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Synodality in Anglicanism

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Abstract: The Church of England and the wider Anglican Communion have adopted forms of synodical government from the very beginnings of their existence, even when this was exercised through parliament. There has been very little theological discussion of synods, especially of the role of the laity. Although some have used a Trinitarian theology to analyse synods, far more appropriate is a form of Augustinianism that can handle the conflicts at the heart of human life which are mirrored in the church as a corpus permixtum.

Zusammenfassung: Die Kirche von England und die Anglicanische Gemeinschaft insgesamt haben seit ihren Anfängen Formen der synodalen Leitung übernommen, auch wenn diese durch das Parlament ausgeübt wurde. Es gab nur sehr wenige theologische Diskussionen über Synoden, insbesondere über die Rolle der Laien. Obwohl einige eine trinitarische Theologie zur Analyse von Synoden herangezogen haben, ist eine Form des Augustinismus weitaus angemessener, die mit jenen Konflikten im Zentrum menschlichen Lebens umgehen kann, die sich in der Kirche als einem corpus permixtum widerspiegeln.

1 The Problem of Church Government

What is conspicuously lacking in the so-called Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral of 1888, which has become one of the key defining statements of Anglicanism, is the absence of any statement on synodality as a key characteristic of Anglican polity. The Bible, Creeds, Sacraments and Bishops are all mentioned, but there is nothing on how authority relates to synods, even though all the provinces of the Anglican Communion have forms of synodical government. This is perhaps because the Church of England’s own embracing of synodality came rather late in the day as it was effectively governed by parliament which saw itself as the governing body of the Church just as it was of the secular world. Undoubtedly, the synods, especially the lay voices, are never straightforward in church governance. Here it is worth reflecting on the approach of other churches. For instance, in 1867 George Talbot (1816–1886), the somewhat eccentric Roman Catholic convert who served as papal chamberlain wrote a letter to Henry Manning asking: ‘What is the province of the laity?’, partly in response to John Henry Newman’s work on consulting the faithful in matters of doctrine in 1859.1 Talbot’s response to Newman was simple and direct and displayed something of his aristocratic background: the province of the laity, he claimed, was ‘To hunt, to shoot, to entertain. These matters they understand, but to meddle with ecclesiastical matters they have no right at all.’2 The clergy, and especially the bishops, and the laity had quite distinct spheres.

Such an attitude towards the laity has been something shared by some who have occupied important roles within the Church of England. For instance, John Hooper, Bishop of Gloucester, one of the martyrs of the Reformation, did not have a high view of the laity. He called the people ‘that many-headed monster’, which because of its ignorance was ‘fascinated by the inveiglements of the bishops, and the malice and impiety of the mass-priests’.3 The people, he felt, were ill-educated and superstitious, and deserved to have little say in the running of the church. Nowadays, however, there are very few Anglicans who would seek to deny the laity a say in the governance of the church. There can be very practical reasons for this. In a time when the financial burdens of the church increasingly fall on the active laity, there is a sense in which the principle of no taxation without representation needs to be taken seriously. Just as in England the earliest synods, the two houses of Convocation (the bishops and the clergy) derived from the need for medieval kings to gain the

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consent of the clergy for taxation, so the representation of the laity makes sense on purely pragmatic terms. It is interesting to note that despite his High Church inclinations, Bishop Robert Gray of Cape Town, who was one of the pioneers of Synodical Government in the Anglican Communion, established a House of Laity in the Province of South Africa from the very beginning on such grounds: the church could not be governed without the consent of the laity who were expected to pay for it. The laity were included in the synod, which was formally set up in 1876, according to Peter Hinchliff, ‘not as a result of theological or historical justification, but because they possessed the money and power which was needed and because by the nineteenth century a purely clerical gathering would have been not merely unthinkable but unworkable’.

