

**THE ROLE OF ESCHATOLOGY IN RECENT ANGLICAN
ECCLESIOLOGY**

A study of three recent International Doctrine Commission Reports

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Ever since Schleiermacher in the eighteenth century and Barth last century it has been difficult if not impossible to contemplate doing theology without recognising the dynamic relationship between the ecclesial tradition out of which the theological task is being enterprised and the shape and direction of the theological task itself.¹ Furthermore any consideration of ecclesiology that is to function in a particular church will need to engage with the particularities of the ecclesial tradition of that church. Different traditions of ecclesial practice and understanding emerged very early in Christianity and can be seen in the documents of the New Testament.² The pattern of practices in Corinth were different from those in Philippi and in Thessalonica, and these churches were founded by the same apostle. Different again

¹ See Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, ET of second German, 1928). Karl Barth's opening declaration in *Church Dogmatics, I,1, The Doctrine of the Word of God*, ET 1999, and authorised English translation of the 1932 German original, 'As a theological discipline dogmatics is the scientific self-examination of the Christian Church with respect to the content of its distinctive talk about God.' P.3

² See for example J D G Dunn, *The Parting of the Ways* (London: CSM Press, 1991). , JDG Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1977).

were the patterns in the Jerusalem church. Broader traditions emerged later and are part and parcel of any historical account of the history of Christianity.³

THE ANGLICAN PROJECT

In the case of Anglicanism its traditions go back to the formation of a more or less coherent Christian English nation and its subsequent occupation of the greater part of what we now call England.⁴ Adrian Hastings put the beginning point of this English tradition in the eighth century with Bede even though the nations of the land were not brought together until the ninth century under Alfred and then Harold.⁵

All Anglican churches around the world look to the long tradition of faith in this Church of England as the root from which they have sprung.

The present historical moment for Anglicanism is shaped by this long pedigree but also by the imperial expansion of Britain and especially the dramatic de-colonisation of the British Empire in the last sixty years.⁶ Alongside this decolonisation process went also the development of independent Anglican churches in the new nations. The present Anglican Communion of Churches is made up of these new churches, along with some older British colonies, churches founded by missionaries from the United State, some later American dependencies, which remain part of The Episcopal

³ See further Bruce Kaye, *Web of Meaning. The Role of Origins in Christian Faith* (Sydney: Aquila Press. Distributed from 2009 by Broughton Press, Melbourne, 2000). For the later period of late antiquity see especially P Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom. Triumph and Diversity Ad 200-1000* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).

⁴ See Bruce Kaye, *An Introduction to World Anglicanism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

⁵ A Hastings, *The Construction of Nationhood. Ethnicity, Religion and Nationalism* (Cambridge: CUP, 1997).

⁶ Kevin Ward, *A History of Global Anglicanism* (Cambridge, UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006). I T Douglas, *Fling out the Banner. The National Church Ideal and the Foreign Mission of the Episcopal Church* (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation 262, 1996).

, I T Douglas and Kwok Pui-lan Ed., *Beyond Colonial Anglicanism. The Anglican Communion in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Church Publishing, 2001).

Church, the Anglican Church in Korea, which began with Japanese missionaries when it was part of the empire of Japan, and some others.

They are also set within the dynamics of globalisation with its varied colours of new empires, immediacy of contact across vast distances, and the struggle to find faithful local identity.

The tension between local and global is inscribed deep in this moment of time and is reflected in the life of these Anglican churches around the world.⁷

In the last thirty years three international doctrine commissions have been established in the Anglican Communion to examine aspects of ecclesiology. Their reports have come out roughly every ten years: *For the Sake of the Kingdom (1987)*, *The Virginia Report (1998)* and *Communion Conflict and Hope (2008)*

Clearly the different tasks allocated to these three commissions inevitably moved them in different directions with different questions at the forefront of their reports. Even so it is not unreasonable to ask how they each construe their ecclesiological discussion in the framework of eschatology. After all the New Testament material is replete with notions of the Christian and the church living in the light of the coming kingdom of God. Within the Anglican tradition of liturgy and formularies eschatology occupies a significant position. How did these commissions handle it?

FOR THE SAKE OF THE KINGDOM (1987) was initiated by the Anglican Consultative⁸ Council with the brief

⁷ Miranda Katherine Hassett, *Anglican Communion in Crisis : How Episcopal Dissidents and Their African Allies Are Reshaping Anglicanism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

, Ephraim Radner and Philip Turner, *The Fate of Communion : The Agony of Anglicanism and the Future of a Global Church* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2006).

⁸ On the origins and role of the Anglican Consultative Council see Kaye, *World Anglicanism*, pp.130-140.

