

St Boniface Trust Essay Competition

Why I am an Anglican and believe I shall remain so

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[Very few essays were submitted by women, and this one was deemed very good by the judges. Minimal editing has been required prior to publication.]

We were visiting Southern Italy as members of a choir, hosted by an Italian family, and it was nearing the end of a long day of rehearsing and sightseeing. We were sitting in the kitchen over *spaghetti alle vongole*, and emboldened no doubt by a glass or two of the local Puglian wine, I was feeling quite proud of my attempts at conversation with our (non-English-speaking) hosts – I had only been learning GCSE Italian for a short time at an evening class. Then suddenly the subject of conversation turned to religion, and of course the Italians wanted to know if we were Catholics. “*No, siamo anglicani*,” I replied confidently. As soon as I had said it my heart sank, because I knew what was coming next; “So what exactly do *anglicani* believe?”

If there was a chapter in my GCSE textbook on *Discussing theological questions*, sandwiched perhaps between *Booking a room in a hotel* and *Talking about hobbies*, I am afraid I had completely missed it. I think I managed to say something about Anglicans being Protestants, although we were a bit like Catholics too, but the Pope was not our Capo (I hope that I was not being rude to His Holiness, with those overtones of *The Godfather!*). The Italian hosts were polite, but I think they were really no wiser.

Actually, if I am honest, my limited Italian was a convenient excuse, because the plain fact is: I am not sure I know the answer. I know faithful Anglican churchgoers who would be very upset if you called them Catholic, and others who would be equally unhappy to be called Protestant. Whether it can really be said that they all subscribe to the same beliefs is very difficult to judge. Certainly, to an outsider it must seem difficult to comprehend that a church with such widely differing customs and liturgical practice, even such fundamental differences as the approach to women’s ministry or the meaning of the Eucharist, can survive as a unified institution. In spite of this, I have come to believe firmly that the

Church of England is my spiritual home, and it is where I intend to stay.

Why am I an Anglican? The simplest answer is that I was baptized in the Church of England at the age of six weeks, and regularly taken to church (mostly Matins or Evensong, as well as Sunday School) by my mother, who apparently found it strange that anyone could either doubt the existence of God, or think it possible to worship Him properly other than in an Anglican church. I knew the Catechism by heart, and could find my way round the Book of Common Prayer with ease, if not complete understanding. Anglican ways, and Anglican beliefs, became for me a fundamental part of everyday life. I suspect that there are many people in this country, certainly those who are middle-aged or older, for whom dusty, musty old Anglican churches, with their strange language of hassocks and cassocks, epistles and apostles, are inextricably woven into the fabric of childhood memories.

As I grew up, however, I started to question many aspects of religious belief in general and Anglicanism in particular, and embarked on a rather turbulent spiritual journey which took me over a period of years to some very different places. Eventually however I found myself again in an Anglican church, and knew that this was where I belonged. Admittedly there was an element of nostalgia for the 'blue remembered hills' of childhood (with, in the foreground, a little country church nestling at the heart of its village, the flag of St. George flying from the tower). Music has played an important part in my personal journey too, through a life-long love of Anglican chant and the wonderful heritage of liturgical settings and anthems composed specifically for Anglican worship. The Church of England's role in uniting the nation when rejoicing or mourning is important to me, but I am also proud to belong to a world-wide communion of Anglicans. All these factors doubtless played a part, but they are not the real reason why I returned to the fold. When it finally dawned on me that I would never be able to say I had grasped God with my intellectual understanding, but rather that He was asking me simply to commit myself in faith to a spiritual journey which would last my whole lifetime, I realized that the Anglican Church offered me the best place to explore all the possibilities of that Journey.