2 Synods and the Problem of Division

This example from South Africa indicates something crucial about the nature and theology of synods. While much of the literature tends to assume that they are rather grand assemblies whose debates and discussions are geared towards the clarification and articulation of important matters of doctrine and order, synods are frequently, at least in origin, very worldly councils. Although the English clerical synods (Convocations) acquired the rights to create canons through the Middle Ages, they spent the bulk of their time discussing very worldly aspects of church affairs. Perhaps because of these very worldly concerns, there has been remarkably little discussion of the theology of synods in the Church of England and Anglicanism more generally. The last full-scale account of synodical history was Eric Kemp’s comprehensive Bampton Lectures of 1960, which offer a thoroughgoing analysis, legal, theological and financial, of the development of Convocation and later of the House of Laity in the Church Assembly, the forerunner of General Synod. Nevertheless, even when synods are discussing such worldly matters, it remains important to think through the theology of the synodical system. The problem, however, is that they do not seem very theological. Instead they are messy, full of conflict and very political. Often they do not appear to be possessed of the great Christian virtues of faith, hope and love at all. And furthermore, they seldom embody anything more than a modicum of unity or consensus.

This is particularly true of the Church of England whose synodical government grew out of the parliamentary process. Like parliament it has embraced a system of church government characterised by conflict, compromises and sometimes downright hostility between the factions. This has become apparent ever since the revival of an active Convocation from the middle of the nineteenth century and the creation of the Church Assembly in 1919. When the authority to make its own decisions was returned to the church following the long dominion of parliament, the horse-trading and political wheeling and dealing did not evaporate. What emerged was a system established not on the fact that people agree; instead it quickly became that place where people who disagreed with one another came together to try to make decisions. Synods were necessary precisely because of the disunity of the church. This means that it is crucial to bear in mind from the outset that any theology of synodical government is always going to be a political theology: it will be about putting things into practice in a society which is not perfect and which is made up of people with very different ideas of what constitutes truth. It requires what the Anglican theologian Ephraim Radner working in Canada has called ‘eristology’, or the study of Christian divisions in their relation to political power.

In England the General Synod is highly politicised, and its debates often lack the qualities of listening and learning. The recent conversations over women bishops and, most recently, issues in sexuality offer good examples. To understand synod requires a special form of political theology. After all, synods claim to be about discerning the will of God for the Church, which is inevitably a theological act. But because the church is made up of people who are themselves mixtures of saint and sinner, any form of Church government, from the most authoritarian to the most democratic, is always deeply political. Indeed, all politics, whether in the church or in the state, is about power, authority and legitimacy.

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6 Kemp, Counsel and Consent (see n. 5), 65–86.
7 See Kemp, Counsel and Consent (see n. 5), esp. 87–112. See also the 1902 report The Position of the Laity in the Church Being the Joint Committee of the Convocation of Canterbury (1902), repr. with an introduction by Norman Sykes (Westminster: Church Information Board, 1952).
3 A Theology of Synods

If synodality is principally about compromise and conflict and disagreement then it would seem somewhat disingenuous to suggest that the starting point for the theology of synodical government should rest in the doctrine of the Trinity, which, with rare exceptions, has seldom been used to explain conflict, disunity and division. Such reservations about the appropriateness of the doctrine of the Trinity in grounding human political communities, however, are rare. Instead it has become a commonplace in church reports and much of the rest of theological literature, including nearly all writing on mission especially after David Bosch’s seminal work *Transforming Mission*,9 that somehow all the church needs to do is simply to model itself on the harmony of some imagined Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit in a relationship of perfect reciprocity or mutual indwelling.10 This means that what little theological reflection there has been on the nature of the structures of the General Synod and of the more local synods of the Church of England has simply assumed that somehow the obvious place to start theological reflection on church government should be the doctrine of the Trinity. For instance, in the 1997 report *Synodical Government in the Church of England*,11 which remains the most extensive discussion of the General Synod,12 the brief theological sections which preface the very practical body of the report simply assume that the social doctrine of the Trinity is the obvious place to start. Somewhat self-referentially it cites two earlier Church of England reports. Its opening section ‘Theological Principles and Historical Development’ quotes directly from the Turnbull Report, *Working as One Body*, which claimed, without explaining precisely how, that the life of the Church was ‘utterly Trinitarian in its ground, being and hope’. Thus, the Turnbull Report continued, the Church is ‘also firmly part of God’s good creation, an assembly of men and women of varying gifts and abilities, who love and support one another through all the joys and difficulties of their daily lives’.13

