

The Church is One. A Reflection from East Asia

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The Global South Primates of the Anglican Communion were wise in choosing the “One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic” to be the central theme of the Third South-South Encounter that takes place later this year in Egypt. In doing so, the Primates challenge the Communion to move beyond isolated controversies; not to ignore them, but situate them within a broader vision of what it means for the Communion to live as a community of Jesus Christ that is in communion with historic *ecclesia*. In what follows, I shall confine the discussion on how the confession “the Church is One” should shape the character of our mission and our common life.

We often approach the question of the Church’s one-ness as a problem *between* different Christian communities. For example, the 1920 Lambeth Conference issued an *Appeal* “to associate ourselves in penitence and prayer with all those who deplore the divisions of Christian people, and are inspired by the vision and hope of a visible unity of the whole Church”.¹ The Lambeth Fathers went on to pass twenty-three resolutions to elaborate this Appeal under the heading of “Reunion of Christendom”.² The heading is revealing. The broken fellowship within the Christendom informed their reflection on the one-ness of the Church. The issue at stake is *unity* between churches within a world that has been brought under the discipline of the Christian Gospel (so the Lambeth Fathers thought in the heydays of ecumenism in the early twentieth century) rather than of the *uniqueness* of the Christian community within the unbelieving world.³

The above observation is important for our present discussion. The Christendom legacy of European and North American churches has shaped the self-understanding of the church. There are three main features. First, their Christian experience arose historically from a shared Mediterranean culture. Second, churches are situated within social and political structures that were shaped by a long history of Christendom. Thirdly, from the time of Constantine until perhaps the nineteenth century, secular authorities were involved in defending and propagating the faith, and upholding the ecclesiastical and doctrinal positions of the church as institution.

We live now however in the radically different contexts following the political and social realignments at the end of the Second World War. Indeed, Lesslie Newbign and John Taylor, two Anglican missionaries who have devoted considerable time

¹ *Resolution 9.*

² *Resolutions 9-31.*

³ In this connection, the “notes” of the church (as one, holy catholic, and apostolic) from the patristic age down to the nineteenth century, have often been expounded along institutional lines. For example, the North African church in the third to the fifth centuries reflected on the Oneness of the Church in the face of the claims of “schismatic” communities on the one hand, and of Rome over the African churches on the other. In the thirteenth century, Boniface VIII issued the *Unum Sanctam* to defend the jurisdiction of Rome over every human creature. The notes of the church were later discussed in what constitute the true church in the rival claims between Roman Catholics and Protestants in the time of the Reformation. Perhaps of more interest to Anglicans, the marks of the church were a key consideration among the Tractarians in the nineteenth century as they sought to define the integrity of the Church of England as Church (“Notes of the Church,” *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd Ed.).

outside of the Western world, are among those who not only alert us to the changed contexts, but also helpfully suggest ways forward for the Christian church.⁴

The questions of faith that we need to reflect upon are these: How are Christian communities around the world able to understand themselves to be *visibly one*, and not fragmented into many churches that only exemplify local interests? Are there fresh ways that we can approach the questions on the instruments of unity, which have all along been expounded along institutional lines? More crucially, what would our confession of the “one-church” if we restore it within its proper missiological context. This is to say, if we restore Jesus’ Prayer in John 17 to his original context, Jesus’ prayer that “they may all be one” is less a prophetic prayer for visible unity among churches than a prayer for integrity of his disciples to remain in his truth in an unbelieving world. (John 17.16). To put this differently, hitherto “Catholic” communities have been developing the doctrine of the “one” along ecclesiastical lines, as a polemic against “schismatic” and “non-conforming” *Christian* communities that also confess the same Triune faith. How would our doctrine of the church look if we were able to develop it at the cutting edges of engagement with the different faith-systems and political structures in the world?

Asian churches within the Communion are particularly able to contribute in this discussion. Although churches in Asia can trace their histories back to the first centuries of Christian mission – and indeed, Syriac and non-Chalcedonian forms of Christianity leave their traces in India and China⁵ -- the two major cultural groups in Asia, Christianity is a relatively new experience to many Asians. East Asia, in particular, has been a silent partner within the Communion. The reasons are not difficult to see. Most, if not all, national churches in Asia only came into existence in the last few decades. For example, within the Anglican Communion: Hong Kong (1998), South East Asia (1996), Korea (1992), Philippines (1990), Church of North India (1970), Church of South India (1947). Some churches, for example, Taiwan is still part of EUCSA; and some, noticeably Indonesia and nations in Indochina, still do not have their own national church structures. Moreover, China remains for some diehard romantics a target for “Christian raids and occupation” rather than a church of its own right.

These young churches emerged alongside new nation states after the Second World War. Thus, church affiliation, along with citizenship and other social identities are new experiences to many. Peoples and refugees from different faiths and countries come together to build their new homes, cities and nations. They are united not so much by a shared past and tradition, but by sojourn- and refugee-experiences, and a desire to create viable communities.

Anglo-American Anglicans often are not conscious of this human factor in their understanding of churches outside their immediate horizons. Hence, some would characterize churches in East Asia, for example, to be “conservative” or “charismatic”,

⁴ See Lesslie Newbign, *The Other Side of 1984. Questions for the Churches* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1983); John V. Taylor, “The Future of Christianity,” in *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Christianity*, ed. John McManners (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990) 628-665.