I can imagine however that my Italian friends might find that exposition of my faith a little too woolly, and would be inclined to press harder as to what it means to be an Anglican believer. Perhaps a good starting point might be the oath that clergy must swear when they are licensed. Besides swearing loyalty to The Queen as Head of the Church, and promising to be subject to the authority of their Bishop (thus upholding the ancient concept of Apostolic Succession) they promise to abide by the "Historic Formularies of the Church of England": the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion, the Book of Common Prayer and the Ordinal. However, the way in which the Thirty-Nine Articles have been interpreted in practice has varied considerably over the centuries and, as one priest put it to me, it is quite possible that many clergy have their fingers crossed as they make their solemn oath, hoping that their personal belief is not heretical!

If it is difficult to pin down exactly what beliefs we have in common as Anglicans, perhaps we could be said to be united by what we are not as much as by what we are: we are not subject to Rome, but in spite of being a product of the Protestant Reformation, we have not rejected the most important features of the ancient Church, in particular the Eucharist as central to worship, and the authority vested in bishops which has been passed down from the early apostles. This makes it possible to say that Anglicans are good Protestants; or to maintain that they are faithful to the Catholic Church (if that is interpreted as meaning the faith of the early Christians, uncorrupted by later centuries). The Thirty-Nine Articles make

it clear that the Church of England is a Protestant church by rejecting unequivocally the doctrine of Purgatory, the worshipping of relics and images or invocation of saints, and worship in a language not understood by the people — in other words, all the potentially venal and superstitious practices which reformers such as Martin Luther railed against — as well as the authority of Rome. At the same time it is clearly stated in the Thirty-Nine Articles that Anglican priests must subscribe to the doctrine of the Trinity, the Incarnation and the Resurrection, and that the two sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist are central to Anglican faith and worship.

There is a dichotomy at the heart of Anglicanism which one could summarise as the supremacy of Bible-based teaching from the pulpit versus the supremacy of the Sacrament. The acceptability of diversity of religious practice appears inherent in the Thirty-Nine Articles themselves: “It is not necessary that Traditions and Ceremonies be in all places one, and utterly like”.¹ Traditionally the Church of England has, in Hempton’s words, shown an “unwillingness to define traditions too closely, except when pressed hard by threats of serious deviation from them.”² It is easy to be critical of this stance, seeing the Church of England as a rather wishy-washy compromise between the Protestant and Catholic versions of Christianity – a church defined by what it does not find acceptable. In my own journey of faith I have at times been frustrated by this seeming vagueness; after all, certainty can be very attractive! In a society of shifting values where the emphasis appears to be on the right of each one of us to think or believe whatever we like, it is tempting to look to the Church at least to give definite answers, on moral issues as well as questions of faith. Will people struggling with the turbulence of modern life find the clear guidance they seek in an Anglican church? The rise of fundamentalism, whether of the Christian variety or among young Muslims, suggests that there is a desire for straightforward answers to the difficult questions of life.

It is also tempting to criticise the Anglican Church for being too complacent and ready to uphold the establishment, rather than engaging with the plight of the poor and disadvantaged in our society. The Church of England is an established church, and therefore has a fundamental role in the life of the nation. It is very good at ‘putting on a show’, but coronations, royal weddings and other state occasions can easily give the impression that the Church is inextricably bound up with the lives of the rich and the powerful. This is not just a modern phenomenon, and the rapid rise of Methodism among the working classes in the nineteenth century can be attributed in large part to the perception of lower citizens that the Church of England had little to offer them, being more interested in upholding the status quo (at a time when many of the rich were seriously afraid of revolution) than in caring for the spiritual well-being of the masses. The rash of church-building in Victorian times owed as much to a desire to establish the social status of donors as to a genuine call to minister to the population at large. In more recent times this accusation has still been levelled at the Church, and one can identify with the words of a vicar in inner-city Liverpool, interviewed in 1981: “In this country [the Church of England] has stood on the side of the powerful, the influential and the aspiring individual. Here in the inner cities the vicious cycle of multi-deprivation is as powerful as ever it was, and we’ve offered these people no real salvation, no real affirmation, no real redemption or release.”³ A church so divided by the different interpretations of its beliefs and conflicting understandings of what should be the focus of its life and worship surely does not sound like

¹ *Article 34 of the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion.*

² *Hempton (1966), p11.*

³ *Priestland (1981) p146.*

the body which can bring the light of Christ to the many dark corners of our land today, or indeed like the antidote to fundamentalism.

