

Ardour and Order

Can the Bonds of Affection survive?

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In the life of the Anglican Communion today, an approach which expresses “ardour”, a response to the Gospel which tends towards freedom from institutional restraint, is favoured over an approach of “order”, which sees the regulation of the life of the Church as itself a witness to the ordered will of God. There is both an “ardour of the left”, which seeks to loosen the restrictions of canon law to allow a greater “inclusiveness”, and an “ardour of the right”, which is prepared to override traditional understandings of jurisdiction in the defence of “orthodoxy”. The First Epistle to Clement bears witness to an ancient tradition of respect for order in the life of the Church. The “Windsor Lambeth Process” in the Anglican Communion, as developed by the Primates’ Meeting at Dromantine in 2006, and affirmed at their meeting in 2007 at Dar es Salaam, furthers just such an ordered approach to the life of the Communion, by its requests to the North American Churches through due process, by the development of mechanisms to address questions of alternative episcopal oversight, by the Listening Process to address the moral questions under debate, and by the process to draft to adopt an Anglican Covenant. These initiatives are all intended to strengthen “the bonds of affection”, and to secure the future of the Anglican Communion as an international family of Churches.

The English don and children’s book writer, CS Lewis, has never quite achieved status as a magisterial theologian, but he has retained his place as a perennially popular one, and this is probably because of his capacity to find a highly evocative and memorable images and symbolic representations for the points which he wishes to make. In his 1933 work, *The Pilgrim’s Regress*, Lewis seeks to do for the Philosophy of Religion what Bunyan had done centuries before for Christian discipleship, and to write an allegory of a journey through the fields of the philosophy of religion in a way which will entertain and instruct. In the book, the hero, John, has to leave behind the City of Claptrap and navigate his way through a nightmare geographical landscape, populated with the avatars of contemporary philosophies, avoiding on the way the mountainous region of the tableland of High Anglicanism and the steamy marshes of Theosophy as he makes his progress towards the truth. While we may be slightly sceptical about the details of Lewis’ analysis, he does at least provide us with a vivid picture of a fundamental polarity in religious life – the polarity between an emotional and subjective faith, such as may be expressed in Theosophy – the marshland where anything goes; and the arid and sterile casuistry of a ritualistic and formalistic faith, a mountainous tableland where nothing is valued unless it is done “properly”.

Or to put it another way, Lewis offers two extremes of a polarity which may be described as “ardour” and “order” – the over passionate and extravagant relationship of faith which sets store by a vigorous and subjective response to “the Lord’s leading” set over against a disciplined approach to faith founded upon rigid adherence to formal regulations and disciplines.

Or to put it a third way – much beloved in current Anglican discourse – a tension between Truth on the one hand, and Unity on the other. In this form of the discourse,

what matters is the unfettered response to the Truth revealed in the Gospel, an extravagant love for the Lord; while too much concern for holding the Church together in unity is portrayed as compromise and the exaltation of church regulation and procedures over a wholehearted commitment to obey the Lord.

Or perhaps even to offer a fourth scale, especially when seeking to discourse upon “the bonds of affection” – to say that while some seem to prefer the affection, others wish to emphasise the bonds.

The danger inherent in this kind of analysis, particularly in the discourse about Truth and Unity, is that it takes the polarities described, and turns them into a false dichotomy – setting Truth against Unity and Ardour against Order so that they become enemies of one another: the latter more usually depicted as threatening the integrity and force of the former, rather than in seeing the latter as a way in which the former may be channelled to the greatest effect or perceived with the greatest integrity and with the minimum disorganisation in the life of a grace-filled Church.

This scale of tension between experiential faith and unfettered discipleship and a reserved yet marshalled appeal to the order of the church – the one, in Lewis’s allegorical turn of phrase being marsh and the other being mountain – is nevertheless perhaps an appropriate lens through which to look at the life of the Anglican Communion as it is currently being lived out.

From wherever we stand, it becomes quite clear that the apostles of “ardour” have it. This is an age when Anglicans are called to cast order and regulation aside, and revel in a wholehearted commitment to the will of the Lord.

