting in passing, however, that the

English word 'church' comes from a different source: the Greek *kuriake*, 'belonging to the Lord (*kurios*)' (cf. the Scottish 'kirk'). Originally referring to the building, 'the church' has come to mean the people and the institution as well.

To be faithful to the meaning of *ekklesia*, it should always have the definite article: 'the Church'. The current trend to speak of 'church' in a generic sense moves away from the clear sense of Scripture and Christian doctrine that there is one Church, called in the purposes of God, founded by Jesus Christ through his Incarnation, life, ministry, death, resurrection, Ascension and outpouring of the Holy Spirit. There is one Church to which we are required to belong and that we are called to serve. The term 'church' without the definite article, as in 'doing church', 'being church' and so on, has the merit of suggesting that the Church is a dynamic thing, always in motion, ever active, but it has the fatal demerit of implying, perhaps inadvertently, that the Church is something that we can make or do or bring into being, that it revolves around human activity, rather than divine institution and divine initiative. Christians should always speak of 'the Church', the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church of Jesus Christ.

The transition from the secular meaning 'assembly' to the Christian meaning 'church' in the theological sense is found in the New Testament. *Ekklesia* is found in only one of the Gospels (Matthew), where it occurs three times. On two occasions it still has its basic meaning of 'assembly' (Matthew 18.17: 'tell it to the church'), but the third instance has the broader sense: 'on this rock I will build my church' (Matthew 16.18).

In the Epistles, *ekklesia* occurs frequently and three uses can be discerned.

- First, there is the local Christian assembly or community: 'All the churches of Christ greet you,' writes Paul, apparently

those claims. The Church of England, even at its most robust (say at the Restoration of the monarchy and episcopate in 1660–62) has never regarded itself as the only true Church; it has always recognized the existence of other Churches – Protestant, Roman Catholic or Orthodox. As a result, Anglican ecclesiology has openly drawn on the theological resources of other traditions; it has been practised in an ecumenical spirit and by a synthetic method. The early English Reformers, however harshly they may have spoken of the Church of Rome, recognized their affinity with the Reformation churches on the Continent, regarding them as sister churches. The Thirty-Nine Articles borrow unashamedly from the Lutheran Augsburg Confession (1530), especially in what they say about the Church. Richard Hooker (d. 1600) holds in his theological armoury not only the thought of St Thomas Aquinas, but the learning of the more recent and contemporary Roman Catholic divines, as well as the Reformers, and deploys them with a good conscience at will.

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