Anglican Vintage, Values, and Virtues with Vitality

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What is Anglicanism? Forrest Gump would readily respond that Anglicanism is what Anglicanism does! But Forrest Gump is not Anglican, so what is Anglicanism for those who are indeed Anglicans? Perhaps the simplest answer is that Anglicanism means different things to different people. It has always touched those who are within it in a variety of ways, and sometimes amazed those who are on the outside. The most recent British display of Anglicanism at its center was witnessed on June 5, 2012, when Queen Elizabeth II, the Head of the Church of England, was seated in worship at St. Paul’s Cathedral, London, accompanied by her son and immediate heir to the throne, Prince Charles, and his son, the Duke of Cambridge, next in line to the throne. They were listening to the sermon being delivered by the Archbishop of Canterbury, a Welshman, who is also recognized as the Head (*primus inter pares*) of the Anglican Communion. The Anglican Communion is made up of thirty-eight independent regional church bodies, all claiming to be in some form of communion with the See of Canterbury. Also in attendance at that service was the Archbishop of York, a distinctly African prelate from Uganda, whose name is strongly listed as a possible successor to the current Archbishop of Canterbury. The service was the culmination of the celebration of the Queen’s Diamond Jubilee.

Archbishop Rowan Williams was preaching from a very rich text from St. Paul’s letter to the Romans: “Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God” (12:1). He extolled the virtues of seeking the common good, of promoting the values enshrined in the vision of the “promise of a shared joy far greater than narrow individual fulfillment,” and the vitality of an “energetic, generous spirit of dedication to the common good and the public service, the rebirth

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of a recognition that we live less than human lives if we think just of our own individual good.” So as he prepares to demit office in a few months’ time, Dr. Williams has outlined in very simple terms what he considers should be the radical shift in the axis of the Anglican ethos, with all the ethical demands for mutual responsibility and respect for each other. He said that “this alone is what will save us from the traps of ludicrous financial greed, of environmental recklessness, of collective fear of strangers and collective contempt for the unsuccessful and marginal—and many more things that we see far too much of, around us and within us.”¹

One may well ask: what does this have to do with Anglican vintage, or the Anglican ethical tradition? My answer would simply lie in the fact that the totality of the Anglican tradition, apart from its pomp and pageantry, its rites and ceremonies, its liturgy and learning, finds its main focus in locating the critical factors that assault the full worth and dignity of the human condition in each contemporary social milieu, and in exegeting the evangelical, pastoral, and prophetic imperatives for a reaffirmation of the gospel’s apostolic tradition. Williams’s pronouncement from the pulpit of St. Paul’s Cathedral was also of historical significance; for that has been the site from which major proclamations of Christian witness and conviction have been powerfully delivered for centuries. I think, for example, of a famous Canon of St. Paul’s, Henry Scott Holland, whose sermons from that very pulpit, between 1884 and 1910, made an indelible and transforming impact on the life of the church and society in England, as well as on the mobilization of missionary zeal and social reform at home and abroad. We shall return to Scott Holland later in this article. What is of prior importance for us at this stage is to explore what it might mean to be Anglican today, what are the critical continuities and commonalities in our ecclesial and ethical identity, and what are the contours of the Anglican tradition that should propel us forward into a new world order.

This is precisely where the Anglican tradition has always sought to take its real point of departure—the search for a new world order that would more adequately and accurately reflect the enlivening convergence of the Christian profession of faith with a more

¹ The text of Archbishop Rowan Williams’s sermon for the National Service of Thanksgiving to celebrate the Diamond Jubilee of Her Majesty the Queen may be found at http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/2514/archbishop-of-canterburys-sermon-at-diamond-jubilee-service.
humanity-affirming ordering of the common life. It really does not matter whether we begin with Bede and Augustine and wend our way up to Williams, Wright, or Tutu. It really does not matter whether we distinguish pre-Reformation from Reformation, or imperial from postcolonial eras. What eventually wins the day is the call, the clarity, and the courage to take the plunge into the biblical, theological, ethical, and transcultural (not multicultural) substreams in the flows of Anglicanism, and our willingness to engage the plurality of tensions and themes, struggles and structures, lifelines and lifestyles, vices and visions, theories and theodicies, that have all made this global ecclesiastical movement such a historical socio-religious phenomenon.

