Introduction

Undoubtedly we live in times that can be both confusing and disturbing. At least during the Cold War period there seemed to be much less complexity in international relations. Alliances divided the world into two sides. The other side was the enemy and was thus evil and radically different. Each had some clear sense of where they had come from and the values that united both the nation and the church. This clarity came at the expense of accuracy about important facets of both the other and ourselves and also some critical truth about the common human condition.

While the Cold War is now in the past, this kind of radical division among human societies and nations still persists in a number of disturbing ways; disparities not just of wealth and health but of understanding. Not just understanding the elements of human life and meaning, but divisions about how that task of understanding is actually enterprised and how you might judge that you have reached some sensible and defensible conclusion. In the multiplying legitimation of individual differences, an environment still called by some postmodernism, it is much less easy to see what is common and shared.

In the last half of the twentieth century, mass immigrations have meant that nations are now made up of many different cultural and ethnic groups. Australia has become a multicultural society when once it was overwhelmingly Anglo-Celtic. The United Kingdom has absorbed many from India, Africa, and more recently Poland. For the first time in its history the United States became a nation in which no one cultural or ethnic group was a majority in the population. Similar, though not as extensive diversity can be seen in other countries in Africa. Postcolonial nation states contain groups with different tribal backgrounds. The postcolonial constitution of India tried to acknowledge this diversity and to affirm the rights of minorities, but it all happened at great cost.

All such countries struggle to maintain some sense of coherence and national identity, but in Western countries especially the fact of diversity has been embraced not just as a condition to be accommodated, but an ideal to be aimed for. This is not just plurality as a fact, but pluralism as an ideal. Such is the global power and influence of these countries, especially the United States of America that elements of this pluralist culture flow into other countries. This struggle to find coherence and respect in combination with manifest diversity can be seen clearly in the extensive macro communities of the world wide christian traditions.

It should not surprise us that the kind of struggles that can be seen in the communities in nation states should also be reflected in these trans-national church communities. The common cohering tradition of a particular church faith struggles with the different cultural realities of the nations and communities in which these churches are located. Within the nation states cultural and social understandings develop which enable citizens to understand each other and live in some degree of harmony. It is not just that there are different laws for social relations in different countries. In these different countries the way people think about issues is shaped by the histories of the country and the cultural assumptions that have become part of the national self understanding. The degree to which a country such as Kenya has shaped a distinctive culture out of its history and environment is also the degree to which it has developed its own way of thinking about some social issues. The tribal-based riots following the elections of 2007 show how difficult is the task of building national coherence.

Those different approaches become themselves the un-stated or tacit way of thinking about these things. As a consequence the Kenyan may well assume that certain principles and assumptions are simply part of their own reasonable thought world. On this basis some things seem to make common sense while others do not. These tacit assumptions thus in turn become grounds for appeal in social argument. They constitute what is thought to be plausible. Social anthropologists and sociologists refer to these as plausibility frameworks in a society. Such frameworks are, of course, not static. They change and develop in relation to the issues facing a particular society, including how it relates to other societies and the so-called international community.

Underlying the series of conflicts currently engrossing Anglican leaders around the world is a mismatch of communication arising from

differences in these frameworks of plausibility. While the presenting issue this time concerns gender relationships there is also an underlying question about the significance and challenge of increasing diversity within the Anglican expressions of Christian faith. This plurality is seen by some as a threat to Anglican identity and witness. If there is diversity and thus plurality in Christian expression then does that not challenge the claim that there is one faith, one true faith? And if there is such diversity of expression does that not compromise any church witness to the faith whether that church is Coptic, Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Lutheran, or Anglican? "United we stand, divided we fall" might suggest that in our diversity we will fall and that we will also fail to witness to the truth.

There are quite important issues at stake here as to how Christian churches are to understand who they are and how they can relate their present circumstances to their Christian heritage. But the fact remains that this is not a new question in Christian history, indeed there is a long tradition of Christians grappling with this issue.

The trouble arises because we believe that Jesus of Nazareth is the incarnate Son of God. This confession means that Christian faith is an invitation to all humanity without distinction of race or circumstance to respond to the gospel. Such gospel disciples are also called by the very terms of this gospel of the incarnate redeemer, to be faithful to Jesus Christ in the particularities of their personal circumstances.

This universal scope produces churches scattered around the world in many nations. This scattered community is in a metaphorical sense a "universal church" of which all are a part as they belong to Christ. It is the living contemporary "catholic" church. It is the present expression of what we call the catholicity of the church of Jesus Christ.

The personal dynamic is a commitment to live out the gospel of Christ in the terms of the immediate and temporal situation in which we are located. This commitment necessarily produces expressions related to and shaped by the local. It is this personal gospel imperative which in turn produces diversity within the universal.

