

The death of liberal Anglicanism?

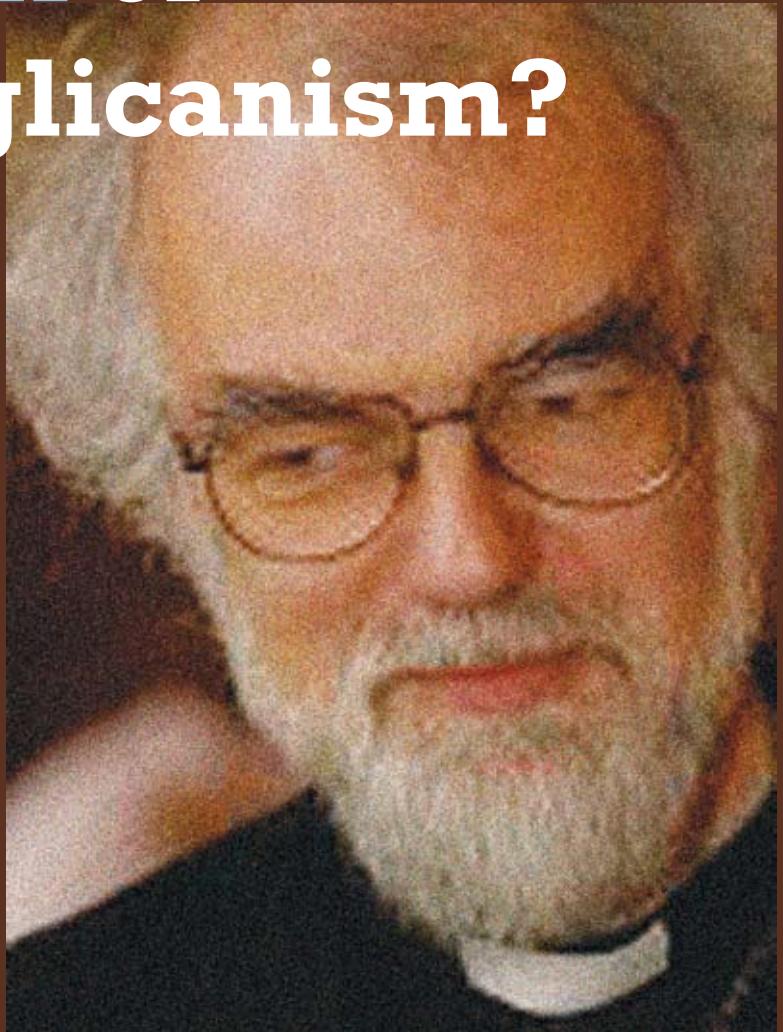
Lynda Patterson examines the reasons for the decline of the Anglican liberal tradition, and argues that liberals must now think seriously about their distinctive theology...

THE distinctive feature of Anglicanism, said the British journalist Jeremy Paxman more than a decade ago, is its apparent conviction that no dispute is too serious to be resolved over a cup of tea in the vicar's study. It is the tired old caricature of a church existing on a diet of polite innuendo and crippling reticence. As far as I am aware, Paxman has never retracted his statement, despite all the recent evidence of an Anglican Church engaged in the slow and bloody process of amputating its own limbs. For those, mostly outside the church, wedded to the idea that it is an institution which behaves nicely and keeps its voice down, this must come as something of a shock – as if a maiden aunt has revealed a secret life as a samurai.

In the current struggle for the right to define Anglicanism, there is an obvious casualty. One of the developments of the last few decades is the decline of the Anglican liberal tradition. It used to hold the whole of the broad middle ground within the church, a sceptical buffer between evangelical enthusiasm on one side and catholic enthusiasm on the other. It was the liberal broad church tradition which contained that delicately balanced part of the church that is so difficult to explain to those outside it.

In a liberal Anglican understanding, the church experienced the Reformation, yet kept a hold of the apostolic ministry of bishop, priest and deacon; it continued the pattern of the old monastic offices but translated them into services of morning and evening prayer for the benefit of congregations. It recognised the centrality of the Bible, in a language which could be understood and interpreted by the whole church, but retained the sacraments, even the sacramental signs like the ring in marriage and the sign of the cross in baptism.

The balancing act was often dismissed as ill-defined woolliness, an unwillingness to commit to Protestantism or to Rome. In fact, it made a careful theological statement about the nature of Anglicanism. With no body of systematic theology comparable to Calvin's Institutes or Aquinas's Summa, Anglican orthodoxy was not defined by conforming to a set of core principles or confessional statements. Anglicanism has always been better at describing the outline of its traditions than identifying a centre; you can call yourself an Anglican, according to the liberal tradition, as long as you fall within its generous margins.



What the current crisis suggests is that this balance has been lost, and the broad middle ground is being gradually washed away.

