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Global Anglicanism's Crisis of Authority

Following Justin Welby's resignation, the search is on for the next Archbishop of Canterbury, by tradition the spiritual head of the established Church of England and the Anglican Communion (the world's third-largest body of Christians after the Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches). Focus groups are being held to discern the qualities, gifts and skills required of the nominee. The Diocese of Canterbury is preparing a Statement of Needs for the Crown Nominations Commission to consider, with other information from the national Church and global Communion. A list of nominees could appear in September, interviews will be held, and an appointment may be announced by the end of the year.

Compare this process to the conclave in May that chose the Pope. While the recent Synodality consultation let Rome claim a veneer of transparency, it was carefully curated to protect that Church's universal mission. Real authority resides with the historic episcopate, as it should. The focus must be on why bishops exist, what they are for—to defend the faith from threat (not subject it to popular vote or the spirit of the age).

Christian orthodoxy—in the term's best and broadest sense—is codified in the biblical faith of the first seven councils of the undivided Church. Many Anglicans assume their Church is biblical faith without a Pope. This was true when Anglicans were focused on catholicity and apostolicity. In the twentieth century, the focus shifted to syncretising trends in modern culture, particularly the lies of the 1960s sexual revolution. Unfortunately, many Anglicans view progressivism as divine inspiration—see it as the Holy Spirit moving where it will (John 3:8)—and presume trends in modern culture are something the Church should embrace as an opportunity rather than a threat.

The English Reformation was unique within the Protestant Reformation. The Church of England saw itself as both Catholic and Reformed. Its claim to be One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic was remarkably

resilient until the nineteenth century; however, its resilience as a national church depended wholly on national identity, and the fate of the colonial and post-colonial projects.

For Anglicans, unity has always depended on how the historic episcopate—locally adapted to the varying needs of nations and peoples called of God into the unity of his Church—understood its role and exercised its authority. For Catholics, the historic episcopate has collegial authority to preserve the Church's teaching authority (*magisterium*)—derived from Christ, guided by the Holy Spirit—to interpret scripture and tradition.

Anglicans and Roman Catholics have different approaches to natural law and biblical anthropology grounded in the creation mandate of Genesis 1:28. Being members of a national Church, Anglicans are more influenced by the modern world—particularly in the Global North where progressivism is now entrenched—and assume the creation mandate no longer applies to them. The current crisis in the global Anglican Communion revolves around the vexed question of how far Anglicans can syncretise the lies of modern culture and still be part of the universal Church—One, Holy, Catholic, Apostolic.

Welby is an “open” evangelical, someone who attempts to uphold evangelical doctrines, morals, and spirituality while being liberal and inclusive. This explains his lack of sympathy for his archepiscopal office as an Instrument of Communion—the other three being the decenary Lambeth Conference from 1867, the Anglican Consultative Council (ACC) from the 1960s, and the Primates' Meeting from the 1970s—by which Anglicans seek to maintain visible unity in the universal Church. His lack of sympathy was expressed in his presidential address to the 2023 ACC meeting in Ghana. In that address, he said the Instruments are only about organisation and hence are not as important as the bases of Anglican belief and the signs of Anglican character:

The Instruments have grown and changed over the years. They've responded to changes caused by wars, colonialism, decolonising, corruption and failure, heresies and schisms, technological and scientific advance. They have never had the character of Synods with either doctrinal or ethical authority over the Communion, but they do have moral force.

But history shows us that when times change, so must the Instruments of Communion. The post Second World War era is ending. It is collapsing around us, as we sit here.

In this environment of global existential crisis, Welby does not believe his office can continue functioning as a sign of unity: "I will not cling to place or position as an Instrument of Communion ... I hold it very lightly, provided the other Instruments of Communion choose the new shape."

The bases of Anglican belief and signs of its character must stay the same, he believes, but the Instruments may change. He also believes the Church must listen to the Holy Spirit—a doctrine on which much has depended since the first Pentecost—yet it is unclear what this doctrine means to an open Evangelical without a Catholic understanding of his role in the apostolic succession.

Pope Francis also wanted the Church to listen to the Holy Spirit, but his collegial relationship with the historic episcopate was bounded by the *magisterium*, including natural law and a biblical anthropology grounded in Genesis. The Pope cannot change the universal Church's biblical faith, or its clerical structure of bishops, priests, and deacons, or its organisational structure of parishes, dioceses and provinces.

Of course, at the first Pentecost, the Holy Spirit was poured out on everyone in the upper room, it was not confined to the apostles. Still, by tradition, its gifts are transmitted through the apostolic succession by invocation and a collegial "laying on of hands" at priestly ordinations and episcopal consecrations. While it blows where it chooses, and we hear its sound, we do not know from where it comes or where it goes.

Anglicanism's crisis of authority is a reminder of how hard it is to change the Christian fundamentals handed down through apostolic succession. Biblical faith is not about popular vote or modern, liberal, progressive whims. It resists all attempts to syncretise the lies of our modern culture.

