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Churchman

Not Angels but Anglicans

When Bede wrote his famous history of the English church and people he could not resist putting in the story about how the future Pope Gregory the Great spied two blond young men on sale in the Roman slave market. Struck by their un-Mediterranean appearance, he asked where they came from, and was told that they were Angles. "Not Angles but angels" was his immortal reply, and Bede, despite doubts about its historicity, wrote the encounter up for posterity. Centuries later, W. C. Sellar and R. J. Yeatman retold it in their classic parody *1066 and all that*, altering Gregory's famous words to "Not angels but Anglicans." They may not have realised it, but they may have transmitted the mind of Bede to us more accurately than Bede recorded the words of Gregory.

Bede would certainly not have called his countrymen angels, but he might have seen himself as an "Anglican." In intellectual terms, he was the inventor of the *Ecclesia Anglicana*, the church that bound the Anglo-Saxons together long before there was a united Kingdom of England and that gave the nation a common identity and purpose. Thanks to his history, England was a spiritual reality centuries before it became a political one and *homo Anglicanus* was easily recognisable. He was a Germanic speaking inhabitant of Britain who was loyal to the church of Rome. It is not that Bede was particularly anti-Celtic. He disliked the Welsh because they had failed to evangelise the English, but he admired the Irish whose missionary efforts had borne great fruit in his native Northumbria. If the Irish were wrong, as he believed they were, it was because they were non-conformists. They celebrated Easter according to an outdated calendar, their monks tonsured their hair in a different way, and so on. Modern Anglicans can understand how Bede felt about such things because although the trivialities that excite us are not the same as those that bothered him, the distraction and divisions that such details can cause are still familiar in the Church of England today.

For Bede, an "Anglican" would have been someone who was determined to spread uniform "catholic" practice to the far corners of

the land—even to the Welsh. Making the outliers conform to a universal norm was the mission, and there the matter rested for centuries. When the *Ecclesia Anglicana* finally broke its ties with Rome, it redefined itself in essentially political terms. It was still the church of the English people, but its boundaries were determined by allegiance to the king who had spearheaded the separation. This was to have momentous consequences in Ireland, where the sister *Ecclesia Hibernica* found the going much harder. Had Ireland been securely tied to Henry VIII there would have been no problem, but it was not, and so in that country political allegiance and religious division have complemented each other ever since.

There was, however, another factor at work in the Reformation that was to prove more fundamental and more enduring. It introduced a new theology, based on that of Martin Luther and his fellow Reformers on the Continent, which quickly became the distinguishing mark of the newly independent churches—not least in Ireland! They were Protestant, and as time went on, they leaned increasingly towards the form of Protestantism that we now call the "Reformed" as opposed to the more conservative "Lutheran" tradition. Reformed Protestantism drew heavily on the teachings of John Calvin and his followers in Geneva, but Calvin never defined it in the way that Luther came to personify Lutheranism. The English Reformers were at least as close to Zurich, Strasbourg and the Dutch as they were to Geneva and saw themselves as part of a wider family of churches that stretched into Central and Eastern Europe. Each of these churches had its peculiarities, but none of them was sufficient to cut it off from the rest. Even episcopacy was not a cause of division, as the existence of Reformed bishops in Hungary and elsewhere attested.

This sense of pan-Protestant brotherhood was deep and enduring. It allowed England to forge an alliance with the Dutch and to consummate a union with Scotland, even after political considerations led to the abolition of episcopacy in the latter country. When the Huguenots were expelled from France they were welcomed in the British dominions and their clergy were integrated into the Church of England without having to be re-ordained. In 1703 Joseph Bingham even wrote a book against dissenters in which he argued that the non-episcopal French Reformed Church was closer to the Church of England than it was to those who had conscientiously left it!

Well into the eighteenth century, the spread of Pietism from Germany was greatly facilitated by this connection and Lutheran dynasts were placed on the British throne with barely a second thought. Considerations of birth and ancestry would certainly have favoured James Stuart (the Old

Pretender) over George I of Hanover, but it was the latter who became
king, even though he could barely speak English. The deciding factor was
that James was Catholic and George was Protestant, and Englishmen
were Protestant. Some were conformists and others were dissenters, but
on the fundamentals they were agreed. The few exceptions—there were
some—became Jacobites and were excluded from the Church on both
political and theological grounds.