The report on synodical government then goes on to cite the Cameron Report on *Episcopal Ministry* which describes the church as existing to ‘nurture and sustain the relations of human persons joined, as far as it is possible for us as creatures, in a resemblance to that Trinitarian life’.14 The church is given the capacity to live the divine life as different people embody the diverse gifts given them by the Spirit and use them to build up the common life of the church. Thus the Turnbull Report suggests at the end of its theological section: ‘In a theology of gracious gift the first words must be gratitude, love, service, humility and trust. In such a way the Church can, in its very structures and processes, embody the mission on which it has been sent.’15 What is conspicuously lacking in the reports, however, is much of a conception of the Church as a political institution riddled with conflict and division and consequently forced to use the dirty ways of the world to make its decisions.

A theological account of synodality, it seems to me, cannot begin with the ideal of a mutual relationship of divine love as somehow descriptive of human relationships inside or outside the church. The reason for that is quite simple: such language fails to describe the church as it really is, and is little more than wishful thinking. Instead it seems far better to start by addressing the Church as existing under the conditions of sin. At one point this is even recognised in the report on synodical government. There is an ‘acknowledgement of the reality of sin which makes it necessary to have a set of checks and balances in the life of the Church, which will serve to prevent the abuse of power and to preserve the comprehensive nature of the Church’.16 And yet this reveals an underlying misperception in the report about the nature and function of the synod: synods are principally about making decisions when they need to be made (as with finance). However, the report suggests that synods are about preserving comprehensiveness. But comprehensiveness may be little more than an Anglican word for unresolved conflict. After all, in making a decision, it is often the case that one party is simply shown to be wrong (as, for instance, with slavery), which no amount of pleading for comprehensiveness can conceal.

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12 The report *Government by Synod* (London: Church Information Office, 1966) deliberately avoided theology since it sought to create a General Synod from the Church Assembly without the need for parliamentary legislation.
15 *Working as One Body* (see n. 14), § 1.25.
16 *Synodical Government in the Church of England* (see n. 12), § 2.8.
Unity, then, is not always a unity in diversity: there will be limits to comprehensiveness; making decisions can sometimes exclude and alienate those on the losing side, even when they accept the decision, however unwillingly. The strange arrangements that emerged over the ordination of women in the Church of England where some clergy do not feel themselves to be in communion with their diocesan bishop is predicated on the idea that all truths are as good as all others and that somehow all we have to do is to make a decision that allows people not to accept that a decision was made with which they disagree. This may not always be the best strategy: there are times when mutual indwelling and comprehensiveness are impossible.

A theology of synodality might therefore be better rooted in an Augustinian understanding of the Church rather than in the doctrine of the Trinity. For Augustine, as he made clear in his anti-Donatist writings, the church is a mixed body, a corpus permixtum, made up of saints and sinners. It is consequently always a body which is riddled with conflict; there will be competing clamours for authority and assertions of power as the heavenly clashes with the worldly. As an institution both human and divine the church needs to work out structures and mechanisms which might better express its identity as the body of Christ, but through all this it remains an institution composed of human beings in all their sinful complexity. Because it is a human institution the body of Christ needs government and constraints: it needs a political theology because it lives under the conditions of human sinfulness.

As the Anglican theologian-sociologist David Martin once wrote about Luther:

> Once Luther tried to take monasticism out of the monastery into the world he found the whole enterprise vitiated by a gap, by a break, between the language of the heavenly city and the inherent character of the City of Man. This was hardly a new discovery [...]. The malignant worm constantly revisits.

Indeed, I would suggest that the normal state of the church is to be in conflict, which is precisely why it needs structures of oversight and some means for institutionalising conflict and decision-making.