In Australia, Anglicanism's governing structures and those of Federation evolved in parallel. Before Federation, the Church was a collection of independent dioceses, each with a synod under a

bishop, with two houses clerical and lay. Differences in churchmanship between dioceses prevented the Church from modelling its national structure on the new federal structure, but this did not undermine its determination to shape the nation. The Church's vision of nationhood reflected imperial sentiment and a belief that Australia had an important role to play in the empire. There was widespread support for the constitutional monarchy within the Westminster system. The Church was structured around the historic episcopate, without which it could not function (even in Evangelical dioceses). While it did not object to party politics in the parliamentary sphere, political parties were thought secular and divisive. There was broad agreement that making the Church a political force would weaken its prophetic role.

In England, the churchmanship spectrum was found in virtually every diocese, which diffused tensions between them; however, for historical and geographical reasons, Australian dioceses were monochrome, isolated, and inward-looking. The most noticeable differences were between Evangelicals and Anglo-Catholics. Evangelicals focused on the authority of the laity as well as the clergy, and believed it was vital for each diocese to remain autonomous as a safeguard against outside interference. Anglo-Catholics, focused on episcopal authority, promoted a national Church with provincial authority over dioceses. While the Church presented a united front to the idea of Federation, parochialism was hard to overcome.

During the 1930s, Anglo-Catholics became increasingly self-confident, crediting themselves with the major advances in theology, worship, biblical scholarship, and social reform since the 1830s. While liberal Evangelicals were willing to concede much of this, conservative Evangelicals were not and sought to bolster their cause, particularly in Sydney where they had gained control of the decision-making processes of that large, influential diocese. A committee of General Synod drafted a national constitution which favoured Sydney. The draft was accepted at a Constitutional Convention in 1932, but the final say belonged to diocesan synods. Eighteen dioceses had to approve the draft before it could progress further, but only fourteen did so, while others withheld approvals until future drafts safeguarded episcopal authority. The committee amended the draft, to moderate concessions to Evangelicals, who still feared the Church could become too Catholic. A new draft, which also contained concessions to Evangelicals, was not produced until July 1939. A few weeks later the nation entered a new world war with the autonomy issue unresolved.

Perhaps paradoxically, the Diocese of Sydney—

bête noire in the Anglo-Catholic imagination—has turned out to be a powerful protector of Catholic authority. More liberal dioceses in Australia have been unable to resist the laity's demand to syncretise progressive trends in modern culture. While Anglo-Catholics think they know more about episcopal authority than Evangelicals, Sydney demonstrates what that authority really looks like. While many find this pill bitter to swallow, the crisis of authority in global Anglicanism suggests the medicine is desperately needed.

Welby's desire to divest his office of fifteen hundred years of spiritual authority took practical shape in 2024 with the release of the *Nairobi-Cairo Proposals*, a report of the Inter-Anglican Standing Committee on Unity, Faith and Order (IASCUFO). The first proposal is that the Instruments of Communion adopt a revised description of the Anglican Communion, replacing "in communion with the See of Canterbury" with *inter alia* "historic connection with the See of Canterbury". The second is that the Instruments of Communion consider ways of broadening how their meetings are called, convened, chaired, and presided over, particularly a rotating presidency of the ACC.

The authors insist the description needs updating to serve "a decentred, polycentric understanding" of the Church's mission while admitting that traditional calls "to catholicity and apostolicity ... remain inspiring and worthy of God's calling ... to holy agreement". This means the authors view Anglicanism's mission through a post-colonial, post-structural lens (while noting the old lens remains an ideal). Inspired by Welby's open Evangelicalism, the authors frame the crisis of authority as a failure to agree, but it is really about the Global North abdicating responsibility for its diversity, equity and inclusion agenda—washing its hands like Pontius Pilate—by asking the Global South to sort out the mess it made for itself.

Terms like "decentred, polycentric understanding" may apply to the mission of an Edward Said or a Michel Foucault, but they do not apply to the mission of the Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches, or those of mainstream Protestant churches (despite progressive tentacles firming their grip in the Global North). To insist calls to catholicity and apostolicity be put aside to serve *anything* is to promote the rhetoric—disguised as empathy and compassion—which has been influencing the Christian worldview

since the sexual revolution.

The calculations behind this rhetoric should be noticed. First is that the unity of orthodox Christian belief—or any ecclesiology under the authority of God's Word—is not as important as the diversity of expressive individualism. Second is that the Anglican system of synodical governance will eventually be gamed to syncretise the progressive worldview, globally. Third is that biblical anthropology and natural law have become irrelevant in the modern world. These calculations are part of a curiously imperialistic form of post-colonialism.

The IASCUFO report does not address the imbalance of power between provinces. The Episcopal Church of the United States (TEC), for example, is top-heavy with bishops presiding over few adherents, giving it an unwarranted, disproportionate influence in the Instruments of Communion. Also, contrary to the proposed Cairo Covenant, the Windsor Report of 2004, or the proposed Anglican Communion Covenant, there is no mechanism for disciplining teaching judged to be contrary to Scripture.

