



From the Editor

After Heartbreak: Anglicanism and the End of Christendom

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ABSTRACT

The Church of England is experiencing a significant decline in membership and in other forms of influence and engagement, whose implications may have consequences for the Anglican Communion as a whole. The qualitative as well as quantitative changes suggest the need for a renewal of Anglican public theology that maintains a positive account of the relationship between church and world while letting go the expectation of privilege and power. Articles in this issue of the *Journal of Anglican Studies* address the public character of Christianity in Britain after Christendom.

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Anglicanism and Christendom

The emergence of Christianity from early obscurity and marginalization into the prominence and centrality often associated with the conversion of Constantine has shaped the church universal, and Anglicanism in particular. Among other things it has necessarily been a foundational element in how Christians spoke to and about society itself.

Prior to Constantine, there had of course been a Christian social vision, but it tended to be apocalyptic and separatist; early Christians like Paul or Tertullian dreamed of a social and indeed cosmic reality transformed in Christ, but envisioned it as enacted on a somewhat different plane, and via different characters, from those familiar in the forum or the agora. When these arenas themselves came to reflect majority Christian influence, however, the concrete public sphere was

indeed where the social vision of the church was articulated as well as enacted. This is certainly the case for the Church of England, and consequently often for Anglicanism as a whole.

Although its demise is sometimes now celebrated, Christendom brought with it many things that Christians of most types and traditions and not least Anglicans still take for granted, or at least want. The great historic achievements and present realities of Christian art and intellect, and of ethics and liturgy, are hard to imagine having come into being without the privilege associated with majority status or mainstream engagement.

During Christendom, the capacity of Christians to think about and act on the social fabric itself also assumed a close if not always precise relationship between church and society. The connection has not only implied material influence and numerical strength, but has also undergirded some of the most important and influential Anglican theology up to the present, not least those strands that included strong and critical social engagement, whether evangelical, broad or catholic. Anglican theology, then, like its aesthetic and performative glories, owes much to this fading or broken synthesis. How will it have to change, and how can it retain the desirable elements of strong and positive engagement with society as a whole?

The Church in England

The scope of Anglicanism is unmistakably global, and recent discourse has come to question the traditional Anglican focus on or even deference to English and practice.¹ The Church of England of course never had juridical authority over others in the Communion, and even its moral authority may now be weakened in some important respects, both for good and ill. Yet the fact that all Anglicans belong to a tradition that stemmed in whole or part from the faith and witness of the English Church means that body retains an importance for the rest, based not on mere nostalgia, or even on 'bonds of affection', and certainly not on formal jurisdiction, but on history itself. What happens in the Church of England may happen to the rest of us, whatever else may happen too.

Christendom and all that went with it is of course now under pressure, not least and perhaps paradigmatically in Britain. The essays

1. The unmistakable rise in number, and influence within the Communion and its instruments of unity, of Anglicans in other countries is clear; for thoughtful reflections see Ian T. Douglas and Kwok Pui-Lan (eds.), *Beyond Colonial Anglicanism: The Anglican Communion in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Church Publishing, 2001).

in this issue focus on how churches in Britain can continue to speak with a public character, but their relevance is more than local. That similar issues are relevant in different parts of the West goes without saying; yet even the so-called 'Global South' and its churches may not really be insulated from the same social and intellectual currents. Glib claims or assumptions to the contrary will surely come under more and more pressure in years to come. Having been a crucible of Anglican Christianity, England is now also becoming a laboratory for how Anglicanism could survive and engage a post-Christian reality.

Breaking the Heart of the Church

Changes in religious practice and affiliation in England, and in Britain as a whole, have been profound. Stories of institutional decline, most obvious in terms of attendance and other statistical measures of participation, are particularly stark at present. There are alarmist voices in public discourse, suggesting in regard to observed numerical collapse that 'it has all happened so quickly'.²

Alarmism about ecclesial decline and fall is, however, perennial, even though some of the present reality is unique. If things are happening quickly, they did not begin to happen recently. Some of the trends regarding English Christianity have probably become more obvious at a human level, because they are cumulative. A recent acceleration in decline of church attendance and membership is more existentially shocking than factually surprising, having been all but inevitable as trends identified long ago worked themselves out; in 2010, for instance, the British Social Attitudes survey was already reporting that affiliation with the Church of England had halved since 1983 as a proportion of the population, with continued change likely within a pattern of generational replacement.³

But observers of more substance have seen these trends coming for much longer still, not only in England but for the West as a whole, and would remind us that this is not just a fall in numbers but a change whose significance for faith and meaning in the public square, as otherwise, is still working its way out. This is not just the change celebrated now in the twenty-first century by prosaic critics like

2. Damian Thompson, '2067: The End of British Christianity', available at: <http://www.spectator.co.uk/features/9555222/2067-the-end-of-british-christianity/> (accessed 30 June 2015).