The decline of liberal Anglicanism has been a slow erosion, not a dramatic collapse. The first signs became obvious about 20 years ago, with the resurgence of evangelicalism as a serious theological force. Responses from other wings of the church were muted, and liberal theologians like Don Cupitt looked very much as if they had thrown in the towel and forfeited the game to secular culture once and for all. In reaction, some liberals reconnected with the catholic tradition of Anglicanism. One notable example was Rowan Williams, at the forefront of a new and revitalised movement which married a liberal social and theological conscience with catholic liturgical practice.

For a while, the catholic sort of liberalism looked vibrant. It shook up a dusty Anglo-Catholic tradition and added depth to sometimes-tentative liberal theology. Then came the relentless rise of the gay issue, which revealed the strength and intractability of the conservative elements in the church and the potential fissures in the Anglican Communion, Liberal catholics were forced to make a choice. Do you take the catholic option, and sacrifice your belief in the rightness of ordaining homosexual clergy for the sake of the unity of the church? Or are you at heart a liberal, prepared to sit

lightly to the authority of the church when it proves itself to be structurally homophobic? It seems that you can longer have it both ways, and it has proved an agonising decision for some. For Rowan Williams, who once championed gay ordination, it seems that catholicism now trumps liberalism. However necessary the reform might be, and however just its principles, it cannot be allowed to endanger the unity of the church.

For those of us who consider ourselves liberals, there is something disorientating about the current state of Anglicanism. The rug seems to have been pulled from under our feet. We find ourselves increasingly squeezed between two competing conservatisms. There is an evangelical one which seems determined to implant a rule book of doctrinal and moral orthodoxy at the centre of Anglicanism. There is a catholic one committed to preserving the unity of the church by re-inventing the primates as a sort of Anglican curia. A church which seemed to have room for diverse expressions of Christian faith is solidifying around us into something rigid and unfriendly. What happened to the Anglican habit of cultural sensitivity and intellectual flexibility?

If we are honest, we liberals have to shoulder some of the blame for the loss. The liberal tradition had settled down into something which looked suspiciously like complacency. Even the early stirrings of the debate on homosexuality seemed to pose no serious threat. It had long been the logic of Anglicanism that reform movements eventually – if often with painful slowness – won the day. The church’s position on the ordination of practising homosexuals looked as if it was temporary. It was assumed that evangelical objections were an attempt to resist change, and in the longer term, they would eventually be worn down.

There is a story, possibly apocryphal, about the press officer of the Diocese of New Hampshire who was approached by a journalist on the day of Gene Robinson’s election, and asked about its potential impact. She is said to have replied that the story was very likely to make the local television news that evening, and might even be reported nationally. In the light of everything which has happened since, this shows an almost touching naiveté.

Those of us on the liberal wing of the church also show some signs of neglecting to take our theology seriously enough. Part of the distinctive calling of the liberal tradition is learning to speak with secular culture in a language it can understand. At best, there is a commitment to theological hospitality, to encouraging those exploring the Christian faith whose search starts not from the Bible or the doctrines of the church, but from the most sensitive and creative parts of their own experience.

In an effort to avoid the sort of position which rejects everything outside the church, or everything not explicitly authorised by the Bible, we can end up carelessly affirming every aspect of secular culture. There is no room left to critique its injustices and its excesses. Our task is to witness to God’s transforming power, but sometimes we have lost sight of the Gospel’s subversive edge.

It is not yet clear whether, to borrow from Mark Twain, the death of Anglican liberalism is exaggerated. Most of us speak and listen mainly to the people who share our worldview, and assume that it is the natural one to belong to. It’s easy to fall into a sort of anxiety, because the particular picture of the church, of holy life, of effective mission, which we subscribe to doesn’t seem to be getting the hearing it deserves. We end up with a situation where everyone believes they are a persecuted minority.

We have to be committed to keeping the conversation going with those whose vision of the church we find peculiar or bewildering or infuriating. But it is also essential at this point for liberals to think seriously about their distinctive theology and be prepared to articulate it more clearly than we have done in the past. The four areas below are suggested starting points for dialogue:

The place of the Bible

A liberal theology of Scripture must address the misconception that you can take the Bible seriously only if you take it literally, as if it were an oracle. The text of the Bible takes time to let its meaning unfold, and requires careful, repeated, prayerful reading. It doesn’t immediately translate into a series of easily digestible ideas and simple concepts. We have to resist the urge to simplify what we find in Scripture, or to domesticate it in a way which fudges its challenge to us. The Bible is intractably historical; it calls us, in the words of Rowan Williams, to “the steady and radical exposure to the fundamental events of the Christian faith, to God’s love made visible in Jesus of Nazareth.”

The centrality of grace

Any theology must take the grace of God, God’s disarming welcome, seriously. Liberals need to address the tendency to speak enthusiastically about the universal love of God, which meets people in all circumstances of their lives, but to downplay the particular aspect of God’s love, which is learned only in a specific relationship with the crucified and risen Christ. >>

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Whose responsibility is she?