The authors of the IASCUFO report adopt a methodology that suggests biblical teaching on matters of human sexuality and human nature is unclear, so any areas of disagreement are morally neutral (*adiaphora*) and thus become the subject of unending dialogue until the Lord sorts it out when he comes again in glory. Nevertheless, biblical anthropology and natural law are not so easily put aside.

In his 2019 presidential address to his Diocesan Synod, then Archbishop of Sydney, Glenn Davies, made himself a lightning-rod when defending the biblical view of marriage as a union between a biological male and a biological female. He said the Church must focus on its mission, while refusing to succumb to "constant pressure to change our doctrine in order to satisfy the lusts and pleasures of the world".

Davies spoke as a man of authority who knows that God's word is not changed by opinion polls or democratic whims. His address began with a neat overview of the episcopal role in the Anglican tradition. The apostolic mantle does not pass by personal authority, he said, it passes only through the faithful transmission of apostolic doctrine "consistent with the teaching of the Bible, and specifically the commands and doctrine of Christ". He cited Ezekiel

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34:2, the prophecy against the shepherds feeding themselves instead of the sheep. God's message here is clear. To feed the zeitgeist is to starve the sheep. The Church must stand apart from the World.

Understanding marriage as a relationship between a biological male and a biological female is not only biblical. It is also central to the record of human evolution. Despite this, the Anglosphere has embraced a puzzling array of untested new heuristics including same-sex marriage and transgenderism. The suddenness of this is disorienting, as Douglas Murray suggests in *The Madness of Crowds* (2019): "A decade ago, almost no one was supportive of gay marriage. Even gay rights groups like Stonewall weren't in favour of it. A few years down the road and it has been made into a foundational value of modern liberalism." To conscientiously object, even for perfectly rational reasons, is to place oneself beyond the pale.

Gay liberation is about freedom from life in the closet, not about placing everything in the closet before God's altar and demanding it be declared holy. The Anglosphere is only just beginning to grapple with the implications of its decision to allow the hyper-novelty of same-sex couples to marry, have children—always with assisted reproductive technology—and pretend they are the same as heterosexual couples. There is the moral problem of believing in the functional independence of sex and gender, and of pretending men can become women or vice versa. History provides many examples where societies become obsessed with transgenderism just before they collapse.

Wherever such hyper-novelty takes hold, and set the agenda, Anglican bishops are tempted to mistake the siren calls of secular trends for the good of the universal Church. When this occurs, they need to maintain what Robert Runcie called "a sense of Catholic solidarity ... which has allowed the Church through the ages to deal with great questions in order to get on with its chief task of witness, mission and service".

During Runcie's incumbency, Global Anglicanism was still mindful of Catholic solidarity, including its organic relationship with the Church of Rome. Discussions about possible reunion were conducted at arms-length by the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC). Over the years, ARCIC produced official statements on eucharistic doctrine, ordination, Church authority, the doctrine of salvation, the nature of communion between the Churches, and the role of Mary. Although ARCIC had just completed a major document on Marian theology, the Vatican suspended discussions abruptly in 2003

after TEC consecrated a practising homosexual as bishop, Gene Robinson, who went on to marry his husband in 2008. While women's ordination was not seen as a barrier to unity with Rome, ordaining non-celibate homosexuals was a line in the sand.

The consecration of a practising homosexual was presented as a social justice issue, a hill on which TEC chose to exhaust its moral capital. Given that TEC's dogmatic pursuit of feminist and LGBT+ agendas was tearing Anglicanism apart, globally, many were left wondering when Robinson divorced his husband in 2014. Whatever Robinson's same-sex marriage was about—expressive individualism, the virtue-signalling modern self—it became a textbook example of the progressive playbook now adopted by other Anglican provinces in the Global North.

The Global North now affirms practising homosexuality, same-sex marriage (with assisted reproductive technology for couples who cannot conceive naturally), and transgenderism as moral goods (*eudaimonia*) while ignoring biblical anthropology and natural law. A few years ago, in England, the House of Laity asked the House of Bishops for a guidance on welcoming transgendered individuals into the Church. This is a perfect example of progressive laity—with a diversity, equity and inclusion agenda—asking the Church to syncretise the lies of modern culture.

The bishops' response was to adapt the rite of renewal of baptismal vows, creating a *Pastoral Guidance for Use in Conjunction with the Affirmation of Baptismal Faith in the Context of Gender Transition*. The best that can be said here is that the bishops have lost all "sense of Catholic solidarity" which grounded Anglicanism in the past. Nothing about the guidance is defensible in terms of biblical anthropology or natural law.

The Global North no longer discriminates between male and female, or heterosexuals and homosexuals, and actively affirms gender transitions. It therefore remains to be seen whether the next Archbishop of Canterbury is a man or a woman, or is lesbian or gay, or is in a same-sex relationship and with offspring conceived by IVF or surrogacy, or—indeed—is a transman or a transwoman. Welby was compromised by the John Smyth sex abuse scandal and had to resign. He did not leave a religion-shaped hole. The hole was already there. Anglicans in the Global North once stood for catholicity and apostolicity. No one knows what they stand for now.

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