Then, at some point, things started to change. In the eighteenth
century there were French Catholics who saw their church as a national
body, tied to Rome theologically but in other respects autonomous under
the king. They called it the *Ecclesia Gallicana* and jealously guarded its
privileges and distinct identity. Some of them looked around Europe for
parallels and hit on the *Ecclesia Anglicana*, which they regarded as a sister
church. Of course they knew that it had broken with Rome but as their
own devotion to the papacy was lukewarm, they tended to overlook that
inconvenient fact. At the administrative level, the national churches of
England and France operated in a remarkably similar way, so similar
in fact that nowadays it is easier for an Englishman to understand the
pre-Revolutionary French Catholic church than it is for most French
Catholics. Benefices, advowsons and banns of marriage were all swept
away by the Revolution, but they are second nature to modern Anglicans
who feel at home in an ecclesiastical polity that no longer exists across
the Channel.

At the time, few people in England took any notice of this, but as the
Ecclesia Gallicana came crashing down, a number of refugees washed
up on the shores of Albion, where they received a sympathetic welcome
and shared their thoughts about their "sister" church with people who
feared that the revolutionary tide would eventually sweep north. That
took a generation, but when change finally came in the great reforms of
1828–1832, the traditional church-state links in England (and Ireland)
were loosened to what many thought was an alarming degree. On 14 July
1833—a day with a particular resonance in French history—John Keble
preached his famous assize sermon in Oxford, in which he denounced
what he called "national apostasy." In the years that followed, Keble and
his followers developed their new ecclesiology, and increasingly it began
to be called "Anglicanism."

Anglicanism in this sense was slow to catch on at popular level, and
even today there are members of the Church of England who do not
recognise the term, but it soon developed a historical pedigree of its own.
Its propagandists looked back to ancient times and saw a continuous

thread that could be traced at least as far as Bede and (in some accounts) even to Joseph of Arimathea's legendary mission to Glastonbury. The ancient British (Celtic) church was held to be a third branch of Christendom, equal in importance to those of Rome and Constantinople, and enthusiasts like William Palmer even advocated the reunion of Christendom on that basis. Of course, England's Protestant links were an embarrassment to the advocates of this new Anglicanism, but they rose to the occasion. The Thirty-Nine Articles were reinterpreted in a way that made them entirely compatible with traditional Catholicism, an absurdity so outrageous that it sparked a furious reaction and led to the departure of John Henry Newman for Rome. The movement survived however, and in time became a cause for which an eccentric but dedicated minority was prepared to make considerable sacrifices, even to the point of going to prison for their beliefs.

In Newman's day no bishops wore a mitre and stoles were extremely rare, but gradually both managed to creep in and establish themselves as the "norm," so much so that a clergyman today who wants to dress the way their forebears did in the 1840s is regarded as a nuisance, and perhaps even as subversive of proper church order. At a more serious level, an odd collection of eccentrics was cobbled together in the *Library of Anglo-Catholic Theology*, in an attempt to show that "mainstream" Church of England theology had never wholeheartedly accepted the Reformation. There was just enough plausibility in this assertion for the Anglo-Catholics to be able to make some sort of case, though serious students of the subject were aware that the whole effort was a gross distortion of what had really happened.

In England resistance to this trend was never crushed and Protestant Anglicanism continued to find its advocates, but the United States was less fortunate. After the Revolution the newly-established Episcopal Church there took its cue from the dissenting Episcopalians of Scotland, and came to venerate the 1549 Prayer Book over the mainstream tradition that looks back through 1662 to the 1552 revision, which is much more Reformed than 1549. In their rewriting of history, Richard Hooker, who in 1850 was so obscure that he did not even make it into the *Library of Anglo-Catholic Theology*, emerged as the chief architect of sixteenth-century Anglicanism. His fame rested less on what he advocated than on what he opposed, which was "puritanism." As a result, the Puritans were effectively driven out of Anglican history altogether, and episcopacy, which had never been a touchstone of orthodoxy, was elevated into one of the cardinal points of the church's identity.

Two extraneous circumstances favoured the spread and gradual acceptance of this version of "Anglicanism." One was overseas expansion. In the course of the nineteenth century the Church of England became a worldwide communion that (somewhat incongruously) took its name with it. The Church of England in Australia, in Canada, in South Africa—what sort of nonsense was that? At first, many of these overseas bishoprics wanted to be represented in the Church of England at home, but that was constitutionally impossible. Instead, a new communion of sister churches emerged, and it took the name "Anglican." At about the same time, the Church was threatened by a liberal theology that undermined its historic beliefs. The original Anglo-Catholics were horrified by that, but by the end of the nineteenth century a younger generation was working towards a compromise. It essentially combined liberal theology with traditional "catholic" practice, an alliance that allowed for great intellectual freedom but at the same time imposed a more rigid pastoral practice. You could think what you liked about the sacraments, but you could not deny baptism or refuse communion to those who wanted them, whether they were believers or not. In the "catholic" perspective there was no problem with this because the sacraments operated independently of the attitude of the recipient(s). Evangelicals who were attracted to liberalism were initially opposed to what they saw as medieval mumbo-jumbo, but they gradually gave in on more superficial things like mitres and stoles, giving the Church an appearance of outward conformity that belied the theological turmoil underneath.