There is a very public example of these issues to be seen at the end of the twentieth century in the Anglican Communion. Anglicans, like Copts and various families of Orthodox, have a faith which was formed in a particular location and then in relatively modern times has spread around the globe into local circumstances which are culturally and socially very different from the location in which the tradition was formed. This book

takes the Anglican example of the general issue in order to illuminate not just something about Anglicanism, but also about the general issue facing Christian churches.

The dynamic of the two forces of personal commitment and universal faith that lies at the heart of Christian faith creates the ecclesial realities in which the present Anglican struggles arise.

In speaking of the personal and the universal I do not have in mind the sort of contrast between universal and particular in philosophical discourse. I am concerned to focus on the universal extent of the invitation of the gospel and the specific personal response that invitation calls for. Such a focus on the gospel requires us to go back to the foundations of the faith and the story of the Anglican heritage to set out this diversity in more constructive terms in order to deal more helpfully with the present conflicts. We need a more helpful narrating of the long running story of the Anglican tradition of Christian faith. The construction of such a narrative takes its starting point in the origins of the Christian faith generally, but then tracks through the particular story to which Anglicans belong. This book seeks to offer such a re-reading which is conducted with an eye to the present dynamics of world wide Anglicanism.

This sort of exercise is always fraught with interpretative challenges. In looking back on the evidence left behind by others in our story are we not likely to find our own particular needs written into the story? Is it not likely that in conducting such a re-reading I am simply digging back into the evidence to create a story which suits my own purposes in the present? Could it not be said that such an exercise is simply yet another attempt to gain a strangle hold on the compelling issue of today by defining them in the light of the past shaped according to my interests? After all it is a powerful rhetorical device to define the present in terms of the past as construed to suit a pre-existing view about the present. Who owns the past has first grip on the present and thus the future.

All of this is undoubtedly true. The problem for the theologian, and fundamentally for the Christian, is that the past is the place from which we have gained a crucial and defining part of our knowledge of God. The trouble arises because we believe that Jesus Christ is the incarnate Son of God and this Jesus lived in a past that was different from the present. To be precise Jesus lived in Palestine, a Jew who encountered the wider world of his day through the experience of the Roman occupation of the Promised Land. Clearly this revelation of God in Christ was preceded in

the experience of Israel and the redemptive presence of God in their history. There was also a future in that Jesus pointed to his own resurrection and to the coming of the Holy Spirit who would lead the disciples into all truth.

The connection with the past of first century Palestine and the life, death and resurrection of Jesus has never been a merely antiquarian matter. Nor has it been an appeal which stood separated from the continuing presence of God through the Holy Spirit. How to understand this manner of acting by God, let alone formulate some pattern to characterize it, has been the enduring task of Christians and theologians through two thousand years.[1] Furthermore it is an unending task for the simple reason that times and circumstances change. In attempting to witness to this faith Christians have had to speak and act in a way which faithfully expressed the continuity of the tradition of faith and the dynamic of living truly in the circumstances in which God has placed them.

This does not mean that there is no continuity with the patterns and expressions of the faith from the past. On the contrary, continuity with the faith of the apostles is the claim of the Christian. Yet each generation has had to find ways to be faithful in their own circumstances. Not every formulation is appropriate to any subsequent generation. Each looks back to Jesus and the apostles as the touchstone for their faith and the early creeds as normative. Certainly in Anglican churches around the world the formulations in the creeds have been taken as the norm. Continuity in formulations of social attitudes and political actions has been less straightforward.

In 1848 the Anglican hymn writer Cecil Frances Humphreys Alexander (1818–1895) first published one of the most popular hymns in modern Anglicanism. "All things bright and beautiful" has been included in many hymnbooks and to this day remains among the most popular hymns for Anglicans. It is a celebration of the beauty of the creation portrayed as a pastoral idyll. Perhaps this is not surprising, for while 1848 saw Europe convulsed in social disorder and revolutions Mrs. Alexander was living in Ireland in pastoral quiet. The hymn was published in her *Hymns for Little Children*[2] and it quickly gained popularity beyond the ranks of

1. See the radical work of Henri de Lubac and Yves Congar. A more popular account can be found in Kaye, *Web of Meaning*.

2. Alexander, *Hymns for Little Children*.

the young. It lasted for many years in its full form but in 1906 the new English Hymnal cut out the third verse:

> The rich man in his castle,
> The poor man at his gate,
> He made them, high or lowly,
> And ordered their estate.