### 4 Legitimacy and Authority

From the very beginning of the church the question of authority became crucial and was tied up with securing and maintaining the tradition. Increasingly, the authenticity and legitimacy of the tradition were guaranteed by those whose office conferred an authority, but at the same time they were called to their ministry by the local churches and later the local rulers: it was an early truism in the church that equated the vox populi with the vox dei. When decisions were made, however, it was usually the case that the divisions continued: all councils and synods could do was to reach temporary agreements which had to be received. The same remains the case: decisions may or may not be received and may or may not simply lead to further levels of conflict. As Radner writes: ‘Councils are not about reaching consensus. Instead, they are about forming a culture of traditions in which actual agreement, in Christian terms, may take place.’ Like a parliament, then, a synod will be characterised by a mechanism, or a series of practices, that provides an institutionalisation and containment of conflict. For the most part the theology of synods will be the study of ‘eristology’, the theology of divisions and the principles that allow people to live with such divisions without resorting to violence or schism. There is consequently no need to apologise for the fact that the synods are political and a place of frequent conflict.

Just as with the politics of the state, so with any ecclesiastical polity the question of legitimacy is central. This is true for all church polities, Presbyterian, congregational or the hybrid bishop-in-synod that has eventually been adopted by most other provinces of the Anglican Communion. That means that for synods to work they need to be seen to be legitimate; their authority needs to be accepted by the churches they seek to govern. Any power they wield needs to be connected to those over whom they exercise it. Legitimate authority consequently requires a trust in those political institutions which embody the sorts of mechanisms that might serve to alleviate some of the worst conditions of human sin. With such a degree of trust, synods will become institutions which, while not necessarily removing divisions or resolving conflict, at least help churches learn to live with them.

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17 Brev. 3.20; c. Don. 9.12; doc. Chr. 3.32; cf. civ. Dei 18/49. The Augustine references are cited according to the schedule in Allan D. Fitzgerald OSA, Augustine through the Ages: An Encyclopedia (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1999), xxxv–il.


19 Radner, Brutal Unity (see n. 9), 264.
5 The Dysfunctionality of Synodical Government in the Church of England

Over the past few years, however, synods have come to be regarded as bodies whose primary task is the promotion of consensus, rather than bodies that allow conflicts to be contained and even used creatively. In the Church of England in particular synods have become little more than places whose purpose is to support the initiatives of the House of Bishops who have tended to understand their role as a sort of managerial executive standing above the other two Houses in promoting unity in the church: increasingly they have spoken ‘collegially’, that is, with one voice. This understanding of synods has sometimes resulted in a sense of dysfunctionality. There are some obvious examples which illustrate this approach to synodal government in the Church of England.

For example, the rejection of the Anglican Communion Covenant – which was intended as a mechanism for conflict-resolution across the provinces of the Communion – by the majority of English dioceses, proved an enormous blow to Rowan Williams, the outgoing Archbishop of Canterbury, who had put so much hope in its provisions. In the discussion of the Covenant there was very little loyalty shown to many bishops by their own diocesan synods partly because the House of Bishops as a body had failed to respect the legitimate authority of the representative synodical structures in the earlier women bishops’ legislation. Rule by executive diktagt with the expectation of consent has not proved a successful episcopal strategy in the past few years. Indeed, through the course of the past twenty years or more the House of Bishops appeared to be exhibiting what Paul Valliere has recently called ‘synodophobia’, a word borrowed from the Danish theologian Hans Raun Iversen who developed the term in relation to Denmark’s somewhat unusual form of ‘churchless Christianity’.20

