

## The Communion post November 2 2003 -- Self-Examination from East Asia

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Bishop Tom Wright of Durham in a recent article in the Guardian (October 18, 2003: That special relationship) helpfully compared the plight of the United Nations with that of the Anglican primates in the face of American unilateral actions. It would be unhelpful to stereotype those in leadership in America, and in ECUSA, as ugly Americans. But indeed many of us in the East greet the statements from the Presiding Bishop of ECUSA and from New Hampshire, issued so hastily after the agreed statement of the Primates in Lambeth, with disbelief and dismay.

For us in East Asia, the rumbles in the West this time come to us with personal interests and ramifications. This time, we cannot curtly dismiss it as something which happen elsewhere, and hence can safely be ignored. Many of the parishioners who are involved in the drama in New Westminster come from Hong Kong. The dissenting priests are our personal friends. On the wider scene, East Asia's mission history is inextricably linked with American and Canadian churches, not to mention that the Philippines and Taiwan have had special ties, and benefited (continually?) from the material and spiritual support from ECUSA; indeed, Taiwan is still part of ECUSA.

And yet, what makes the situation more interesting is that this crisis happens when, perhaps for the first time in many years, the Communion is blessed with a theologian of considerable stature and sensitivity at the chair of Canterbury; as one, who not only in his formal position is able to perform the assigned role in the world-wide Communion, but is able to fulfill his office as *spiritual* leader, that is, as *teacher and interpreter of the faith*, in true Alexandrian tradition, to the whole church and the wider world. And this awareness should shed light in how the crisis should be approached.

I said "approached" rather than "managed". The choice of the last word is deliberate. It is helpful to draw a parallel between the present crisis with that of publication of the "Myth of God Incarnate" in the late 70s. The "Myth" captured the imagination of the ordinary people and took Western churches by storm. Some self-confessed orthodox Christians condemned the authors, among which are Anglican theologians, and demanded their expulsion from the church. That however, was not the only possible approach. Bishop Stephen Neill and some theologians, soon after the release of the *Myth*, issued *The Truth of God Incarnate*, as a considered response. This led to further dialogue, and symposiums, which helped the Christian community to clarify and define the issues, and renewed its understanding of Jesus Christ as very God and very man, to the long-term benefit of the church.

In other words, the gut response for member churches of Communion perhaps is to *manage* the crisis; that is, to declare, after the likely consecration in New Hampshire on November 2, whether one's church is in or out of Communion with ECUSA, as if our Communion were some sort of United Nations or the Commonwealth. This may be the right course of action for some churches: a prudent decision, but nevertheless a *political* decision. Nevertheless, the crisis may indeed have some elements of truth to teach us with regard to our own life and mission, which I as a Christian need to receive and repent of, that we all can emerge from the crisis as stronger churches.

For us in East Asia, it calls for critical self-examination at least of the following areas as we seek to offer fresh obedience to the Word of God today:

1. What do we have to teach about sexuality? It is sometimes said that the ECUSA by their liberal stance in homosexuality undermine our mission in our own context, because their stance causes moral indignation even among the non-believers. Yet, does this not suppose that we share the same (conservative) suppositions on sexuality as those around us in our societies and cultures? How does the Bible renew our understanding of sex? Where is the cutting edge? What message does the gospel bring to the area of sex should we preach to our own community? For the church in Hong Kong, when we still have not made up our mind on the issue of remarriage for divorcees, what would a decision to stay in or out of Communion with ECUSA mean to the parishioners? What have we to teach the community of faith? That we need to discover from a more faithful reading of the Scriptures. Otherwise, we would simply make decisions on non theological grounds, as Bishop Tom Wright put it in his article.
2. What have we to contribute to the wider Communion and the Christian churches? Churches in the majority world, especially those in East Asia, are mainly in the early days of gaining their status as provinces in the Communion. The cultivation of mature relationship presupposes a measure of confidence in our own identity, which can only come about through theological maturity. Churches in the West are often impressed with the efficiency of East Asian churches. We are always involved in huge projects. Such success blinds us to the need for spiritual maturity. I have said in another paper that I believe the term "Anglican Communion" and our self designation of "Anglicans" may no longer be useful for our mission today. For many member-churches in East Asia, our self-designation is "member of the Holy Catholic Church", and not "Anglicans". For the term, like the veil of Moses, reminds us only of our Anglo-history (that is what *Anglican* means), binds us to remain Anglo-American-centric, and blinds us to the vision and task of labouring to become part of the Holy Catholic Church (Sheng gong hui). The rules and resolutions adopted in the history of the Communion (dated from Lambeth 1868) so far are conventions which had served to keep adolescent children together within a family, during a period when the missionary societies are devolving their responsibilities to native churches. Is it not the time to move from custodianship to full status as heirs of the true promise? This is to say, in the past we have been at pains to devise means to keep the family together. It is more fruitful to think through how the family members can move on as an Apostolic Fellowship: as successors of our apostolic forefathers to bless and connect with other families (to follow though the analogy) and the wider world? Some radical restructuring of the Communion for mission is called for.

Our Communion in the past decades have succumbed to administrative style of governance, with bishops acting as chief administrators, and the instruments of unity as consensus building devices which we hope somehow are able to smooth out the uneven voices in the Communion. The present crisis serves as a wake-up call. Would there be a day when we can see more theological output from the chief-servants of the Church, and the emergence of more centres in the Communion (nay, Apostolic Fellowship) marked by true scholarship and faithful witness, as Alexandria, Jerusalem, and Carthage did in the Mediterranean world before Rome became the overlord? I pray that God would engage our minds and passions to the realising of this more noble vision.

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