

Editorial

Scepticism, History and Listening

Bruce Kaye

The issues currently before worldwide Anglicanism are quite novel in the sense that never before have Anglicans been so widely dispersed around the world and located in such diverse circumstances and yet at the same time, because of modern technology, been so immediately aware of each other. This connection, of course, is restricted to certain classes of people who have the resources and access to the means of communication and to that extent this new media community has some qualities which probably derive from the medium of communication. The Windsor Report comments on the significance of this new technology and its relation to the 'troubles' between Anglicans.

While this novelty is important and needs to be seriously addressed there is also a sense in which the Anglican tradition itself has contributed to these difficulties. Let me illustrate with a point from the General Introduction to that wonderful book *Love's Redeeming Work: The Anglican Quest for Holiness*. This book presents texts from Anglican history on the theme of holiness. In the General Introduction, apparently written by Rowan Williams, two kinds of scepticism are noted. First, a self-protective scepticism born of an experience of uncertainty in getting things right. A second scepticism is more reflective. If I can deceive myself then 'I need the presence of history and community to check my self-obsessions.'¹ This kind of scepticism, it was said, is very characteristic of Anglican style. Two sources in the reformation part of the Anglican tradition were offered to explain this. A conviction that our fallen condition affects our capacity for learning and knowing, and secondly that the reformation theologians rejected the idea that faith could be contained within a particular cleric arena. Rather, for the reformation theologians 'faith transformed the relations of human beings as they concretely existed in family

1. Geoffrey Rowell, Kenneth E. Stevenson and Rowan Williams, *Love's Redeeming Work: The Anglican Quest for Holiness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. xxv.

and society'.² These insights could also be found elsewhere in the history of Anglicanism, for example in the writings of the Venerable Bede.

This kind of 'scepticism' could also be spoken of in terms of humility or reticence. It is to be found in the Windsor Report with its emphasis on conversation and listening. We are invited to listen because we may not have the whole truth, or perceive the particular qualities of the relations of human beings, as they concretely exist in family and society, which an Anglican faith is called to transform.

In the global cyber community of statement and declaration which has emerged we could be forgiven for thinking that the turmoil in the Anglican Communion is to be understood in terms of power relations; Canterbury has the history and traditions, Lagos the numbers and New York the money. Some public statements in recent times have looked a little like this kind of power play. The Windsor Report and *Love's Redeeming Work* point us in a different and better direction.

However, if we take the point of *Love's Redeeming Work* seriously — that we are called in Anglican faith to transform the relations of human beings as they concretely exist in family and society — then differences within the worldwide community will inevitably arise because Anglicans live out their faith in contexts where these concrete expressions are different. The history of Anglicanism in the last two hundred years has amply demonstrated this process.

Contextualization is not the unique preserve of Anglicans, even though it may be a characteristic vocation. In a new book edited by John Parratt we have an exposition of the issues and a tour of regional expressions. John Parratt introduces the question in terms of Third World theologies which bear regional markers: Latin America, an emphasis on liberation in the socio-political and economic dimension; Africa, the integrity of indigenous cultures and traditions; Asia, the need to do theology in a religiously plural environment.³ In these circumstances difference comes from faithfulness to the originating impulse as it is expressed in different circumstances.

It is a point worth bearing in mind in the present debates about the nature of Anglicanism, and it relates to the point made by Rowan Williams that Anglican scepticism is a habit of the heart that should condition our own expressions and actions. Such a humility will move Anglicans to patience and to listening and in that process to value and to cultivate in the community an imagination that can point to ways in which we can

2. Rowell *et al.*, *Love's Redeeming Work*, p. xxv.

3. John Parratt (ed.), *An Introduction to Third World Theologies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 11.

have enough confidence as a worldwide community to live by faith, not by sight, and walk patiently before our God.

If such qualities are indeed characteristically Anglican then we can learn from the long history of Anglican tradition something of power for tomorrow's futures.

This issue of the *Journal of Anglican Studies* indeed draws on aspects of the tradition to highlight elements of these themes. Rene Kollar points out the influence of Victorian social assumptions on Anglicans in the regard to the confessional; Martyn Percy moves along themes of faithfulness, certainty and order in his analysis of Reform; and Barrington Bates opens up a question which tests assumptions about baptismal practice. Stephen Edmondson tackles issues of imagination in Coleridge, particularly in preaching. Kevin Ward continues our series on church-state relations in different parts of the world and in doing so highlights again the shaping influence of the structures and assumptions of the local context.

This issue of the *Journal of Anglican Studies* thus confronts the underlying questions of contemporary Anglicanism by revisiting the history of the tradition. These insights provide for that 'presence of history and community to check my self-obsessions', which is a mark of a characteristic Anglican scepticism, or should we say humility, which can thus contribute to a richer theological voice from the tradition.