What I have gradually come to see, however, is that the most important characteristic of Anglicanism is that very ability to accommodate different ways of approaching God and worshipping him. It is not dichotomy, but consensus, which seems to me to be the outstanding characteristic of the Church of England, and to be its greatest strength. As David Jenkins puts it, "The Anglican way has much to say for it in keeping many strands of devotion, understanding and explanation going while never insisting that anyone of them is either the only true one or the one which has really got there."⁴ This has of course not been achieved and maintained over the centuries without pain and conflict, and once again in our own time we see our unity being put under strain, particularly since the ordination of women in the Church of England from 1994 onwards. History shows us however that our Church has creaked and groaned under many strains of conflicting belief before, and somehow has held together, because most Anglicans recognise that "belonging has greater theological resonance than schism".⁵

The consensus at the heart of the Church of England goes right back to its origins, its *raison d'être* in an age when Europe was being torn apart by religious conflict. As every schoolchild knows, King Henry VIII abolished papal authority and made himself Head of the English Church in order to divorce his queen and remarry, in the hope of securing a male heir. This act did not in itself bring great change to the English Church; apart from the disappearance of the Pope's name from parish prayers, the ordinary churchgoer would hardly have noticed any difference in the first few years of the English Reformation. There is also little evidence of popular support for the break with Rome; rather than coming from below, it was imposed from above, with increasing savagery, and such cataclysmic change was only possible because the populace believed implicitly that they were bound in obedience to the powers-that-be. There were however those at court in the centre of power who were strongly influenced by the developments in Germany following Martin Luther's assault on the Roman Catholic Church, and they were inspired during Henry's reign to force through the abolition of what were seen as superstitious practices, but which were for the ordinary Englishman the foundations of everyday life: intercession for the dead, the veneration of saints and celebration of holy days, pilgrimages and pardons, were an integral part of their lives.

The disappearance of monastic houses as they were suppressed from 1536 onwards is often thought of as the aspect of Reformation which must have had the greatest impact on ordinary people. However, it was the doctrinal statements and injunctions of the following years which were designed to change the English Church into a Protestant one, and to purge it of Catholic doctrine. The Ten Articles of 1536 were the first doctrinal statement of the new Church of England, and the injunctions issued later that year required clergy to preach these Ten Articles, and encourage parishioners to read the Bible. Two years later it was decreed that the Bible in Coverdale's English translation was to be bought by parishes and made available to all, but perhaps more traumatically for ordinary worshippers, the saints were all but excised from the Litany, the Rosary and the Angelus forbidden, and the shrines in places of pilgrimage were ordered to be broken up and the relics destroyed. This injunction unleashed throughout the country a frenzy of destruction, as images of every kind, and everything associated with the veneration of them, were smashed to pieces by

⁴ Jenkins (2002) p.ix.

⁵ *Ibid*, p140.

militant Protestants. Another significant development of the role of the Church of England took place in 1538, when parishes were required to keep a register recording all weddings, christenings and burials in the parish, thus making priests and officers of the Church into agents of the state.

The King himself hesitated to embrace the Protestant reformation wholeheartedly, becoming seemingly more conservative in matters of religion towards the end of his life. The Six Articles of 1539 reinstated some of the traditional teaching of the Catholic Church, including transubstantiation, clerical celibacy, and auricular confession. However, the accession of his son Edward VI in 1547 brought changes designed to establish England as a firmly Protestant nation. Though still a child — he was only fifteen at the time of his death — Edward received a thorough education from strongly Protestant tutors, and his advisers, especially Thomas Cranmer, were determined to press ahead with reforms which would eradicate all traces of Catholic practice from the English Church. Ever more extreme injunctions were issued to abolish all images and processions, and, with more far-reaching consequences, the guilds and fraternities were dissolved. They had not only raised a large part of the income of parish churches, but had also provided the link that bound the living and the dead through the chantries and the priests whose function was to say Requiem Masses for the dead. It is difficult for us to comprehend just how traumatic it must have been not only to see venerated images and relics smashed, but to see the ties between the living and their departed loved ones being so brutally severed. Though the young king reigned for only six years, it was during this time that the ‘Historic Formularies’ were created which were to form the basis of Anglican belief and practice, right up to our own time: the Book of Common Prayer, the Ordinal, and Cranmer’s Forty-two Articles of 1550 (later modified in Elizabeth’s reign as the Thirty-Nine Articles).

