

Anglicanism and the Episcopal Church 101

What it means to be an Episcopalian: Rediscovering a Rich Tradition

The following are reflections by John Westerhoff in *A People Called Episcopalians: A Brief Introduction To Our Peculiar Way of Life* (St. Luke's Press, Atlanta, 1994)

The Episcopal Church is a community of practice – the centrality of worship

“Our primary identity is as a community of practice. That is, we are bound together by our liturgy, rather than doctrinal emphasis or social organization. Orthodoxy for us is right worship and not right belief. Our rule for prayer is our rule for belief and life, and not the other way around. (3)

You just have to see and experience the Anglican way for yourself

... In other branches of Christianity, the decisions of councils, the writings of particular theologians, catechisms, confessional doctrinal statements, the decisions of bishops, particular interpretations of Scripture, or polity have significance unknown to Anglicans. If anyone wishes to know what Anglicans believe about issues of faith and life, they need to turn to The Book of Common Prayer and engage in the process of interpreting this document. ... For Anglicans, therefore, the answer to the question: “What is it to be an Anglican Christian?” is, “Come, worship and minister with us,” that is join us in liturgy. Our styles of worship in different congregations may be quite diverse, but our substance and content are consistent. Others might initially invite inquirers to study Scripture or explore doctrinal teachings, but we would save these activities for later as aspects of our reflection on our experience of worship and ministry. (4)

Jesus Christ the Word of God absolutely mediated by Scriptures, the Word of God relatively

... While maintaining that the Scriptures provide us with a unifying plumb line, Anglicans are willing to live with diverse and changing interpretations, rather than infallible certainty and binding prescriptions for all times. ... Christianity is a religion of a person, Jesus Christ, and not a book. Jesus is the Word of God absolutely. Yet our means for knowing the Incarnate Word is contained in the Scriptures, especially in the Gospels. Because this is so the Scriptures are the Word of God but relatively. (8-9)

Tradition: special attention to first five centuries; revered yet fallible

...Anglicans give special attention to the first five centuries, the formative years of the church in which the canon of the Scriptures was established, its seven ecumenical councils, the creeds, and the work of its classical theologians – the “church fathers” – and their various imaginative means for

interpreting the Scriptures. Tradition for Anglicans also includes such things as bishops' pastoral letters and the actions of General Conventions, the canons of the church, and historic documents....

...Nevertheless, insofar as the church is not infallible, neither is tradition; it too must be interpreted continually and open to reform. It is important to acknowledge that we Anglicans are a people who at our baptism are incorporated into a living, changing tradition, established by a community of faith that continually strives to know and do the will of God through the use of its three authoritative sources: Scripture, reason and tradition. Such efforts cannot help but result in disagreement and creative tension within the church. Therefore the church must be held together finally by the authority of love, or as St. Paul would advise us, we are "...to live a life of humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bonds of peace." (13-14)

Toleration of messiness; openness to ongoing revelation; avoiding premature fixation

... Anglicans are able to tolerate theological and ethical messiness; we do not need to have everything resolved or settled immediately. ... Anglicans encourage a searching, questioning, reasonable mind always open to new insights and change.(22)

At home in the world of symbol, myth and ritual

... While never being anti-intellectual, Anglicans are more at home in the intuitive way of thinking and knowing than the intellectual. We prefer art to philosophy and are more at home in the world of symbol, myth and ritual than systematic theology; more at home with liturgy that makes use of the arts (drama, dance, music, poetry and the visual arts) than discursive prose; and more at home with the 'feminine' than the 'masculine' dimensions of life.(23)