

SCHOLAR'S CORNER

I may be showing my hand by highlighting this element of the Anglican tradition at this time of strained communion in the Anglican Communion, but perhaps what I value most about the Episcopal Church is its comprehensiveness (breadth and inclusivity).

There has for much of Anglicanism's history been a range of opinion and liturgical practice (high church, low church, Evangelical, broad church, etc.) which has been incomprehensible to both Roman Catholics and most other Protestant churches. "How can you endure having such a wide range of doctrine in your church? You should enforce discipline and excommunicate the heretics if they will not be persuaded," outsiders have often said to us.

Yet Anglicanism has been characterized by comprehensiveness (inclusivity) almost from its beginning. This is because ever since Elizabeth I, the Church of England was meant to be a national church maintaining the peace and public order by containing within itself a wide spectrum of people from almost-Roman Catholics to almost-Anabaptists. Those who would not agree to remain under Canterbury and follow the Book of Common Prayer

were left outside the Elizabethan Settlement. Those who insisted on loyalty to Rome were excluded and suppressed, as were those on the radical Protestant side who could not abide "unscriptural" things like bishops and infant baptism. But everyone between these poles (everyone who would accept the Book of Common Prayer and the ecclesiastical structure of the Church of England) was included.

So there was great inclusiveness but with limits on what was acceptable. (Transubstantiation was out as was insisting on believer's baptism.) But compared to either Roman Catholicism on the right or the Reformed (Calvinist) tradition on the left, greater latitude of belief and practice was allowed in the Church of England.

Because Elizabeth's Church of England was to unite the majority of English and Welsh people, it could not be too narrow. That is ultimately what we owe our Anglican comprehensiveness to. (Much like we owe our separation of church and state in the United States to the fact that the different colonies and states could not agree on any one church to be the official national church for the new federal government.)

In an effort to make for peace in a situation where there was already diversity, preexisting diversity was officially recognized. You could say our Anglican comprehensiveness is an example of making a virtue out of a necessity. And since uniformity was not attainable, substantial unity was found in those things which were common to all — or almost all. Every congregation using the Book of Common Prayer brought a national unity, even if there were differences in how the words were understood.

The upshot of this historical accident of the Elizabethan Settlement is Anglican comprehensiveness whereby we claim the entire Christian tradition as ours because we can draw on every period of Church history and every branch of that history.

We can selectively revive and adopt elements that speak to us and inspire us without feeling bound or limited by the beliefs and practices of the past. So we can choose what "blesses" us and also choose to leave alone or even repudiate as unhelpful elements of the Christian Tradition that for one reason or another do not appeal to us or even repel us, like anti-Jewish sentiment and the denigration of women.

We can appreciate the writings and the lives of Christians (and Jews, for that matter) whose lives and perspectives differ significantly from our own. Have you ever noticed how many people that we commemorate in our calendar who were not Anglicans? It is characteristically Anglican to learn about people of faith of earlier times and of other traditions and to read their words and the stories of their lives sympathetically, taking into consideration their times and cultures, yet looking for "whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise" [Phil. 4:8].

It is my hope that at this time of strained unity within the Anglican Communion, we can all remember our characteristic Anglican comprehensiveness and appreciate our substantial unity without demanding uniformity.

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