6 Listening

Alongside such synodophobia has been a parallel series of ‘listening’ processes which have sought to encourage those who disagree to engage with one another. These have figured prominently in the Church of England and the wider Anglican Communion: the ‘listening process’ and continuing indaba grew out of successive Lambeth Conferences. The purpose was to help the Lambeth Conference grow into a mature synod where there could be a proper institutionalisation of conflict rather than a body for mutual consultation. As Rowan Williams noted in his retreat addresses given at the Lambeth Conference in 2008, ‘the bishop is a linguist’ who learns how to speak a language, obeying the rules so that communication occurs. This involves ‘listening for the nuances, listening for the hidden music in what someone says or does, listening sometimes for what’s beneath the surface as well as what is immediately in front of us. It’s a tough experience, and it doesn’t happen quickly.’ This, he claimed, is modelled on Jesus, who listens to those around him by ‘learning our language, listening to our needs, answering our hunger’. Episcopacy was consequently based on the example of Jesus Christ who said something like this: ‘Tell me what your need is, and in giving my love to you I will be obeying my Father.’ The vocation of the bishop was consequently to ‘be a Christlike stranger’, ‘listening for the true need around us and to hold that together with our listening to God’. The bishop – and this is presumably equally true for all others involved in any form of Christian leadership – listens in a ‘stereophonic capacity’. He ‘listens with one ear to the word of God, and the other to the languages of those among whom he or she ministers. And somehow the messages come to the one centre of heart and brain, and we live under the law of Christ’.21

This approach to listening might have been all well and good for the Anglican Communion and the Lambeth Conference, which, after all, has very few institutionalised mechanisms for listening, but it became a high-risk strategy for a church that already had developed mechanisms to ensure that institutionalised listening processes. In fact, one of the most important characteristics of General Synod is that it has developed a form of representative government and committee structure that, like parliament, carry a legitimacy that has been conferred on them by the local churches who trust it to bear their many conflicts: it carries with it a legitimacy which is conferred by a system of elections and representation. The idea that a bishop can circumvent synod and somehow listen ‘directly’, which resembles the role of the ‘special adviser’ in the governmental system, can be extremely damaging for the legitimacy of representative government. For a church that has embraced a system of synodical government there


needs to be trust in that government by all parties, including the bishops. After all, those loud voices, together with many other often quieter voices, are represented – perhaps over-represented – in Synod, and it is through the mechanisms of institutionalised conflict which Synods are established to contain that those voices are best heard.

7 Synodophobia and the Representation of the Laity

The ‘synodophobia’ of the House of Bishops might indicate a second reason for the rejection of the Anglican Covenant. Because of the vagaries of history and the ways in which the Anglican Communion has developed, the concept of episcopacy that has emerged has frequently failed to give due weight to the role of synods. At a global level episcopal leadership has often been mistaken for episcopal authoritarianism or control. Three of the four instruments of unity have no formal place for laity and the Anglican Consultative Council remains a body dominated by bishops and clergy (fifty out of seventy-six members). It is probably for this reason, as Valliere writes, that the view of conciliar or synodical authority ‘as inherently antithetical to freedom [...] remains powerful in Anglicanism to this day’.22 The principle of synodality is scarcely developed in the Anglican Communion structures. This means that for those churches, like the Church of England, which are governed by synods there can be little sense of what might be called ‘conciliar legitimacy’ for the Instruments of Communion (along with the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Lambeth Conference, the Primates’ Meeting and the Anglican Consultative Council). The laity, who after all pay for the church, will dislike being told by bishops what they should be doing, whether those bishops are at home or abroad, when they have little or no formal representation. What seems to be required as a necessary precursor to a functioning Anglican Communion is some sort of pan-Anglican synod. As Valliere writes, ‘the faltering Anglican Communion needs a worldwide council more than ever’.23 A council or synod ‘would change Anglicanism’24 by introducing for the first time the principle of lay synodality into the Lambeth Quadrilateral, which, I would suggest, is one of the most misleading documents in Anglican history.25

