

SOCIOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON CONTEMPORARY ANGLICAN POLITY

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One question that Anglicanism faces today is, 'Who is Anglican?'. Any investment in an overly narrow specifications of membership will have profound consequences for the identity and organisational shape of Anglican ecclesiology, including performative-liturgical arenas such as baptism. The socio-cultural expectations that are invested by those outside the worshipping congregation in baptism require constant local, pastoral negotiation between churches, clergy and the communities they serve. The socio-theological vision of Anglican polity therefore needs to understand its purpose and roots more deeply. Theology and the supernatural authority of the church, which she is called to embody and proclaim, cannot simply allow its ethos, identity and practice to be replaced with what I have consistently termed 'consecrated pragmatism'.¹ This is particularly the case in relation to the question of how people become part of a social and spiritual body, like the church, that is fundamentally inclusive in nature and character.

The current turn toward ecclesial organisation and management, focuses particular attention on how people become part of the church.² Specifically, it presses the question as to whether the global expressions of Anglican polity are distinctive, bounded and overtly member-based organisations in character, seeking clarity of identity, or whether they are broader social and sacramental institutions to which a much wider public relates in a variety of ways. I am mindful that most ecclesial ecologies will contain both of these elements and will be a blend of those who feel a sense of strong attachment (often expressed

as 'membership'), and those whose basically affirmative relationship to the church involves a more variegated form of commitment. My concern is with the concept of membership in Anglican polity as a whole.³ If the church is consumed with its own managerial and organisational goals, including increasing its own numerical growth and disciplining its members, it will have lost its soul. I hold, in contrast, that global Anglican polity posits an incorporative model of church; a non-member-based institution that seeks to serve society as a whole, rather than a member-based organisation that primarily exists for its committed subscribers.

In her prescient book, *The Precarious Organisation*,⁴ the Dutch sociologist and ecclesiologist Mady Thung suggests that national churches in Northern Europe have come under increasing pressure in the post-war years to become self-consciously 'organisations', marked by 'nervous activity and hectic programmes ... constantly try[ing] to engage' their members in an attempt to reach 'non-members'. She contrasts the 'organisational' model and its frenetic activism with the 'institutional' model of the church – the latter offering, instead, contemplative, aesthetic and liturgical models that take longer to grow and are often latent for significant periods of time, but which may be more culturally resilient and conducive than those of the activist-organisational model. Thung concludes her book by suggesting that the model being adopted by many national churches – a kind of missional 'organisation-activist' approach – is what drives the population away. It leads, logically, to sectarianism.

Church-going in Anglican polity has generally been a matter of relating to and inhabiting a complex institution, where the idea of 'membership' of a subscriber-based organisation is seen as a more 'Congregationalist' kind of

ecclesiology. I mean no disrespect to Non-Conformist chapels and congregations here. I simply draw attention to the fact that a parish church exists for the spiritual wellbeing of the whole community, and it serves that community independently of any subscription or support that the people in the community might provide. This is by no means a unique characteristic of Anglicanism. It is the form of ministry exercised by ecumenical chaplains in prisons, hospitals, schools and colleges, the armed services and other arenas, where the ministers elect to serve the whole body, not merely the committed minority. And amid the general anxiety about apparently declining numbers of attendees at regular Sunday worship in the Church of England, at least one group of churches has bucked the trend: the cathedrals. Consistently, the numbers worshipping in English Anglican cathedrals have been resilient, immune to the decline seen elsewhere. Indeed, many cathedrals report an increase in the number of worshippers. But what do these numbers actually show?

