

Keynote Address to the Fellowship of Concerned Churchmen. August 22, 2006.

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I have been asked today to speak on the question, 'What does conservative Anglicanism have to contribute to the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church?' At least that was the initial statement of the subject given to me. Before offering something of an answer to something like this question, I wish to refine the subject and consider some of its terms. Then I will offer four possible answers to the refined question:

Let me begin with a challenge to what seems to me to be the most problematic element of the question, namely the term 'conservative Anglicanism'. 'Conservative' is a relative term with little absolute meaning. To be conservative is to seek to conserve or preserve something, to resist change, or to be less inclined towards change than others. In the 1970s foreign policy experts spoke of 'conservative' members of the Soviet Politburo: an odd concept which, nonetheless, shows the vagueness of the adjective. Since radical changes have rocked the Anglican world at its highest levels since the 1960s, and since such changes still are in process in the Canterbury Communion, 'conservative' could refer to a vast array of positions, which need share little with each other beyond a resistance to some element in one of the revolutions of the last 30 or 40 years.

Consider, if you will, this hypothetical example. Jane Smith is an ordained clergyperson of the Episcopal Church and worships exclusively with the modern language forms of the 1979 Episcopalian worship book. Ms. Smith opposed the consecration of Gene Robinson, opposes all efforts to equate homosexual liaisons with Christian marriage, and is opposed to inclusive or gender-neutral language for the Deity. Ms. Smith subscribes to the Christological definitions of the Fourth Ecumenical Council. Ms. Smith favors legalized abortion on demand. Ms. Smith is, I submit, in the context of the contemporary Episcopal Church, a conservative. She may even describe herself as 'orthodox' because of her views concerning the classic Christological formulas. Ms. Smith may plausibly be described as conservative in 2006 because of her views on homosexual genital acts, although she embraces all of the three revolutionary changes wrought by the Minneapolis General Convention in 1976: namely priestesses, the 1979 book of prayers, and abortion. Ms. Smith is relatively conservative, yet I submit to you that an adjective that groups Ms. Smith and me together is of little heuristic value. So until 'conservative' is given more content - until we name the issues about which any given person or group is said to be conservative - the term is almost useless.

If 'conservative' is nearly useless, the alternative 'orthodox' is even worse. 'Orthodox' simply means that a given view meets the criteria a given speaker has in mind for correctness or truth. If Ms. Smith and I agree that the Christological formulations of the ecumenical councils are an essential element of doctrinal orthodoxy, well and good. But until we know what criteria a given speaker holds for defining orthodoxy, this term also has little or no content or heuristic value. At least 'conservative' clearly suggests opposition to some change or novelty. 'Orthodox' can mean almost anything. I sometime think that for some Anglican commentators - the estimable David Virtue comes to mind - 'orthodox Anglican' means simply 'opposed to homosexuality'. This reduction of meaning leads to the curious conclusion that Muslims, Hasidic Jews, and Mormons are orthodox Anglicans.

More useful as a general term than 'orthodox' or 'conservative' is 'traditional'. While this term also is very broad, it does at least have some content. Some things have clearly, objectively, and historically characterized Anglicanism or most Anglicans or many Anglicans, and so can properly be called 'traditionally Anglican', while other things are clearly excluded by the term. In the 1970s William F. Buckley, Jr., said that no one from Mao Zedong to Pope Paul VI could be sure that he *wasn't* an Episcopalian. That was a clever and telling comment about the post-revolutionary Episcopal Church. Nonetheless, we may reasonably assert that the Society of Jesus, Karl Barth, Planned Parenthood, Gene Robinson, the Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom, and the writings of B.F. Skinner are not traditional Anglicanism or classically Anglican. The historically-defined content supplied by the adjective 'traditional' makes this term more helpful than 'conservative' or 'orthodox'.

Nonetheless, the term 'traditional Anglicanism' is very broad and comprehensive, even if it is not as elastic and vague as the other terms. Any competent historian or theologian can make a powerful argument that Calvinist soteriology is embraced by the term 'traditional Anglicanism', since most of Elizabeth I's and James I's bishops, not to mention many later Evangelical Anglicans, were Calvinists in their soteriology. Most of the clergy in Sydney, Australia, have read more Calvin than Hooker. Most 18th century English clergymen held a kind of high Calvinist Eucharistic doctrine. So Calvinism, or at least many Calvinist ideas, may plausibly be described as 'traditionally Anglican'. But likewise sacramental and soteriological views that approximate those of the Council of Trent also have a long history and distinguished supporters in the Anglican world. Such Anglicanism also may plausibly be called 'traditional'. So too the Cambridge Platonists, the 18th century Latitudinarians, and the later Modernists ensure that liberal, rather anti-doctrinal Anglicanism may plausibly be called traditional. So too, finally, the Philo-Orthodox views of many Anglicans represent a traditional strand of Anglican thought. If 'traditional Anglican' has some content and excludes much else, still it embraces a vast field of often mutually contradictory views. Some would go so far as to define the essence of Anglicanism as the very fact of this variety, coexisting in tension perhaps, but still held in a kind of unity.

In any case, 'traditional' is a clearer adjective than 'conservative' or 'orthodox'. Therefore, let me revise my initial question ~~by~~ by using this somewhat more helpful term. Let us ask, 'What does traditional Anglicanism have to offer the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church?' I will offer next four possible answers.

The **first** and most depressing possible answer is that traditional Anglicanism now has little to offer the universal Church save scandal, confusion, and a cautionary example of comprehensiveness run amok. An absolutely open house will soon have no contents. An absolutely open mind will have little of interest to say. A religious tradition characterized by unceasing revolution, by a refusal to impose moral and doctrinal limits, and by supine accommodation of the *Zeitgeist* will experience steady, and finally a terminal, decline. Insofar as traditional Anglicanism is tied to the Episcopal Church or the Canterbury Communion, such decline is its obvious and already far advanced tendency. I doubt most of us here need elaboration of this point. Let me just emphasize that insofar as Anglicanism has in fact traditionally included a powerful anti-dogmatic, Modernist wing, the term 'traditional