3. Lucy Lee, 'Religion: Losing Faith', *British Social Attitudes* 28 (2011), pp. 173-84.

Richard Dawkins, but that looked for in the nineteenth by more formidable thinkers such as Marx, Nietzsche and Freud. In the twentieth, in and after the great wars that exposed some Christian compliance with national projects of the Western powers at their worst, the most impressive Christian voices were not apologists but advocates and heralds of further change, such as Barth and Bonhoeffer.

A few Anglicans echoed such prophetic and oppositional notes, and not only proclaimed but celebrated the coming marginalization of the church, but public voices of this type were relatively few in that period.⁴ The typical canon of Anglican public theologians over the last century or so, however – Maurice, Gore, Temple – were more likely to be concerned with what the Gospel might still demand of a nation whose predilection was, or at least could or should be, to listen. Even prophets, after all, tend to recall a people to a faith once professed; calls to repent and return sound strange to ears that had never heard the message to begin with.

Valuable as these voices are, however, it is becoming evident that they are in many ways attuned to assumptions that no longer hold, even in Britain. There is a need for other perspectives for a renewed Anglican social vision. The emergence of postcolonial voices in Anglican as in other contexts will certainly become more important as a somewhat different reflection from outside, as well as after, Christendom.⁵ Yet there had also been Anglican and particularly English commentators who, considerably earlier in the twentieth century, acknowledged that the relationship between the church and its public was shifting in ways profound and difficult, without however adopting a prophetic stridency or a theology of crisis. Gabriel Hebert SSM, for instance, the subject of an article in this issue, represents a tendency for Anglican theologians associated with the liturgical movement to see secularization in the early-mid twentieth century as both gift and challenge. Sacramental and liturgical renewal, with attention to ancient models, offered a new sense of the distinctiveness of Christian vocation, expressed in the heart of ecclesial life.⁶ This implied,

4. The American lay theologian William Stringfellow is one strong example.

5. Christopher Duraisingh, 'Toward a Postcolonial Re-Visioning of the Church's Faith, Witness, and Communion', in Ian T. Douglas and Kwok Pui-Lan (eds.), *Beyond Colonial Anglicanism: The Anglican Communion in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Church Publishing, 2001), pp. 337-68.

6. Philip J. Morton, 'That They May All Be One: Christian Unity in the Work of A.G. Hebert SSM, and Its Implications Today', *Journal of Anglican Studies* FirstView (November 2014), pp. 1-20, doi: 10.1017/S1740355314000199.

however, clear acknowledgement of a massive social and ecclesial change already in course.

Michael Ramsey, Archbishop of Canterbury from 1961 to 1974, is another case in point. His time in office was hardly the beginning of the phenomenon of secularization, but included a recognition of that reality and of cultural ferment, during and after which it was clear that the place of the church would not be the same again. Ramsey's own wisdom was not lacking in the theological virtue of hope, but it was hardly 'optimistic' in usual terms. In an interview given before his translation to Canterbury, he was asked about his sense of taking on the office:

People ask me, sometimes, if I am in good heart about being Archbishop ... My answer is 'Yes' ... But the phrase 'in good heart', gives me pause, because after all, we are here as a church to represent Christ crucified and the compassion of Christ crucified before the world. And, because that is so, it may be the will of God that our church should have its heart broken and perhaps the heart of its Archbishop broken with it.⁷

Such thoughts about the nature of the church could well be offered in any place and time, but Ramsey's notion that the church might have its heart broken had a more specific meaning in that context. This was a hint that being an established church in a secularizing society would entail a loss of privileged status and consignment to the margins. It did not, however, imply any necessary retreat from public engagement for the Church of England, as his episcopate showed. The character of this 'heartbreak' stemmed from the fact that the church had given itself to the world in a specific way, in the form of a particular people and nation, irretrievably; its failure would be more than evidence of a tactical or historical mistake, but a sacramental sign of how, after Christendom, the church exists in the world precisely as broken.

After Christendom

Ramsey's example at least hints at the need for and possibility of an Anglican approach to theology, and particularly to social thought and public theology, which neither ignores the crisis, nor abandons the positive and strong engagement with human life, science, and culture that has characterized Anglicanism at its best. This entails some consideration of how the passage out of Christendom will actually

7. From the *Church Times*, 9 June 1961; cited in Alan Wilkinson, 'Ramsey, (Arthur) Michael, Baron Ramsey of Canterbury (1904–1988)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); available at: <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/40002> (accessed 28 June 2015).

work, and what will be required after it. For the changed reality of secularization presents not only the bare fact of a smaller and weaker church, but the challenge of a different way of thinking about how to speak to that reality. In particular it begs the question of how the church could speak from amid the ruins of its own establishment in and to a public that no longer assumes its relevance or authority.