On the one side we have the “ardour” of the left. The “ardour of the left” sees the imperative of the Gospel in the command of Jesus to love; specifically that the fundamental imperative of the Gospel is to reach out in a proclamation of justice and inclusion to all those who have been disadvantaged or oppressed in the past. These apostles have a driving ambition to make the Church as inclusive as possible. It does not matter if the canons of the Church are stretched a little here, expanded and reinterpreted a little there, if there is even occasion for sleight of hand or ambiguity; what matters is that the regulations of the Church are subordinate to the need to respond; clear canonical provisions may be nudged aside or quietly reinterpreted to clear the way for the juggernaut of the self-apparent Gospel values of equality and inclusion.

On the other side, there is an “ardour of the right”, which, faced with the oppression of the saints under the hand of a revisionist and unfaithful tyranny, responds to the clear imperative of the Gospel to offer sustenance and comfort to the righteous, to be generous in the provision of protection and support even if it cuts through whole swathes of ecclesiastical regulation and convention, for such things are of little concern besides the defence of Gospel truth.

Now these polarities may be overly caricaturised, although in our current life the rhetoric is not far behind the parody. There can be little doubt that in the current debate “ardour”, a single-minded commitment to truth, justice and the Gospel – whether of the left or the right – is seen as incarnating the beacon of prophetic witness

while to insist on order is at best a time wasting and unhelpful over-concern with politeness and diplomacy, or at worst the sacrifice of Gospel values to mere accommodation of as many as possible in a lowest common denominator Church which stands for nothing but compromise, even at the cost of accepting bigotry. “Ardour” becomes a sign of bright commitment to the Holy Spirit; “order” is a mere inconvenience, an obstacle erected by the pedantic in the way of divine truth.

Is this necessarily the case? One would certainly not expect an Ecclesiastical Law Society to subscribe to such a vision of ecclesiastical life. Might the apostles of “order” themselves marshal a defence for order in the life of the Church?

In 1627, Cyril Lucar, the Patriarch of Constantinople, arrived at the Court of Saint James’s. He was seeking out the wisest fool in Christendom, King James VI and I, whose fame as scholar and commissioner of the Authorised Version of the Bible had reached the far corners of Europe. The Patriarch had missed King James by two years, and Charles I was now on the throne. Patriarch Cyril nevertheless handed over his gift, an ancient manuscript collection of the Scriptures, known today as the “Codex Alexandrinus”, and kept in the British Library. When Charles’ eager scholars examined the volume, they were astounded; bound in with the New Testament were two further epistles, known from ancient sources, but whose texts were not then available in the West. These were the First and Second Epistles of Clement, the apostolic father who was either second or fourth in succession to Peter as bishop of Rome, according to various traditions.

The First Epistle of Clement, in particular, makes fascinating reading. Although modern scholarship proposes a more diffuse origin for the Epistles, ancient sources ascribed them to this early Bishop, and the First Epistle has striking parallels to some modern situations. I Clement is a letter of admonition written by a local bishop to the congregation of another Church (in this case, Corinth), where a coalition of enthusiastic disciples had just announced a covenant to remove what they saw as a compromised leadership, and to replace them with a leadership more amenable to their theology and priorities.

The author of the epistle emerges as a strong advocate of “order” in the life of the Church, and offers twin arguments that have echoed down through the centuries. Order, Clement propounds, is not mere administrative good manners. It is implicit in the evangelical ordering of the Church precisely because God himself is the God who brought order out of chaos. Drawing on the wisdom of the ancient Judeo-Christian tradition, Clement cites the very order of heaven and earth to make his point. It is inconceivable for him that God who so ordered creation would not have willed such order in the life of the Church.

More - “order” is not a secondary issue: it is itself a witness to the gospel. The way in which the Church ordered its life was precisely at the heart of the witness that it presented to the world. Clement piled up the examples, drawing from the Old and New Testaments, to make his point. If Christians were the bearers of the Gospel, then they should act in the ordered way which love and charity and dignity demanded. Without order, Christians denied the very value of the life in communion into which God called them.

From this perspective, “the bonds of affection” so beloved of Anglican ecclesialogists are not merely affective and emotional, mere “ecclesiastical good manners”: they are the structures of ordered life which actively bear witness to a God of order who has called us into the ordered life of mutual accountability and Communion.

It is this perspective that gives us the clearest grasp on what is happening in Communion life through the so-called “Windsor Lambeth Process”, which flows out of the Windsor Report. The Windsor Report is itself an appeal for the ordered life of the Church.

What the Primates did at their meeting in Dromantine in 2005, and again in 2007 at Dar es Salaam, therefore, was to seek to bring order out of the chaos caused by current tensions in the Anglican Communion, and to adopt and develop four invitations from the Windsor Report in specific ways.