Church and Kingdom in Creation and Redemption, being a study of the relationship between the Church of God as experienced and the Kingdom of God as anticipated, with special reference to the diverse and changing cultural contexts in which the Gospel is proclaimed, received, and lived.⁹

The Commission was focussed on context and difference, witness and mission, with the challenge of adaptation urgently faced in the new provinces.

The report begins by asserting that their examination 'of Gospel and culture, church and context, has had to return constantly to the question of the meaning of that promised kingdom.'¹⁰ They argue that the meaning of God's promise of his Kingdom is empty if it does not speak to the here and now of the multitudinous local contexts which they are addressing. Those local events are to be 'seen as embodying and pointing to the kingdom in this or that bit of actual human history.'¹¹ In deploying the order of redemption language the report declares that the restoration of all things will be realized at the 'coming of Jesus in power and glory, when the whole creation would be transformed.'¹²

There is no yielding on the local as their point of attention and that in these specific local situations what 'constitutes the 'ultimate basis of judgment for Christian believers is Christ himself. He is the one who represents and embodies the world's (and the church's) transcendent horizon, the Kingdom of God.'¹³

They end up by saying that there is indeed a 'sovereign' truth, something beyond our

⁹ The report is available online at http://www.anglicancommunion.org/ministry/theological/iatdc/docs/for_the_sake_of_the_kingdom_1986.pdf

¹⁰ *For The Sake Of The Kingdom* para 4 . All three reports are divided into paragraphs and reference is made to the texts according to paragraph.

¹¹ *For The Sake Of The Kingdom* para 4

¹² *For The Sake of the Kingdom* 29

¹³ *For The Sake of the Kingdom* 58.. Of course within the church such an emphasis inevitably leads to different judgments and conflict. The Commission offers a lengthy discussion of pluralism and in the process rejects any relativism that is often associated with notions of plurality.

fashions and fancies, but that it is to be known only in the continuation of active human encounter. In this context there will be disagreement and conflict but in dealing with those conflicts they are very clear as to what is at stake. 'If we refuse such listening, we need to be called by the Gospel to conversion and repentance, renewed attention to the Gospel and to one another in the presence of the Gospel.'¹⁴

Throughout this report there is a clear pre-occupation with the situation on the ground for churches caught up in the vast political changes arising from the decolonization process. It is concerned to help forge ways of dealing with those new circumstances in a way that both recognizes this reality and the challenge to be faithful in Christian witness. Eschatological categories function here as the ultimate point of reference for faithfulness and underlines diverse responses in different local situations. The gospel is the sovereign truth that is to be embodied in each and every local situation. It is an emphasis on transcendence that shapes the argument and frames the interpretation of the challenge.

THE VIRGINIA REPORT (1998) was initiated through the Lambeth Conference and grew out of the Eames Commission on how to respond the ordination of women in some provinces.¹⁵ Its focus was on unity and institutions to maintain that unity and to do so in reference to the doctrine of the trinity and the theme of unity.

As a matter of urgency further exploration of the meaning and nature of communion with particular reference to the doctrine of the Trinity, the unity and order of the Church, and the unity and community of humanity.¹⁶

The terms of reference for the Commission were thus precise not only as to the subject matter, the understanding of communion, but also they were to approach the

¹⁴ *For The Sake of the Kingdom* 78

¹⁵ See Bruce Norman Kaye, *Conflict and the Practice of Christian Faith : The Anglican Experiment* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009).

¹⁶ The report is available online at <http://www.lambethconference.org/1998/documents/report-1.pdf>

question via the doctrine of the Trinity. The Commission simply accepted this restriction as to theological method. The Eames Commission had shaped a strategy for 'keeping the peace' and the IATDC followed this by making unity the key goal. They then addressed the whole issue on conflict in terms of containment and in the process unity came to be thought of in terms of agreement.

The argument of the report is finely tuned. Trinity is the key to ecclesiology. Communion is understood in terms of the model offered in the trinity, structures are necessary to sustain and develop communion, and so we arrive at the current structures of the Anglican Communion. These structures are denominated, following the Eames Commission, as 'Instruments of Unity'. A rather particular use of the idea of subsidiarity is deployed to move towards a legitimating framework for heightening the roles of the so called 'Instruments of Unity'.

There is a steady theme of development in this report though it is highly selective and even 'Whiggish'.¹⁷ It does not refer to earlier attempts at Communion institutions which were abandoned, things like regional centres, a Communion theological centre or congresses such as those held earlier in the twentieth century, which were widely regarded as significant in building awareness beyond provincial borders. Things like the fallibility of the church are acknowledged, but are often qualified and the qualification taken up as the main theme in the argument.

Something like this happens also in relation to the explicit notice of eschatology in this report. In the opening paragraphs of the section dealing with communion with the trinity and the life of the church the report identifies the place of the church in history as the body of Christ.