The phenomenon consists primarily in its multifaceted capacity to enable religion and cultures to be carriers of each other, with such force and vigor as would withstand the tests of time and the torrents of change. Movements of manpower, materials, and money—whether by imperial expansion, missionary enterprise, or slave-trading—created the most effective strategic and motivational space for the British religious convictions to find broadening and sustaining expressions at home, while blessing and supporting British expansionism abroad. Such was the thrust of striving for a new world order that would reflect the predilections of what they understood to be the essence of the gospel of Jesus Christ, canonized in their tomes and texts, their treatises and treaties, and also organized in their social movements and class distinctions, preferred and proffered by them for the better ordering of their society. No wonder then that one of their favorite hymns would include this verse: “The rich man in his castle / The poor man at his gate, / God made them high and lowly, / And ordered their estate.” The irony there was that the refrain for that hymn rang out with the words: “All things bright and beautiful, / All creatures great and small, / All things wise and wonderful, / The Lord God made them all.”

It seems to me, therefore, that any systematic attempt to map out a conceptual and scholarly framework through which the Anglican ethical traditions might be gainfully explored must certainly take into account the approaches that have been so eloquently essayed by Dackson, Sedgwick, Greenman, Gibson, and Smith. Their choices of Anglican personalities, both ancient and modern, point to a massive pool of historic figures who have virtually been enlisted as

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2 Words by Cecil Frances Alexander (1848).
the dramatis personae in the ongoing dramatic script of Ecclesia Anglicana. Readers of Sedgwick’s article might be encouraged to align what he offers about Jeremy Taylor’s Holy Living and Holy Dying with the monumental work of William Law, A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life. For the ethicists, Law’s espousal of temperance, self-denial, and humility as basic virtues for the totality of Christian life and witness should rank him in a superior category of exponents of what kenosis should entail, both ascetically and morally. Readers of Dackson’s article should certainly embrace the focus on Maurice and Temple.

With Maurice, however, the sterling work and witness of Henry Scott Holland must also enjoy a fertile comparison in any review of the trends and surges toward a greater emphasis on social justice and human equality that have been very much alive since the end of the eighteenth century. Indeed, was it not the spectacular revolt against inequality that brought the United States of America into being—even if that sense of inequality was refined and codified into its own laws and customs up to the present day? Was it not the work of William Wilberforce and his mighty armies of social conscience that brought the British slave trade to an end in 1807? Was it not the primary work of Charles Darwin, whose basic vision was to use his tireless efforts and scientific explorations simply to demonstrate that there was a basic unity in the human race (even though he capitulated to the dominant notions of a linear scale from the “savage” to the “sage”)? Maurice’s efforts at stimulating Christian Socialism, earlier in the nineteenth century, were strengthened in time by the emergence of the Christian Social Union in 1889, led primarily by Holland, in association with Gore and Westcott. His sermons constituted a robust attempt to apply Christian principles and godly virtue to the problems of human living, and his contribution to the famous book Lux Mundi helped greatly to reinforce the message and meaning of Christianity in general, and Anglicanism in particular, as an incarnational religion—one that clearly asked the question, What does it mean to be fully human? (John 10:10).

Anglican thought and practice has inevitably encompassed a wide variety of traditions. This is why it is common practice to appeal to the Anglican principles of comprehensiveness and the via media. While ethicists strive to purvey the exemplary, evangelical, social, and casuist traditions, they may well recognize that these are rooted in a
theological and liturgical framework (*lex orandi lex credendi*) that is at one and the same time catholic, evangelical, and reformed. Greenman offers reflections on the work and witness of two of my former colleagues: David Gitari served with me on ARCIC II, while Tom Wright served with me on the Inter-Anglican Theological and Doctrinal Commission (IATDC). Both groups strove energetically to weave together the three strands of tradition to which I have referred, with ARCIC II, of course, holding our Anglican feet to the fire with respect to reforms in holy orders. The ordination of Barbara Harris to the historic episcopate created a shift in ARCIC conversations, and eventually caused the ARCIC ship to sail away into waters that dealt with Morals and Mary, rather than be buffeted by the rough winds of mutual recognition of each other’s orders. It thus seems to me that Gibson’s article could perhaps have been further strengthened by broadening the notions of “feminism” to include the realities of “womanism” in the contemporary Anglican ecology, for two reasons. First, the consecration of Barbara Harris as a black woman created a historical watershed in Anglicanism, and gave the theology of Incarnation fresh impetus for courageous embrace. Second, it is still a statistical fact that the typical demographic profile of a contemporary Anglican is a black woman, perhaps between twenty-five and thirty-five years of age, whose native language is not English. This must surely count for something in North American Anglicanism, where the saying is absolutely true that all Episcopalians are Anglicans, but all Anglicans are not Episcopalians!