First, faced with the ardour of recent controversial developments in North America, the Primates asked The Episcopal Church (TEC) and the Anglican Church of Canada (ACC) whether they were willing to live by the ordered life of autonomy-in-Communion expounded in the report. And such an answer was not demanded peremptorily, but in an ordered way – allowing the space which these churches needed to address the questions put to them by their proper synodical processes – by General Convention in the case of TEC, and by General Synod in the case of ACC. When the answer from General Convention was heard uncertainly at Dar es Salaam, the primates requested clarifications from the House of Bishops of The Episcopal Church.

Secondly, the disorder occasioned by those primates and bishops from elsewhere in the Communion who had intervened in the life of particular congregations to offer protection against “revisionist” bishops was addressed by inviting a return to the ordered life commended by the Windsor Report, and the proposal to leave it to the North American Provinces themselves to establish properly canonically established procedures for the care of “dissenting” congregations. Acknowledging that this could not happen without there being some sense of security and space for the congregations affected in the current situation, the primates proposed a “Panel of Reference”, a body of learned and experienced pastors and canonists, who could offer as objective an account as possible of any situation referred to it, and to submit advice to the Archbishop of Canterbury on how an ordered response could inform the situation and defuse something of the tensions developing. At Dar es Salaam, they advanced suggestions for a more structured response, inviting The Episcopal Church to liaise with the Communion through a Pastoral Council, but encouraging the bishops of the Church to take the initiative in adopting robust schemes of pastoral care.

Thirdly, the disordered controversy arising out of bitter differences and recrimination on the presenting issue of moral teaching was addressed. What had been proposed in Windsor (§135, 146) was an ordered listening process which built upon the Lambeth Conference resolutions of 1978, 1988 and 1998. The primates at Dromantine requested that the Anglican Consultative Council should initiate such a listening process: something which has now been commissioned, and the first fruits of which are now appearing through the Anglican Communion website.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the primates requested that there should be some ordered articulation of the “bonds of affection” themselves: that an Anglican Covenant should be developed, which would set out the classical foundations of Anglican life and the way in which an interdependent life could be sustained and developed. The Covenant Design Group established by the Archbishop of Canterbury at the request of the Primates submitted a report to the Primates at Dar es Salaam which included a draft for discussion in the Communion. This draft proposed commitments articulating the way in which Provinces would relate to one another based upon a common affirmation of the existing and agreed principles of Communion life, centring on the Anglican Inheritance, the Anglican Vocation, and Life in Communion. The sections of the covenant speak of the way in which what has been received by Anglicans can be handed on, of the mission to be undertaken by Anglicans, and of the mechanisms by which Communion life can be sustained. The Provinces have now been invited themselves to comment on how far the draft of the Covenant is an authentic description of the Anglican faith that they profess, with the intention of substantial revision before the Lambeth Conference.

In all these requests, the Primates are not looking for a new form of Anglican life; they were drawing out principles which the Windsor Report had identified as part of the rich resources of Anglican heritage in order to find an ordered response to the arduous challenges thrown up by current debate. Taken together, these initiatives are a clear strategy to affirm the ordered life of the Churches – calling all Anglicans into a sense of mutual responsibility, to an ordered and just administration of questions of jurisdiction, to theological discernment and debate, to inter-dependent life.

The challenge before the Anglican Communion is this: is it an ordered family of Churches? Or is it likely to collapse in the face of rival ardours – an ardour for inclusiveness that despises those who are challenged by the changes proposed; or an ardour for the received faith which despises innovation as a betrayal of the Gospel, and innovators as deserving no respect in our ordered life together.

I believe that these developments are to be welcomed: not as a growth towards some centralising curia and the gathering of ecclesiastical power into the hands of a few selected hierarchs, which no-one seems to desire, but as an ordered response to the challenges we face.

However, in the choices ahead of us, such an assertion is not an opposing assertion of the absolute priority of order over ardour. The truth is that order is but a mechanism through which the ardour of the Holy Spirit may be channelled into the mission of the Church. Ardour without order in the life of the Church would result in chaos; but order without ardour would result in empty formalism. Ultimately, acknowledging “the bonds of affection” is to acknowledge the need for an ordered life as an international family of Churches, that we may grow into the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace to which God calls us.

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