As with much statistical analysis, it is the story behind the numbers that tells us how to interpret the bare arithmetic. To understand the growth of worshippers in cathedrals, one needs to have some grasp of the nuanced ecology of English church-going. Social exchange theory can help with such interpretation. Classic cathedral worship is typically a 'low threshold' pursuit – that is to say, anyone can come, without any need or pressure to join a rota, group, class or any other supplementary activity. However, 'low threshold' is most likely combined with 'high reward': the music will invariably be superb, the preaching of a consistently high calibre and the liturgy predictable and elegant. In contrast, the dominant preferred ecclesial model in the Church of England today is 'high threshold and high reward'. The justification for this formula is usually the priority of 'discipleship', which is preferred to anything that smacks of vicarious religion, or

a lack of clarity in matters of belief. 'High-threshold/ high-reward' churches will offer attendees a rich menu and a variety of groups and activities that will be expected to join. The committed can be identified easily enough – by the range and scale of their involvement in groups and activities. Those who are less involved will be deemed to be, by the same token, less committed. Thresholds for joining and participating are therefore set deliberately high, and this often manifests itself in areas such as restrictive practices in respect of baptisms and marriages, and can even extend, occasionally, to restricting funerals to 'members'.⁵

The problem with the 'High-Threshold-High-Reward' churches is that, whilst there is a stress on discipleship and commitment, the model of church being offered is unavoidably narrow. Moreover, the concentration of resources and monies in these ecclesial paradigms means that other churches – I do not include cathedrals here – can quickly develop into 'High-Threshold-Low-Reward' churches. By that, I mean that the instinct of affirming the church as being for everyone in the community, whilst laudable, comes as a cost that falls only on a few. The quality and quantity of worship, pastoral ministry and more besides, can only operate if a few will fund this for the many. This is by no means certain.

There is a further complication to be mindful of here. The emerging millennial generation increasingly characterise themselves as 'spiritual but not religious', and when asked to describe their nascent religious or denominational roots or 'home', choose to say 'none'. The rise of the 'Nones' is a significant challenge to all forms of ecclesial polity and expressions of theology. Despite being, as a generation, more sensitive to faiths than previous eras, 'Nones' are often characterised as insouciant and indifferent towards the church, which then plays

into the hands of those who want to turn all church attendees into explicit 'disciples' – preferring the 'High-Threshold-High-Reward' pattern of polity. This takes the church further way from public life, and tends toward sectarianism. Slow, 'low-threshold' churches that might appeal to the young as epiphanies of spirituality and transcendent encounter are at risk here, as their engagement with 'Nones' does not quickly seek to convert them – but does offer a viable base and resource from which to continue to be 'spiritual-but-not-religious'.⁶ Emerging concepts of membership and belonging in relation to churches are now patently more complex.

That said, the neo-conservative revolution of the last fifty years have seen both the High and Low wings of Anglicanism entirely out-narrate the middle ground (i.e. Broad Church), and then move on to re-brand the moderate-middle as 'liberal'. In turn, the very term 'liberal' was swiftly allotted a consistently negative value in ecclesial climes. For Catholic conservatives, and a handful of conservative Evangelicals, this arguably began with 'Gender Wars' (i.e. the debate on the ordination of women). The vast majority of clergy and laity who desired (and eventually voted for) women priests found themselves re-positioned as 'liberals'. On sexuality, a gradual acceptance of lesbian, gay and bisexual Christians, and an eventual (still growing) acceptance of same-sex marriages has also led to the Broad Church and middle ground being labelled, once again, negatively, as 'liberal'.

What is intriguing in all of this is that the Broad Church element within Anglicanism normally holds sensible, moderate and accommodating views on gender, and progressive (note, not radical or liberal) views on sexuality.⁷ The Broad Church, such as it is, tends to be entirely orthodox on creeds, doctrines

(e.g. the physical resurrection of Jesus), articles of faith, liturgical proclivities, church polity, Christian practice and canon law. It practises what many term 'generous orthodoxy'. The Broad Church elements within Anglicanism tend to be, if anything, theologically conservative. And they view the High and Low elements of the church as rather more sectarian – and inclined towards 'membership-speak' – than the more inclusive, 'public' ministry that they would seek to embody and practice.