Packaged in this way, the new Anglicanism gradually imposed itself as the twentieth century progressed, but its apparent triumph has proved to be illusory. Beginning with the work of men like A. G. Dickens and Patrick Collinson, scholars have re-examined the evidence and found that it tells a different story from the one that has come to dominate the Anglican narrative. Now a whole generation has emerged that has effectively overturned the classical Anglo-Catholic picture, though its findings have not yet penetrated the conscience of the Church as a whole.

It is for this reason that the publication of the new five-volume *Oxford History of Anglicanism* is so welcome. Synthesising the findings of scholars from around the world and representing every shade of theological and non-theological opinion, the OHA is a weighty debunking of what has come to be regarded as traditional Anglicanism. The Reformed credentials of the first generations of "Anglicans" are not only reaffirmed but celebrated as the overwhelmingly dominant thread of English and Irish divinity in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The 1549 Prayer

Book is put back on the shelf where it belongs, and the Thirty-nine Articles are upheld for what they are—a confession of faith that tied the Church firmly to its Protestant sisters abroad. The Synod of Dort (1618–19) comes into view as a defining moment in British theology, as does the Westminster Assembly (1643–52), which is reinstated as a fully Anglican synod of divines. Oddities like Richard Hooker and Lancelot Andrewes are cantoned off as "avant-garde conformists" while the Puritans are restored to their rightful place at the centre of the Church's life.

Readers of *Churchman* may be interested to learn that back in 1994, when your editor published *Documents of the English Reformation*, there was no readily available source book for the official teachings of the Church of England in its formative years. It was the intention of that volume to help shift the emphasis away from the outward forms of church life to the content of its doctrine, from anecdotal survivals of pre-Reformation practices, culled by researchers from diaries and obscure memorials of the sixteenth century, to public pronouncements that determined what the Church stood for in the eyes of both the nation and Christendom as a whole. It was in that volume, for the first time, that the canons of Dort and the Westminster Confession of Faith were given an honoured place in Anglican tradition. Now, nearly a quarter of a century later, the *Oxford History of Anglicanism* is a vindication of that approach, explicitly acknowledged as such in the introduction to the first volume.

This is important because the Anglican world is currently undergoing a soul-searching such as it has not known since the seventeenth century. Churches in the developing world are urgently seeking a basis for their identity that goes beyond symbolism and nostalgia for the colonial era. Many in the West are dissatisfied with the liberal Catholic synthesis that has often degenerated into a form of neo-paganism, where sexual immorality is held up as an authentic expression of Christian faith while orthodox congregations are shown the door. Never has there been a time when it is more necessary to define what the Anglican tradition is—and equally important, what it is not.

The rediscovery that our roots lie in Reformed Protestantism, a theological consensus that has stood the test of changing political and ecclesiological systems, could not have come at a better time. It is not enough for Evangelicals to fight a kind of guerrilla warfare against innovations, many of which have been introduced by stealth and subsequently claimed the centre ground of "Anglicanism." We must fight back with a comprehensive vision of our own, one that is solidly grounded

in our heritage and that faithfully expresses the convictions contained in our classical formularies—the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion and the 1662 Book of Common Prayer above all, but also embracing the large amount of catechetical and homiletical material designed to expound those basic texts and communicate their message to people in the pews. This is a time like no other, to stand on the foundations and proclaim them as the true touchstone of Anglican identity. The *Oxford History of Anglicanism* deserves to be widely read and its lessons absorbed so that this goal may be facilitated across the Communion as a whole. There will always be differences of emphasis and not everyone will have the same priorities, but on the substance of the faith to which we bear witness there should be no disagreement. Five hundred years after Luther nailed his Ninety-Five Theses to the church door at Wittenberg, we are among his heirs and should be glad to acknowledge that inheritance. Our Reformed forefathers were not angels—they were sinners saved by grace alone through faith alone. But if they were the founders of what we now think of as "Anglicanism," then it was because they put that doctrine first and shaped their understanding of church polity and practice around the fundamental affirmation of the Gospel. As their heirs, we are not angels either and cannot pretend to have attained a degree of theological perfection that is not ours to claim. But if we want to be Anglicans in the way that they were, then we shall heed their message to us, adopt their priorities and maintain their witness in the perilous times in which we have been called to live. It is time to take our Church back, not in order to glory in the past, but so that we can go forward on a firm foundation and preach the unchanging Gospel of Christ to a world that needs it just as much now as it did then.

GERALD BRAY