Because the Church as communion participates in God's communion of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, it has an eschatological reality and significance. The Church is the advent, in history, of God's final will being done "on earth as it is in heaven." That will was revealed in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ and is continually inspired by the work of the Spirit in the life and

¹⁷ For the Whig interpretation of history see Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1965).

mission of the Church. The Church is the icon of the future toward which God is directing the history of the world¹⁸

The church participates in the life of the trinity and through the Holy Spirit lives as Jesus lived his life. The eschatology here works as a framework for understanding the situation of the church as part of the divine plan and action and also as the ideal, or goal towards which history and the church moves. In an idealist move the church becomes the model of destiny, an icon of heaven.

There is remarkably no significant role here for failure, sin, redemption, corruption or restitution in the eschaton. Indeed these things do not play a significant role in the argument of the report. The report is rather an extended framing for understanding church structures, and in particular the recently created structures of the Anglican Communion. The focus on the trinity by analogy with the church leaves little room for any ongoing dynamic in the life of the church and such movement as there is appears as 'development'. The tone of the ecclesiology here is static and could be thought to echo something of the *analogia entis* that was so vehemently attacked by Karl Barth.¹⁹

COMMUNION CONFLICT AND HOPE (2008) was appointed to continue the work on the meaning of communion started by the Virginia Report.²⁰ However the new Commission focused on a quite different set of issues; conflict, fallibility in the church, catholicity and hope. The tone and character of this report could not be more different from the Virginia Report. It flags in the Preface its intention to go beyond

¹⁸ *The Virginia Report* 2.14

¹⁹ See Barth *Dogmatics I.1*, p. xiii, 'I regard the *analogia entis* as the invention of the Antichrist, and I believe that because of it it is impossible to become a Roman Catholic, all other reasons for not doing so being to my mind short-sighted and trivial.'

²⁰ *For The Sake of the Kingdom* para 1. The report is available online at http://www.anglicancommunion.org/ministry/theological/iatdc/docs/communion_conflict_&_hope.pdf

Virginia and by implication to challenge it. ‘The current Commission wanted to explore to what extent this model needed to be complemented with understandings which were more historical, pneumatological and eschatological.’²¹ The Virginia Report provided the basis for the Windsor Process and a covenant for Anglican Provinces with some level of sanctions. *Communion Conflict and Hope* sets a question mark against that kind of centralisation, albeit in the genteel language of diplomacy. ‘If the outcome of the Windsor process should result in some definitive centralisation of the Communion then one function of this report may be to constitute an appraisal of that development.’²²

The starting point of the report is the plain fact of endemic conflict in the church from the very beginning. There is a strong focus on the fallibility of the church and in the church. The report also underlines a local focus and identifies Anglicanism as generally having a provincial shape to its ecclesiology.²³

The response to such conflict and difference within and between provinces is a dynamic notion of catholicity. The local needs those beyond the local in order to sustain the rich fullness of the gospel. The local can easily be trapped in its own local terms and the wider engagement offered in a dynamic catholicity enables each to grow and to learn. Indeed one of the themes in this report is that the church is a learning environment in which the virtues of Christian living are nurtured.

This framework provides the basis for conceiving of the church as on pilgrimage and engaged in experiments about the form and direction of its ecclesial life. Eschatology shapes this pattern and it is identified as hope. The connection with the present reality is identified in their comment on Corinthians 13. ‘The “more excellent way” (I

²¹ *Communion, Conflict and Hope* 3

²² *Communion, Conflict and Hope* 18. See Bruce Kaye, 'The Sidelining of the Anglican Consultative Council in a Time of Turmoil', in J. Fairbrother (ed.), *To the Church to the World. Essays in Honour of the Right Reverend John C Paterson*, pp.67-74 (Auckland: Vaughan Park Anglican Retreat Centre, 2010).

²³ The Windsor Report and its parent the Virginia Report show no awareness of this provincial character and move in a contrary direction.

Corinthians 12.31) is that such gifts should be exercised according the gospel virtue of love. Faith and hope speak to the eschatological character of the Christian vocation; love speaks to the substantive nature of the Gospel in living form.²⁴ The role that this hope plays is shown in its function in conflicts.