This task remains to be grasped, around the Communion and not in Britain alone. Mission, to take one example of recent and influential theological reflection, has often been defined for Anglicans in recent years in terms of the often-quoted 'five marks'. Mission as the proclamation of good news and making of faithful disciples, but also as action and advocacy for alleviation of suffering, witness for justice, and safeguarding of environmental sustainability, might initially seem to be given new impetus and relevance in a world more obviously unaware of the Gospel.⁸ The period in which this formulation was composed and become widely known to Anglicans is, however, that same time across which the Church of England's own numbers have halved. This sense of mission has therefore been carefully defined while fewer and fewer people were ever likely to hear it enunciated, or to regard either its content or its sources as important. There is reason to fear that some uses even of this good and important language, and of programs such as the much vaunted Decade of Evangelism, function as bulwarks against acknowledging the reality of change, whatever their merits. Put another way, it is far from clear how these marks of mission or the means of their achievement would differ, either for church or for world, as a result of the change that has accompanied their arrival.

The passage out of Christendom thus presents a continuing challenge for Anglicans. If Christendom lies now in ruins (or if it is still collapsing actively), it may be tempting to return to more apocalyptic or separatist modes of discourse. If there is anything good to be found amid the ruins, it must include a sense of distinctive Christian vocation and identity. Some other Christian traditions with roots in the Reformation are more likely to reclaim the separatist strands in their own heritage as central; Anabaptist thought, for instance, has proved an attractive and impressive source of reflection for some within Anglicanism too, and

8. See Anglican Consultative Council (ed.), *Bonds of Affection: Proceedings of ACC-6, Badagry, Nigeria 1984* (London: Anglican Consultative Council, 2nd edn, 1985), p. 49; and Anglican Consultative Council and Roger Coleman (eds.), *Mission in a Broken World: Report of ACC-8, Wales 1990* (London: Anglican Consultative Council, 1990), p. 101.

cannot be lightly passed over.⁹ Yet even if these elements become more influential, they are arguably not what Anglicanism itself would bring most characteristically or distinctively to a renewed Christianity after the end of Christendom.

Whatever else, that end is not and cannot be a mere retreat to the time before Constantine. History is not running backwards at this point. And there are certainly dangers emerging with new narratives of Christian distinctiveness; for all the discomfort that some sincere Christians may experience when at odds with contemporary trends – for instance, where conscientiously held objections to same-sex marriage clash with now-established standards of human rights – this is no new ‘age of the martyrs’, in the West at least. The language of persecution can surely be reserved for the Christian victims of real terror, who are far more likely to be Copts than cake-shop owners.

The passage out of Christendom is thus not into the pre-Christian past, but into a post-Christian (as well as postcolonial) future. One of the obvious differences, to which insufficient attention has arguably been given so far, is the remaining historic impact of Christianity in the West, and elsewhere. The relics of the passing age do not cease to be significant simply because their origins lie in a different time, and may play their own part in the reconstruction of a new synthesis. Institutions such as parishes and schools may not have the same roles they once did, but can play new ones;¹⁰ the physical reality of architecture and less tangible aspects of cultural heritage are not meaningless but are the potentially significant remnants of costly if imperfect incarnation.¹¹ If these cannot be treated as they once were, and may be to many signs of heartbreak as well as of hope, neither can or should they be ignored.

These themes and others are also addressed in this issue in a set of articles, with a separate introduction from Peter Scott, produced from a conference on the theme of *Churches, Communities and Society* held in Manchester in 2013. Although that event had a wider scope than

9. Consider, for instance, the works of John Howard Yoder, still influential despite a personal history whose problematic character is becoming better known; and those of Stanley Hauerwas, who has a personal engagement with the worshipping life of Anglicanism.

10. Alison Milbank, ‘Deeper Magic: Re-Engaging the Virtues in School and Parish’, *Journal of Anglican Studies* FirstView (June 2015), pp. 1-15, doi: 10.1017/S1740355315000121; see also Andrew Davison and Alison Milbank, *For the Parish: A Critique of Fresh Expressions* (London: SCM Press, 2010).

11. William Whyte, ‘The Ethics of the Empty Church: Anglicanism’s Need for a Theology of Architecture’, *Journal of Anglican Studies* FirstView (July 2015), pp. 1-17, doi: 10.1017/S1740355315000108.

Anglicanism or English or British society, the essays here reflect that more specific context and ask some of the questions necessary for Anglicanism to consider its voice after Christendom. As Scott says, regarding the essays and the event that gave rise to them, 'British Christianities remain *public* in remarkably diverse ways ...'.¹²

This publicness is one gift from Christendom, and from the Church of England particularly, to postcolonial Anglicanism, and is not to be lightly rejected in favour of sectarian or introspective alternatives. The articles in this issue therefore offer insights that have significance for different national and ecclesial contexts as well, in the West and beyond it. They may be a contribution to that renewal of Christian and particularly Anglican discourse that can speak to a reality where the Gospel and its followers have left their mark and where, while numerical and political strength can no longer be assumed, hope and the work of the Spirit can.

12. Peter Manley Scott, 'Churches, Communities and Society', this issue, p. 153.