With the death of Edward, his half-sister Mary was able to begin her attempts to undo the Protestant Reformation and bring the Church of England back into the Roman Catholic fold. She faced a daunting task; not only had a vast amount of ecclesiastical property been sold to private landowners and the buildings been demolished or converted to secular use, but also reforming ideas had taken root among the English people. In spite of Mary’s attempts to eradicate such ideas, resorting to the burning at the stake of a number of leading Protestant churchmen, she was unable to turn back the clock. Although many of the population still clung to the Catholic faith of their fathers, reformers who had taken refuge overseas, or who continued to work subversively in England, prevented Mary from leading England back into the Church of Rome in the short period of time which was granted to her as Queen before her death in 1558.

It was in these turbulent circumstances that the young Princess Elizabeth found herself Queen of a land riven by religious controversy. The fact that Roman Catholics considered Elizabeth to be illegitimate and a heretic, and therefore debarred from the throne, made them automatically into potentially dangerous enemies of state; the various plots aimed at supplanting Elizabeth with her Catholic kinswoman Mary Queen of Scots show that Elizabeth had good justification for her suspicion of Catholics. However, the Queen’s own personal religious convictions cannot be established with certainty, and she famously declared that she had “no desire to make windows into men’s souls”. As an astute ruler she no doubt recognised the opportunity to bring stability to her country by establishing a church which could unite different factions, where all citizens were obliged to worship regularly, using the forms prescribed in the Book of Common Prayer. In effect this was a Protestant church where, however, some Catholic practice, even belief, could be tolerated.

The Act of Uniformity of 1559, though essentially Protestant, therefore laid the foundations for the present-day Church of England, with its unique ability to avoid schism by allowing flexibility and “scope for different emphases within a wide tradition”.⁶ Elizabeth’s long reign enabled the new Religious Settlement to become well established in the hearts and minds of most English people, helped by influential theologians such as Richard Hooker, who steered the Church of England in the direction of reason and tolerance, with a respect for tradition. In his highly influential work *Of the Lawes of Ecclesiastical Polite* Hooker argued for the ‘via media’ between the extreme positions of Puritan and Roman Catholic believers which threatened the stability of the state at that time – that ‘middle way’ which is still the defining characteristic of the Anglican Church in our own day.

One should however be careful not to see the Elizabethan Religious Settlement of the sixteenth-century in too rosy a light; after Elizabeth’s death the fault lines between the factions became very visible. The Puritans, the extreme Protestant wing, pressed for an end to episcopacy and the Book of Common Prayer, while those who now began to be called ‘Anglicans’ advocated the governance of bishops and were less hostile to Catholic practices. This was not merely a conflict of words: the Civil War, with all the horrors inflicted on the civilian population as well as the combatants, arose at least partly from the Puritan Parliament’s abolition of bishops and the Prayer Book. In spite of this, England was spared the worst excesses of religious conflict in Europe during the seventeenth century. In Germany, for example, ravaged by the Thirty Years’ War, it is estimated that the population was reduced by almost half through war, famine, disease and expulsion.⁷ Less well-known perhaps are later instances of the suffering caused when rulers did not allow any tolerance in matters of belief, for example the expulsion in 1731 by the Catholic Prince-Archbishop of Salzburg of 20,000 Protestant subjects, forced out of their homes in the middle of winter into terrible hardship.⁸ In eighteenth-century England, by contrast, the Church of England had developed into an inclusive and moderate national church. It is significant that two festivals added to the Christian calendar of the Church of England at that time are the commemoration of the execution of Charles I (a reminder of the excesses of Puritan zeal); and November 5th (recalling the preservation of the nation from the evils of popery). The Church could thus be said to embody the Enlightenment ideals of balance and harmony, as well as stressing Christian ethics and the importance of national traditions.

