

After Christendom:

Benedict, Macintyre and the future of Anglicanism

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1. Introduction

We are, it seems, in the death-throes of Christendom. The reduction of the church's influence on the state is seen by some as an opportunity: the church is being freed to return to its authentic calling. It was founded by a Lord who was crucified 'outside the gate' as criminal and outcast. Its early years bore witness to a Kingdom opposed to physical violence and the accumulation of material wealth. But with the conversion of Constantine, Christianity moved to the heart of the empire - with huge consequences for the church's position on issues such as warfare, wealth and power. It no longer stood in sharp contrast to a pagan state. In Christendom, church and empire were fused together. In Britain, with the rise of secular capitalism, that union is coming to an end. (1)

The Church of England is surely a Constantinian church *par excellence* - founded on an assertion of the supremacy of King over Pope; with the duty to bear arms for the state enshrined in its founding Articles of Faith. Its power and influence is not derived so much from the numbers attending worship, but from its place as a church for the whole nation - still represented in Parliament, with its Bishops appointed by the Queen (on the advice of the Prime Minister), and every citizen entitled to its pastoral care in baptism, marriage and funerals.

What becomes of such a church if the nation decides it no longer needs, nor particularly wants, it to be at the heart of its life? In this article I want to explore whether the end of Christendom is fatal to the Anglican identity - or whether the experience of Christendom may provide some of the resources for the journey beyond it.

2. Hauerwas: The practices of 'resident aliens'

Stanley Hauerwas is one theologian who sees this transition as an opportunity. In *Resident Aliens* and *Where Resident Aliens Live*, he argues that church bears witness in the world by its distinctive *practices*. Christians are a cause of scandal: inhabiting a secular empire, but living according to the values of a very different Kingdom. It is in its distinctive

forms of life (which include the renunciation of all forms of violence, a rejection of capitalist economics in its common life) that the church can answer Christ's call to be salt, light and yeast. (2)

For Hauerwas, liturgy is central to the church's renewal. From Constantine onwards, the church has become subject to the powers of the world: a process that corroded theology, and finally robbed it of its place as the 'Queen of the Sciences'. Theology first became the legitimator of the power of the state (so Constantine, and equally Henry VIII). Having been thus corrupted, it was in due course abandoned - as capitalism banished religious belief into a private realm of personal choice and subjective expression. God does not make, and choose us in modern capitalism: we make and choose God. It is in *worship* that we are reminded that this is idolatry.

In liturgy, we come face to face with the true God. We are gathered and fed by Christ in the Eucharist. Christians are first and foremost liturgical, and not civil, subjects; our worship of God acting both as a corrective to the claims of state power and violence, and to the relativism of the consumer society. Liturgy reminds us that our being finds its source in God: and the practices of our liturgies then flow over into our behaviour in the world.

Of course, the church's practices are formed *by*, as well as being formative *of*, its position in society. Among of the greatest gifts of Anglicanism have been a commitment to an excellence and beauty of worship; and the recognition of common practices of prayer as constitutive of its communion. The origin of these 'gifts' is bound up with its Constantinian heritage. Anglicanism's focus on *practices* flows out of this history: Elizabeth I knew that creedal agreement could not be imposed, and so sought to ensure a unity based on commonality of worship and order. We can acknowledge that the compromises between Gospel and State have borne welcome fruit - that God's grace can work together "in all things for good", even if (with Hauerwas) we are glad to see that union dissolving.

3. Macintyre, Benedict and a sense of place

Our position as an Established Church has also given Anglicans a distinctive focus on *place*. Being a state church, and having a strong parochial system, has yielded a strong sense that the worshipping community exists for the wider parish. At a local level, this remains a distinctive part of the Church of England's ethos.

For six years, I have worked in an East London parish with around 250 church members

and around 60,000 parishioners. This is a ratio more familiar to many other provinces of the Anglican Communion. But the church - through its presence in local schools, the pastoral offices and involvement in community issues - retains a distinctive role. This role is still rooted in the Bishop's granting of a share in the 'Cure of Souls' to the clergy, working in partnership with the whole membership of the church. The statistics in a rural parish would be very different - but my own parish's situation represents the extreme end of a nationwide trend towards both a greater diversity of denominations and faiths. (Indeed, one of the respects in which London parishes are often *atypical* is that in areas of high immigration from less secular countries, church attendance is now gently rising after a substantial period of decline.)

There is something Benedictine about the Anglican loyalty to place. Concerned at the dilution of Gospel values in his very different age, St Benedict founded communities of monks who were committed to building a common life *in one place*, offering regular worship and prayer, and providing hospitality to all who come to their door. In his monastic rule, a commitment to practice and to place was brought together. A Benedictine community made - and still makes - deep roots, offering prayer and praise and ordering its common life according to the Gospel.