How then do we discover and discern streams of Anglican vitality from the vintage of values and virtues that has marked the inexorable evolution and expansion of global Anglicanism? How will theologians and ethicists of today and tomorrow carry forward the tasks of propounding a Christian ethic and Anglican witness that is rooted and grounded in Scripture, tradition, reason, and culture? What will give source and substance to moral decision-making, ethical discourse, and theological reconstruction of the social realities in our times? Given the complex nature of current Anglican dialogue and division with respect to issues of communion, covenant, mutuality, and autonomy, how does one meander one’s way through the maze of Anglican tensions and themes?

I am very fond of reminding others, as well as myself, that God is not an Anglican, and that God is not even a Christian. So that to
embrace the Hebraic notion in Genesis of humanity being made in the “image of God” and to confess that notion in the context of the Incarnation as expressed in the historical Jesus of Nazareth (in Colossians) carries with it enormous ethical and spiritual challenges. The basic challenge, of course, is to determine constantly and consistently what the phrase actually means, and then to accord it either primordial, or eschatological, signification. Vintage Anglicanism has been known to “de-image” the *imago dei*, so that blacks, for example, could be enslaved, since they did not possess souls to be saved. The rhetoric against polygamous marriages has lessened in the West since the practice of same-sex marriages has mushroomed, and has been sanctioned into law, both secular and ecclesiastical. Unmarried parenting is now widely adorned with celebrity acclaim, so that children born out of wedlock are not being frowned upon that much by Anglican missionary codes of approval in former “mission fields.” (In some predominately Anglican countries, babies born out of wedlock could not be baptized on Sundays, nor could their mothers become full members of the Mothers’ Union.)

The challenges that I perceive in this task, therefore, are to create ways of establishing and interpreting dialectical streams between the texts and the times, and between the personalities and the political realities. The latter dialectic is of crucial importance if for no other reason than the issue of *power*. Because Anglicanism has been historically the religion of the monarch, and because it was the issue of power that transformed the church *in* England into the Church *of* England, the power question has tended to be uppermost in the witness of Anglican social and political norms and values. The famous words of Cardinal Wolsey in the sixteenth century come readily to mind: “Had I but served God as diligently as I have the King, he would not have given me over in my gray hairs.”

For Christian ethicists the power issue must surely revolve around the distinction between power as *exousia* and power as *dunamis*. The former has the elasticity of representing God, or the state, or the prelate, while the latter has the potential of representing the sacred dimension (spiritual/moral) or the secular dimension (cultural/social) of human existence. If these dialectical streams are recognized as authentic, then several tensions and themes, almost peculiar to Anglicanism, might inevitably suggest

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themselves. These would include: historical archeology vis-à-vis evangelical eschatology (as in the kingdom of God imperatives); historical tradition vis-à-vis apostolic progression; ecclesial center vis-à-vis missional contextuality; juridical authority vis-à-vis moral accountability; cultural hegemony vis-à-vis counter-cultural liberation. On this last tension it must not be forgotten that the 1662 Prayer Book, in “Concerning Ceremonies,” had this to say:

For we think it convenient that every country should use such Ceremonies as they shall think best to the setting forth of God’s honour and glory; and to the reducing of the people to a most perfect and godly living without error or superstition; and that they should put away other things, which from time to time they perceive to be most abused, as in men’s ordinances it often chanceth diversely in divers countries.

It is this sort of historic injunction that in so many ways has been brought forward right into the twenty-first century, and that has in effect been an enormous blessing to Anglicans worldwide, as we strive to live out the mandate for Christian work and Christian witness, and engage with each other in Christian worship ad maiorem dei gloriam.

May the ethicists of our times, who mine with zeal the treasures of Anglicanism in all its diversity, never fail to rediscover the struggle for a new world order that is driven and sustained by God’s enlivening and empowering Spirit. May they help to lead us further into the practices of human equality, social justice, and compassionate love, as we boldly acknowledge that we are not Anglicans who happen to be Christians, but we are committed Christians who proudly happen to be Anglicans.