Many hymnbooks now publish it without this verse. The editor of the English Hymnal in 1906, Percy Dearmer, complained that this verse revealed "the passivity and inertia at the heart of the British Establishment in the face of huge inequalities in Edwardian society."[3] Precisely the point! For Mrs. Alexander her perception of the meaning of the Anglican tradition in a very different time and location was quite different from Percy Dearmer's, and probably most modern Anglicans. But for many years sensible and devout Anglican Christians understood the social structure of their day and found that the verse sat comfortably with a notion of divine providence. A similar story can be told in relation to slavery and its acceptance by Anglicans whose theological disposition was by no means unbiblical or unthoughtful.[4]

It might be helpful for us to sing this hymn from time to time with the offending verse included. It might induce in us a little modesty about some of the social attitudes to which we cling and which we so fervently think are requisite and Christian even Anglican. So the theologian and the ordinary Anglican will approach this matter with a good deal of humility and openness.

"This matter" is the task of learning how we are to be faithful to Christ in our generation. That task involves the life of prayer, the testimony of God's Spirit in our lives, and the witness and gifts of the Christian community and much more. But Anglicans have been part of a tradition of faith that not only has formed us but also is the landscape over which we travel in order to comprehend the story of that faith of which we are a part. Not every hill or valley of the landscape of that tradition will be important to our present situation and in the direction of that journey we are pointed to the supreme importance of the testimony of the apostles and the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

3. See Dearmer and Jacob, *Songs of Praise Discussed*.
4. See the discussion in Giles, *Trinity and Subordination*.

Such an investigation quickly shows that we are not involved in simply a conversation with the past. The reality of the risen Christ in the Christian community and the resilient presence of the Holy Spirit in the life of the church show that we are also engaged in a conversation with those who live in different circumstances in our own age. In that conversation we encounter the reality of the catholicity of the church community in its contemporary dimension. But the catholicity of the Christian church does not appear as one undifferentiated whole. There are clear sub traditions within Christianity of which Anglicanism is one. Furthermore it takes only a slight investigation to see that the strength and power of Christian witness is not contained in its entirety in any one of these subtraditions. Nor indeed can the totality be contained within one tradition, despite the ambitions of some movements. Rather each has a part to play and together they make up the whole. The health and well being of the Christian family as a whole has depended on the health and vitality of these different traditions and their capacity to see themselves as part of the truly one holy catholic and apostolic church of the creeds.

The very process of the spread of Anglican Christianity and the character of its response to the gospel in the shape of its ecclesial communities has produced both different customs and different ways of thinking about church issues. In the process of enculturation Anglicans have found themselves dealing not just with benign social and political structures. They have also encountered these political realities as malign forces against which they have had to struggle. As a consequence the personal and local dynamic in Anglicanism has created not just diversity of custom and mental habits, but it has done so at points which have been vital to the way Anglicans have understood and been committed to the gospel.

It is noteworthy that the issues occupying Anglicans have not been the matters of clerical dress or liturgical choreography that had been regarded by a previous generation to be of such fundamental importance. These conflicts really only made sense within a narrow European ethnic and cultural framework. The issues now confronted by Anglicans have to do with the way in which they engage with the powers amongst which they live. They affect not only the public conduct of Anglicans but also the character of the church's behavior in the community. Ecclesial issues arising out of the confrontation with the powers raise fundamental concerns about how the gospel is preached in word and proclaimed in deed. The acid test for Anglicans is not organizational style, nor even the details

of their international institutional arrangements. Rather it is the manner whereby Anglicans can testify to the Christian truth in their own communities. That is the point towards which this book moves.

This book explores a globalized tradition of Christianity that has grown out of a local form and it does so with the current diversity and conflicts amongst Anglicans in view. This means we must look at the process by which local traditions developed and how these traditions have related to other sub traditions of the universal church. Along the way we will assess some specifics of the Anglican experience. This will involve a significant re-casting of some prominent elements of the tradition and clarifying some of the distinctives of the Anglican tradition. This leads to a more nuanced appreciation of the force of the social and political framework within which Anglicans have had to work out their salvation. It also entails showing how the imperial route to catholicity espoused by Pope Gregory VII and consolidated in later centuries took no firm root in Anglicanism. In the modern period it also shows how different political and social structures and understandings have produced different forms of secular society and different understandings of plurality and diversity. These differences have shaped the contemporary debate amongst Anglicans and contributed to the misunderstanding evident amongst Anglicans around the world.

My primary argument is contained in Part I of this book. These chapters originated as a series of lectures delivered at a conference in the Lifetime Education Centre at Virginia Theological Seminary in June 2006. The second part is based loosely on some previously published material, though it has been completely re-written and on a number of points I find I have changed my mind. In the last fifteen years Anglicans have embarked on a high-risk strategy of conflict avoidance and containment in the face of growing differences over the place of homosexuality in the public life of the church. These more precise issues are taken up in Part II, which includes a consideration of the recent Lambeth Conference.