It is in the vision of Benedict that Alistair MacIntyre finds a path beyond Christendom. In *After Virtue*, he argues that our society is moving towards an increasing irrationalism and fragmentation in its ethics. This moral incoherence will make it more and more difficult to live together peaceably, and to engage in serious debate about our purpose and direction. As Christendom declines, secular liberalism cannot provide such a framework. MacIntyre's argument is that virtue and meaning can only be nurtured in *communities of value*. With no one over-arching narrative of value, we enter a 'Dark Age' in which the points of light will be the communities (often of faith) which continue to proclaim - but also to incarnate by place and practice - ongoing traditions of value.

MacIntyre ends *After Virtue* with the claim that modern society is 'waiting not for a Godot, but for another - doubtless very different - St Benedict.' (3) Christians can no longer hope to impose their vision upon the world (a dubious pursuit even when it could be done). They can, however, continue to embody this vision as their act of witness.

At its best, that is the mission of the Anglican parish. Too often in debates about Establishment, it is suggested that the Church of England can only exist for the wider parish if it remains a State Church. While in the short term, this is used as an argument for perpetuating the current arrangements, in the long run it is surely a counsel of despair. For as the Establishment settlement becomes increasingly untenable, it means

that the Anglican ethos of practice and place is doomed to a slow and gentle death. In MacIntyre's appropriation of Benedict we have a model of a 'ministry of presence' by which this Anglican vision can outlive Christendom.

What practical steps might Anglican parishes be taking to embody such a vision? I suggest our (perhaps limited) energy needs to be focused on four key areas:

- i. A regular and reverent offering of public worship - through the Daily Office and the Eucharist
- ii. A commitment by church members to pray for the different communities, faiths and institutions in their parish
- iii. A spirit of attention and of hospitality, which makes the church was open to the needs and concerns of the whole parish
- iv. A willingness to forego an all-to-Anglican sense of superiority. Instead, we need to acknowledge that our history puts us in a unique place to bring together the different faith communities in our parishes to work for the common good.

These steps are chosen carefully, because the church needs to avoid a retreat into pietism - a very tempting response to a collapse in its earthly power. The church needs to remain faithful to its calling to be a disturbing and uncomfortable presence: residents who bear witness *here and now* to our eternal home.

London Citizens is an example of such a witness - an alliance of churches, mosques, schools and other community groups working together for social change. The approach is based on building relationships within and between member groups, and thus developing a broad-based alliance of institutions, each with a strong lay leadership. In the eight years in which my parish has been engaged in this work, church members have been involved in campaigns which have achieved significant results:

- reduced emissions from a local factory
- the retention of banking facilities in inner-city areas
- improvements in cleanliness and catering at a local hospital
- commitments from a range of employers - including the Mayor of London to paying workers (including contract staff) a 'Living Wage' of £6.70 per hour
- a framework of ethical commitments in London's 2012 Olympic bid, around fair pay, training for local workers in anticipation of new construction jobs, and the earmarking of much of the Olympic accommodation to be used subsequently as affordable housing

London Citizens' successes have involved a willingness to provoke tension - and on

occasion take direct, non-violent action - to agitate the powerful. Clearly, this does not sit easily with parts of our Constantinian heritage. Nonetheless, it provides a way of remaining faithful to that deeply Anglican vision of being a church for the *whole* parish.

It is important for Christian congregations to ground political action in theology. If pietism is one dangerous response to our age, another is frenetic activism. The four steps I proposed above for Anglican congregations are deliberately balanced between devotion and action. In the end, these cannot but be complementary aims. Hebrews 11 reminds us of our status as pilgrims like Abraham, who 'set out, not knowing where he was going... for he looked to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.' If we are to be resident aliens, we will both need to *set our hearts* on the heavenly places, and *bear witness to them* as we inhabit our earthly homes.

4. Conclusion

Anglicans are in an intriguing position at the end of Christendom. Our identity has been bound up with the Constantinian settlement, and so we are among the most reluctant to break with it. Perhaps we fear that the end of Establishment will be the end of Anglicanism. Masked perhaps by an outward arrogance, this fear represents a deeper failure of nerve. Through our history of Establishment, I suggest we have acquired gifts which are of use on this next stage of our journey. It is a common journey, made as part of a wider Body in which each denomination has a heritage with its own challenges and opportunities.

The Anglican commitment to *practice* and *place* can help us navigate a path beyond Christendom. We will need to give up the disfiguring effects of Empire - the unhealthy accommodations with state power and military violence, and the reliance on a now-vanishing status within the Establishment. If we have met the challenges of our context with honesty and with hope, there is much we can contribute to the wider Church.

The Revd Angus Ritchie is Director of the Contextual Theology Centre in East London.

(1) There is an interesting point of divergence between the two sides of the Atlantic on this matter: a very different article would need to be written about Christianity in the United States of America.

(2) . Hauerwas & J. Willimon, *Resident Aliens* (Abingdon Press, 1989) & *Where Resident Aliens Live* (Abingdon Press, 1996)

(3) A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Duckworth Press, 1981), 263