In terms of membership of the church, therefore, the post-war story of English Anglicanism has witnessed the slow accretion of greater density towards the wings: a density, moreover, consisting not merely of numbers, but also of theological and ecclesiological intensity. Both wings – depending on whether one refers to them as high and low, evangelical and catholic – have tended to be more prescriptive about what constitutes 'membership' (not only of their own respective groups and societies, but also wider membership of the church), have been zealous on areas such as liturgy, reform and divisive debates, such as those on sexuality and gender. In this, 'baptism' as means of incorporation within the church, and symbolically too in being named to wider society, has become a rite that has attracted wider ecclesial collateral. Specifically, is 'Christening' a shared social-sacramental covenant between church and world, and God and people? Or, rather, as the high and low, or evangelical and catholic wings tend to claim, a private rite, performed in public, that inducts individuals into something more obviously bounded, organisational and contained? In addressing this issue, we remain mindful of studies that speak of baptism differently, namely as the rite performed by and in the church that confers a name and social status on the child in question. So through baptism and naming,

the child becomes not only a member of the church, but also a member of the broader social community.⁸

Thung concludes her work with something of a prophetic warning to churches, and here I include global Anglicanism. She notes the inevitability of churches needing to become more organised, and more like organisations, replete with plans for numerical growth and measurable impact. But Mady Thung also sounds a note of caution, namely that every step churches take *towards* the tighter and clearer forms of organisation, coupled to overt mission and evangelism, is one further step *away* from the public at large, who, she claims, are looking for more open forms of institutional life, which offer more by way of obliquity than clarity. Ultimately, Anglicanism's pastoral practice, mission and ministry does not have its identity rooted in being an eclectic and selective member-based organisation, requiring detailed confessional subscription from believers. Anglicanism is, rather, far broader: an institutional body that has many kinds of support and supporters, though with room still for those who want to regard themselves as insider-subscribers. Anglicanism offers itself to the world on these terms, and in so doing, is an oblique foretaste of the inclusive Kingdom of God, embodied in Jesus Christ.

ENDNOTES

¹ For my earliest discussion of this, see Martyn Percy, 'Consecrated Pragmatism', *Anvil*, Volume 14, No. 1, 1997, pp. 18-28.

² The background to the distinction between organisation and institution lies in the writings of Philip Selznick. For a discussion of his work in this field, see Martin Krygier, *Philip Selznick: Ideals in the World*, Stanford: Stanford University Law Books, 2012.

³ On this, see Paul Avis (ed.), *The Journey of Christian Initiation: Theological and Pastoral Perspectives* (London: Church House Publishing, 2011). See also M. Percy, *Shaping the Church: The Promise of Implicit Theology* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), for a detailed discussion of baptism as a broader cultural practice, which enables the child (i.e., having been 'blessed' and 'christened') to be received back into a local community as a recognised and publicly affirmed member of that society. For a closer ethnographic study of this phenomenon, rooted in the fishing village of Staithes on the NE coast of England, see David Clark, *Between Pulpit and Pew*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

⁴ Mady Thung, *The Precarious Organisation: Sociological Explorations of the Church's Mission and Structure* (The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1976).

⁵ This is more subtle cultural-theological issue than space permits to explore here, but for further discussion, see John Shelton Reed, *Glorious Battle: The Cultural politics of Victorian Anglo-Catholicism*, (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 1996), and W.S.F. Pickering, *Anglo-Catholicism: A Study in Religious Ambiguity*, London: SPCK, 1989).

⁶ On this, see Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers is Telling Us about the American Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

⁷ For some further discussion of this, see M. Percy, *The Future Shapes of Anglicanism: Currents, Contours, Charts* (London: Routledge, 2017). For more historical perspectives, see W. J. Conybeare, 'Church Parties' (1853), included in *Essays Ecclesiastical and Social* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, 1855) and C. R. Sanders, *Coleridge and the Broad Church Movement* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1942).

⁸ See For a closer ethnographic study of this phenomenon, see David Clark, *Between Pulpit and Pew*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).