Sometimes we hear of Communion being broken, and often this language is used in rhetorical exchanges about particular issues in dispute. The greater reality, however, is the brokenness of the church within which communion can and does flourish. Communion flourishes when we accept that discipleship in the church is a call to the way of the cross in the brokenness of the church to which we all contribute. Such costly participation in the crucifixion and resurrection sharpens our sense of the hope we have in Christ. This hope will not permit the fallibility which we bring to handling our conflicts to be the last word. Within the day-to-day process of reconciliation and growth in mutual understanding we grow up into that unity in Christ which characterizes the catholicity of the church in all its fullness.²⁵

The hope pointed to in the title of the report is set in the midst of conflict and failure and focuses on the cross and resurrection of Christ on the one hand and on the telos towards which the pilgrimage of the church is directed. Both are firmly located in the reality of history but are not contained by it. Set in this eschatological time as the driver for the character of church life as love energized by hope and enlarged by a dynamic catholicity. Communion is love expressed in failure, conflict and hope. This is an understanding of unity that is worlds away from *The Virginia Report*.

THE THREE REPORTS

These three reports are remarkably different in their approach to ecclesiology and also in the role of eschatology in that ecclesiology. There are resonances of *For The Sake*

²⁴ *Communion, Conflict and Hope* 30

²⁵ *Communion, Conflict and Hope* 50,51

of the Kingdom in *Communion, Conflict and Hope*, indeed *Communion, Conflict and Hope* goes to some trouble to reinstate *For The Sake of the Kingdom* into the conversation. The *Virginia Report* did not refer to *For The Sake of the Kingdom* at all and *Communion, Conflict and Hope* referred to *The Virginia Report* only in its introductory section.

The differences between the reports can be highlighted by drawing attention to a number of issues.

	For The Sake of the Kingdom	The Virginia Report	Communion, Conflict and Hope
THEIR BRIEF	Church and the kingdom of God in the context of diversity and plurality in and between churches	The understanding of the church as communion in the light of the doctrine of the trinity and institutional structures in the Anglican Communion	Developing the idea of communion, a brief given at a time when conflict within the Anglican Communion had escalated over sexuality issues
THE CONTEXT	New independent Anglican churches following decolonization and globalisation and the challenge of mission in multi religious societies	Conflict between provinces in the Anglican Communion over the ordination of women	Heightened conflict between Anglican Provinces
THEIR FOCUS	The witness and mission imperative for the church and belonging to the Kingdom of God	The doctrine of the Trinity as model for unity in the church and how that is sustained by organisational structures in the Anglican Communion	Living faithfully in a church marked by failure, endemic fallibility and conflict
THE THEOLOGICAL DRIVERS IN THE ARGUMENT	The kingdom of God as the transcendent reality that shapes local expressions of the gospel	The doctrine of the trinity and church institutions	A dynamic conception of the catholicity of the church and the hope present in Christ and as the telos of the church's pilgrimage
ESCHATOLOGY	A transcendent kingdom of God	Notional reference only	The hope arising from the death and resurrection of Christ and as the telos towards which the church moves

These reports were all in one way or another grappling with how the relations between Anglican provinces can be understood in the light of the inherited patterns of ecclesiology. How is the local to relate to the more distant global. Are relationships between groups who are significantly separated from each other bound to be qualitatively different from relations between groups or individuals who are much nearer in life to each other. Do more distant relations, even in a faster communicating world, necessarily tend to be more formal and even authoritarian? Will they inevitably tend away from the persuasive authority that is more suitable to proximate engaged relationships? And anyway is globalism a hoax that has had its day?²⁶

The Virginia Report lacks any forceful eschatological concerns. It displaces love as the primary gospel virtue with unity. It more comfortably thinks of institutional structures as vital to the unity they seek. The other two reports are much more relaxed about institutions and focus on relationships, especially relationships that are local.

If institutions are about continuity of relations between people and or things over time then they necessarily emphasise the reliability of that continuity.²⁷ There is a certain fixity in institutions and they thus become important, even vital in understanding the community they exist to serve. But if that community believes as an article of defining faith that their citizenship is in heaven, that they live not for this world, but in the hope of the coming Kingdom of God, then that fixity in institutions becomes a challenge to that kind of faith. While *For the Sake of the Kingdom* and *Communion Conflict and Hope* show a priority for this eschatological element they leave unexamined any account of institutions for an eschatologically shaped community whose primary condition is the radical contingency of their existence.²⁸ The Virginia

²⁶ As argued by John Ralston Saul, *The Collapse of Globalism and the Reinvention of the World* London : Atlantic, 2005 (2006 printing), 2006).

²⁷ There is a considerable literature on institution theory. See for example Robert E. Goodin, *The Theory of Institutional Design* (Cambridge [England] ; New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press, 1996). N Luhmann, *Social Systems* (Stanford: Stanford Univ Press, 1995).

Report seems sadly unaware of the question nor does it reveal any vital sense of the eschatological character of Christian ecclesiology.

²⁸ For a modern examination of this Barthian theme see Stanley Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe : The Church's Witness and Natural Theology : Being the Gifford Lectures Delivered at the University of St. Andrews in 2001* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos Press, 2001) chapters 6 and 7.