Once again, one must guard against idealising a church which had a tendency to be lax and complacent, and which allied itself with the ruling class to such an extent that ordinary working people found it difficult to identify with it. Roy Strong, speaking of the “cold formalism” of the Church of England, believes that “if you were religious during this period you would almost certainly have been a Methodist.”⁹ As the Church’s role in education and its monopoly over marriages and burials was gradually taken away by the state during the nineteenth century, it was in danger of becoming increasingly irrelevant to the vast majority of the population. The Church of England’s response to this situation was first the evangelistic revival (inspired by the rise of the Methodists and other Dissenters) led by such as William Wilberforce and the Clapham Sect, and then the Oxford Movement’s advocacy of a return to pre-Reformation churchmanship, with emphasis on the sacrament and the sacred nature of priesthood.

⁶ Hempton (1966) p11.

⁷ Wedgwood (1938) p453.

⁸ Schwaiger (2008) p7.

⁹ Strong (2007) p202

The Oxford Movement had a profound influence, bringing about the reordering of most churches (whether Anglo-Catholic or not), as well as leading to more formality in worship. It could however be seen as divisive, having left us with a legacy of 'High Church' and 'Low Church' Anglicanism, where for some faith is centred on tradition and the Sacrament, while for others Scripture and personal salvation are paramount. While it has been relatively straightforward for the two positions to co-exist until recently, the recent controversy over the ordination of women to the episcopate has put the Anglican consensus under great strain. It feels as though the irresistible force of women's growing role in priestly ministry has come up against the immovable object of Anglo-Catholic insistence on upholding the centuries-old tradition of ordaining only male persons to the priesthood. With some Anglo-Catholics contemplating whether to take up the Pope's offer of an Ordinariate which would preserve their distinctively Anglican spiritual and liturgical heritage within the Roman Catholic Church, it might seem that we are in danger of tearing ourselves apart over this matter. While recognising the sincere convictions on both sides of the argument, we must not forget that non-churchgoers are simply bemused by the whole issue, which seems to show that the Church is more interested in doctrinal wrangling than in sharing the Good News of Christ. Perhaps, then, the flexibility which has kept Anglicans together for so long might turn out to be a fatal weakness.

I truly believe however that, rather than being a weakness, the flexibility within the Anglican tradition can still be its greatest strength, enabling the Church to bring the Gospel to the people of this country at a time when the Christian faith is in danger of becoming totally marginalised. The sobering fact is that church attendance in England and Wales fell at the end of the millennium to below 10% of the population – for the first time since the Dark Ages.¹⁰ The strident, joyless atheism of such as Richard Dawkins may be seen by some as a great threat to religion today, but I wonder if Christianity is not more threatened by the indifference and apathy of so many people who see it as having no relevance to their lives. And yet at the same time, the looming prospect of economic collapse and the end of the capitalist dream of ever-increasing wealth is causing many people to seek answers to the deeper questions of life. There is an increasing spiritual hunger, and we as Anglicans have much to offer those who have no feeling of belonging to a community of faith.

Ours is a church where no-one needs to feel excluded; as the Church of England's website proclaims, it is "a Christian presence in every community" The old joke used to be that people who had little interest in questions of faith would put "C of E" when required to state their religion on forms; but the heartening fact remains that every person in England has an Anglican parish church which functions as a centre for their community, which is there for them for their personal rites of passage, and enables them to celebrate local or national events or mourn communal disasters together. It is a place where people of any background, those of little faith, those of none, even those who are not sure what they are seeking, can come and go without having to make a firm public commitment. That is not to say, of course, that lack of commitment is something that one would necessarily wish to encourage. However, the sobering fact is that a large part of the population of this country could be described as 'unchurched'. It is no longer the norm for parents (church-going or not) to send their children to Sunday School as a matter of course, and religious education in many schools, often delivered by teachers who are not themselves believers, consists of a confusing multi-faith concoction of festivals and customs, mixed up with some discussion of general moral and ethical issues. As regular churchgoers we have