Similarly, within the Church of England, the hard-won rights of the laity cannot be taken for granted. As Archbishop Lang noted in a sermon preached shortly after the creation of the Church Assembly in 1919: ‘every man or woman who professes allegiance to the Church is now invested with a personal responsibility for its welfare, for the success or failure of its Divine Mission’. He went on, however, to note that ‘all depends upon the spirit, the motive, the purpose, the outlook with which churchpeople enter the new era, upon the character which is impressed upon it at its start’.26 This I think is equally true for the present day in relation to the General Synod as well as the creation of pan-Anglican synodical structures. What seems to be needed is a reinvigoration of an inclusive conciliarism, which bears ‘positive witness to the church as a fellowship transcending office, status and power’.27

The hard-won freedom of the laity to express its views and opinions was summarised clearly in a letter to Henry Hoare, one of the nineteenth-century pioneers of the laity representation. When synods had spoken, the writer claimed, ‘I think that by that time a sufficient substratum of public opinion (in the best sense) will have been established, without which no body can act, and against which even Convocation itself [...] would be comparatively powerless’.28 Moving beyond the British Constitution, it is important to note that the authority and legitimacy of the House of Laity is theologically dependent first and foremost on the notion of the primary vocation of all Christians deriving from their baptismal covenant which is expressed in such an understanding of ‘public opinion’. Such an approach, however, is not without its critics: Colin Podmore, for instance, has been highly critical of the idea of a baptismal covenant as rather too liberal and very American.29 Such a questioning of baptismal theology has implications for the perception of the legitimacy of the House of Laity in the General Synod in relation to the other Houses (even though it is principally the House of Laity that is the heir of parliamentary sovereignty rather than the Upper and

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22 Valliere, Conciliarism (see n. 21), 192–193.
23 Valliere, Conciliarism (see n. 21), 209.
24 Valliere, Conciliarism (see n. 21), 235.
27 Valliere, Conciliarism (see n. 21), 112.
28 Letter from an unnamed correspondent to Hoare, 23 October 1851, in J.B. Sweet, A Memoir of the Late Henry Hoare Esq. MA, with a Narrative of the Church Movements with Which He Was Concerned from 1848 to 1865 and More Particularly the Revival of Convocation (London: Rivington’s, 1865), 308.
Lower Houses of Convocation). It would counter the theological direction of the Synod from its beginning: the 1916 report on Church and State, which led to the setting up of the Church Assembly was very clear about the role of the laity: ‘It is of great importance to make it plain that when we are pleading for the restoration of autonomy to the Church, we mean the Church and not only the clergy.’ It seems to me that the baptismal vocation expressed through representative synods needs to be at the centre of all synods from the Parochial Church Council to the ‘instruments of unity’ of the Anglican Communion. This is challenged, however, by the elevation of the ‘historic episcopate’ above the principle of synodality in the Lambeth Quadrilateral. Historically at least it is clearly the case that the Church of England’s model of authority was based on the predominantly lay veto of parliament and later the General Synod rather than the authority of the historic episcopate. A theological justification rests in a shared baptism and seems urgently required for the future of the Anglican Communion as it develops into a synodical and representative church from a loose federation united – or disunited – around the ‘historic episcopate’.

8 Conclusion

What emerges from this discussion is a theology of synodality that locates it in a political theology of institutionalised conflict which finds its origins in Augustine of Hippo’s understanding of the church. The Church of England General Synod, like other synods, is a political body established to bear the divisions and conflicts which are an inherent part of the human condition, and is not some imaginary sub-Trinitarian entity which aims at consensus-building or expressing Anglican comprehensiveness, whatever that means. If churches have a theologically grounded mechanism of institutionalised conflict, which is representative of the church, it is to that body alone that they should entrust their decision-making. The bishops – like the British Government – have an honoured place in the process, but their respect and their trust have to be won through co-operation and engagement with the representative body. Autocracy, however divinely established, is not a good way of gaining friends and influencing people, especially when they are the ones who are paying their dues. Synods may not be ideal but that is how Anglicans have chosen to manage their conflicts this side of eternity. The bishops have a constitutional role and a power of veto, but they have to learn the art of trust and the politics of compromise, and they also need to learn the art of public disagreement rather than an imposed collegiality that few in the other synodical houses will ever believe to be much more than an effort to avoid conflict at any cost.

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