IMAGINE that a 75-year-old woman falls on the way home and grazes her knee. She is shaken but gets the help of a neighbour who cleans her up and applies a band-aid.

That would have been the end of the story if another elderly woman had not heard about the fall and contacted someone at the church where they both regularly worship. The parish nurse visits shortly after and by doing a holistic health check realises that this woman's diabetes is out of control. Also, she is getting forgetful about regular meals and medication. Since her family live in another city, they cannot pick up these clues.

Others in the congregation see her in her Sunday best, but since she is unaware that she needs support, she does not seek it. She has not been to her GP recently, and her minister notes that she is content and receives communion regularly.

If she had not fallen, her health would have deteriorated anyway and someone would have eventually noticed. But whose responsibility is she? Under our current health system most of us are now expected to be responsible for our own health.

Years ago the church provided health care through monasteries, missions and hospitals. Today the State (through District Health Boards and PHOs) is the main health provider. Has the church abdicated its concern for the health of those in the community and focussed on the spiritual care available through hospital chaplains and priests? Christian health professionals mostly work within the health system and often have to focus on health in a fragmented way.

The parish nurse in the above scenario was able to provide truly holistic care. With the woman's permission, the nurse went with her to the GP who was able to address the physical concerns. Eventually, too, the nurse shared concerns with her son and her minister.

The woman continued to live safely in her community with extra support until a resthome became a better option. Her quality of life was maintained and she continued to give as well as receive love from her fellowship.

Parish nursing follows Jesus' ministry of healing. It has been operating in New Zealand since about 1997, and works alongside other health professionals and in ministry teams to provide truly holistic care.

It involves the faith community by seeking prayers and practical forms of caring. It is professional and requires registered nurses who have received special training. It is a form of primary health care that goes out to those in need rather than asking them to attend the health specialist.

More information about this work can be found on www.faithnursing.co.nz or by writing to the National Coordinator, NZFCNA, Box 64, Kaiapoi.

admin.faithnursing@xtra.co.nz

"Gaining Altitude" is the title of a parish nursing conference to be held at Vaughan Park from October 16-18. Guest speakers include Dr Anne van Loon from Australia and Rev Debbie Hodge from the UK.

Whose responsibility is the old woman? Maybe if you are called to parish nursing, she is yours. •

– Elaine Tyrrell

The importance of mission

The territory in which religious literacy can be taken for granted has shrunk vastly – Christian faith has lost what cultural purchase it once had in this country. The impression gained from secular media in New Zealand – with a few exceptions – is that faith is a leisure activity about as diverting as needlework, and considerably less morally serious than rugby. The liberal tradition has to think critically about the particular ways it can engage in dialogue with the complex web of attitudes and practices which make up contemporary culture, without knee-jerk affirmation or patronising rejection.

The future of ecclesiology

The coming 12 months are crucial for the Anglican Communion. Next year's Lambeth Conference is shaping up to be the Moscow Olympics of Anglicanism. Despite Rowan Williams' careful vetting of invitations to exclude Bishops Gene Robinson and Martyn Minns, there are already mutterings of dissatisfaction. The Synod of the Diocese of Sydney has expressed its

displeasure with the failure to weed out all those involved in Gene Robinson's consecration, and requested its archbishop and bishops not to attend; we can expect the response of the Episcopal Church in due course.

Rowan Williams' insistence that the Anglican Communion must keep trying to stay together sounds increasingly desperate. A growing movement in Britain has come to regard a global Communion as an unnecessary burden – the ungrateful children fathered by the Church of England during its colonial adventures. One of the delegates at the 2006 C of E General Synod, Wesley Carr, the former Dean of Westminster Abbey, grasped the nettle. Individual provinces must not go with a global drift that damages them, he said. The loosening, or temporary eclipse, of the Anglican Communion would be a price worth paying: "Nothing would be lost if the Anglican Communion ceased to exist for a while."

Those of us who identify as liberal have some hard theology to do on the nature of Communion. What is the church, and what does it mean to belong to it? What is the value of the

Anglican Communion? Should we compromise our principles to maintain its unity?

To my mind, what makes a church is the call of Jesus Christ, and our ability, helped by God's grace, to recognise that call in each other. It is tempting to see the church as a series of competing parties, and to understand our task as securing the territory for our particular party. That is a comfortable position, but the great 19th-century theologian F. D. Maurice pointed out its critical flaw: all parties are partial and end by being sectarian. We are placed in the church with those whom we would never choose and expected to learn from them. Maurice saw Anglicanism as needing the missionary zeal of the evangelical, the sacramental worship and sense of order of the catholic, and the liberal concern for critical dialogue with contemporary culture. But all were held within the structure of the reformed catholicism, in a balance that has been the genius of Anglicanism. •

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