¹⁰ Jones (2001) p13.

to remind ourselves of just how daunting it can be to enter an unfamiliar building, where seemingly arcane rituals are performed and obscure technical vocabulary is used. The challenge for Anglican churches today is to offer to tentative seekers after God, the timorous, the undecided, even the sceptical, the opportunity to find “a place where I might, without the faintest suspicion of insincerity, join with others in simply seeking His presence”, as the Quaker ideal expresses it¹¹, without putting pressure on them to conform to certain practices or to accept certain dogmas.

Many people in England today have not grown up in a Christian environment, yet have a desire to explore their spiritual nature and seek answers to the great questions of life. There is a ripe harvest ready for the Christian churches to reap, and I believe that the Anglican Church has a unique advantage in being placed within reach of every inhabitant of the land, and in a position to offer each individual the chance to find their own expression of spirituality, without the pressure of having to subscribe to certain tenets, or conform to certain practices. As F. B. Chancellor puts it, “throughout the whole range of the Church’s forms of worship the emphasis lies rather on ‘you may’ or ‘you should’ than on ‘you must’ ”.¹² Because the Church of England can accommodate differences so well, it can offer even the most hesitant seeker after God the chance to take that difficult first step, and find an appropriate expression of spirituality.

The town where I live is an excellent illustration of that breadth of spiritual experience which is such a precious asset of the Anglican Church. There are three parishes, with three completely different approaches to worship. In the Forward in Faith church, where tradition is all-important, worship is strongly Anglo-Catholic in nature, and the Eucharist is designated ‘Mass’. Another of the churches is firmly in the evangelical tradition, with lively worship accompanied by a band, and a strong emphasis on scriptural teaching. The third parish tries to incorporate features of both tendencies without going to the extremes of either. A foreign visitor unfamiliar with the Church of England would probably be amazed to find that they all belong to the same denomination. However, what matters is that we all know that what unites us is infinitely stronger than what divides us. There are many areas of ministry in which we are able to collaborate and share resources, something which will become increasingly important in these times of financial constraints, where clergy resources are likely to have to be spread more thinly in future. In each of the three parishes of the town our common life and witness is centred around our Lord’s command to break bread and drink wine together in remembrance of Him, however differently this may be performed around the altar, and despite differences in the understanding of what is actually taking place in the Eucharist. In David Jenkins’ words, “belonging is more important than agreeing”¹³ – surely a model for a church and for a society where individual needs and preferences are respected, and individual strengths can be supported and encouraged.

Elizabeth I, who set out to establish a Church of England which would dispel discord from her kingdom, declared that “There is only one Christ, Jesus, one faith, all else is a dispute over trifles.” We may find it difficult to accept her view that deeply-held convictions can be dismissed as trifles, but we can surely recognise that there are as many ways to come to God and to worship Him as there are human beings. St Paul, recognising that everyone is different, believed that the Gospel must be preached in the way that is appropriate for each

¹¹ *Quaker Faith and Practice* (1999) paragraph 2.02.

¹² *Chancellor* (1962) p14.

¹³ *Jenkins* (2002) p183

individual. When he was among Jews, he “argued in the synagogue every Sabbath;”¹⁴ when speaking to the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers of Athens, he stood on the Areopagus, where they were accustomed to expounding philosophical argument, using logic and alluding to the religious practices with which they were familiar in order to explain his message.¹⁵ He became “all things to all men, that I might by all means save some.”¹⁶ I pray that we will acknowledge that as Anglicans we have a unique and precious gift in a Church that not only accommodates but embraces differences with thankfulness.

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¹⁴ *Acts of the Apostles 18.4.*

¹⁵ *Ibid, 17.22-31.*

¹⁶ *1 Corinthians 9.22.*