⁵ See *Handbook of Christianity in China, Volume One: 635-1800*, ed. Nicolas Standaert (Leiden; Brill, 2001) 1-42; Peter Brown, “Christianity in Asia,” in *The Rise of Western Christendom. Triumph and Diversity AD 200-1000* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996) 167-183.

interpreted according to how those categories may mean in North America. Perhaps it is better to put the churches in Asia in their real situation. This is to say, they are very young churches, and hence any categorization would be premature. The Anglican Communion may miss an excellent opportunity for it to become a truly global Communion by ignoring the experiences that the Communion together can gain from the Asian churches. Sometimes, Canterbury and the Church of England may be tempted to think that Britain is still the mother church, as Rome claimed it was for churches in the Mediterranean world. Hence, it may still offer institutional and administrative responses to the current crises. It is futile to think that Communion issues can be resolved by creating an Advisory Council around Canterbury. In addition, it is illusory as well to think that so long as the Church of England recruits ethnic Asian and African in its courts, it has embraced world Christianity. That may have met the domestic agenda in Britain today, but certainly not in the wider world.

How can churches in Asia contribute to the understanding that the church is one? I shall offer the following lines for engagement:

First, churches in Asia can help us to reflect on what the sojourn experience means for the self-understanding of the church. It would be unfortunate if Asian churches themselves continue to adopt the same ministerial patterns, architectural styles, and liturgical forms of their Western counterparts. The West has often internalized and spiritualized the biblical meaning of sojourn and pilgrimage. Christians in Asia, at least from the sixth century onwards, live primarily as sojourners in non-Christian societies. How is the faith, and Christian identities transmitted from one generation to another? How do Christians regard themselves as belonging to the one (hence unique) community of Jesus Christ the one Lord and Saviour, in the face of changing social identities and the lack of political status, and in many cases, long-term separation from sacramental ministries? I suggest that the Communion may find that the liturgy and sacred texts may again find their role in safeguarding the canons of the church.⁶ Anglicans tend to conceive unity as unity across geographical divides; at least the four instruments of unity as the Communion presently defines them lead to this line of thinking. Perhaps there should be fresh reflection on how the Communion can guard its uniqueness across temporal divides as well.

⁶It is revealing that in the seventh century, the early Syriac missionaries (likely from Sogdiana) took to themselves the translation of sacred texts and the building of places of worship (*fanjing jiansi*) to be central task in China: 明明景教 言归我唐 翻经建寺 存歿舟航 百福偕作 万邦之康 *Mingming Jingjiao, yangui wo tang, fanjing jiansi, cunmo zhouhang, baifu xiezu, wanbang zhi kang* (“When the pure, bright Illustrious Religion was introduced to our Tang Dynasty, the Scriptures were translated and places of worship built, and the vessels set in motion for the living and the dead; every kind of blessings was then obtained, and all the kingdoms enjoyed a state of peace” from the inscription on the Xi’an Stele). Contrast with the marks of the church in the *Thirty Nine Articles*: “where the pure Word of God is *preached*, and the Sacraments be *duly ministered*” (Article 19). Do we not see here a preoccupation on the correct mode and process that has led the church down a positivist blind alley rather than the subject matter itself? Note again the strategies of later missionaries to China from the Latin traditions, who sought to build new Christendoms in the Southern Cone, Asia and Africa, to supplement or replace their lost Christendoms in Europe. Churches were then concerned with institutional presences. Missionaries focused their attention to cities rather than to rural areas. Hence, Christian presences, for example, in China, were severely weakened and even obliterated in times of political changes. Contrast again with Buddhist presences. They are less hierarchical, rooted in rural settings, and bound together across temporal and geographical divides by liturgy and sacred texts.

Secondly, churches in Asia can offer to the wider Communion an important test case of unity in pluriformity. Asians live in countries in vastly different political, religious, economic, and social settings. British colonials, and missionaries at their heels, saw the superior European civilization and the English language to be the instruments of unity for peoples of varied backgrounds. Are Anglicans in Asia able to rise above this nineteenth century mentality? Can Anglicans in South Asia, for example, able to provide an alternative to the peace negotiated by the British Raj? How can Christians from vastly different settings coordinate their efforts and confess their one identity in Christ? Indeed, how should Christians live together with neighbours of different faiths, and build with them a common society? The concrete acts of welcoming neighbours in our journeying, rather than of building new Christian empires, may be the fabrics that bind us as one human community. The opportunities for such acts of love are overwhelming, for countries in Asia are united in the experience of natural disasters and health crises that transcend national and ethnic boundaries.

Thirdly, East Asians could provide leadership in inter-faith dialogues. What does it mean for Christians to confess Jesus as Messiah and Lord? For Christians in Asia, inter-faith dialogues are not simply matters of interest for professional theologians and academics. They carry political and social consequences. Anglicans take pride in themselves being national, rather than denominational, churches. At the same time, what does it mean to be churches in nations that embrace other faiths (for example, Islam) as the official religion? Are there alternatives to a fundamentalist solution?⁷ The Christian social vision would be a crucial area of missiological engagement with those from other faith systems. Churches in Asia cannot remain to be reactionary to what their governments (and the liberal West) propose. They need to build up their theological concepts to able themselves to pose vital questions on what it means to be human. Such questions and discussions would then necessarily touch upon questions on human society, human sexuality, stewardship of material belongings, political ordering of human societies, and the like, and in so doing contribute to the public discussion on the ordering of their own nations and societies.

Christians in Asia bear testimony to how, in the midst of political and social upheavals, they preserve their distinct identity in Christ. They help the Communion to recover a vision that the church is a sojourning, worshipping, and missionary community. They point to different ways that the church can guard its uniqueness.

⁷ For example, it would be interesting for the church in Malaysia to share its experience with their counterparts in Africa. What, for instance, has the Malaysian Christians to say to vision of “Islam Hadhari (civilisational Islam)” that the present moderate Malaysian government proposes?