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ECUSA'S GOD

A Descriptive Comment on the "Working Theology" of the Episcopal Church U.S.A.

by The Rev. Dr. Philip Turner

Jan 18, 2005

I
In the pages that follow, I hope to describe and assess what might be called the "working theology" of the Episcopal Church U.S.A. (ECUSA). I have undertaken this exercise because recent actions on the part of the House of Bishops and the General Convention of this church have provoked a crisis within the Anglican Communion that might well issue in its dissolution. The presenting issue of this crisis is a decision on the part of these bodies to ordain a priest with a same gender partner to the Episcopate, and to give tacit approval to the blessing of same gender unions. I do not wish in any way to minimize the importance of these presenting issues. Nevertheless, ECUSA's most profound problem is not moral. Rather, it is theological. As I hope to show, ECUSA in fact suffers from a theological poverty that is truly monumental. In the end, it is this theological poverty that has issued in the moral missteps recently taken by its governing bodies. It is also the case that the theological poverty I hope to describe has for a number of years been apparent to ECUSA's critics within the Anglican Communion-particularly to those from the Global South.

How then does one both identify and assess the "working theology" of a church? There are theological articles and books of theology. There are liturgies, and confessional statements. Nonetheless, the contents of these documents do not necessarily control the working theology of a church. The theology contained therein may in fact not appear in the texts of Sunday's sermons. Neither do the theological views that are to be found in these documents always comprise the content of what clergy say to parishioners in perplexity and distress.

In this day and age, to find the working theology of a church one cannot go to a canon of theological works. One can, however, review the resolutions passed at official gatherings, and listen to what clergy say Sunday by Sunday from the pulpit. One can listen to the conversations that occur at clergy gatherings; and one can listen for the advice they give to

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troubled parishioners. The working theology of a church is, in short, best determined by becoming what social anthropologists are wont to call a "participant observer." One can "be" in the midst of a church, observe its language and practices, and present a descriptive and critical account of what one sees and hears.

Such is the nature of this account of the working theology of the Episcopal Church. It grows out of 35 years of traveling about, listening, and observing. It focuses on the clergy because, despite constant assertions to the contrary, ECUSA'S clergy in fact control its ethos. The picture that emerges in the course of this account lacks the sort of coherence and consistency one would expect from a systematic theologian, but one should expect no such thing. The working theological universe of most people and most groups contains gaps, even contradictions. These lacunae and confusions are not in all ways a bad thing. They provide grist for the mill of social life that gives it a certain dynamic. So it will not be my purpose to pick out gaps and contradictions, and then carp. My purpose is rather to describe, and then stand back and ask how 'Christianly apt' is the day to day theology and practice of the Episcopal Church?

II

Having spent 10 years as a missionary of ECUSA in Uganda, I returned to this country and began graduate work in Christian Ethics at Princeton University. Three years later I took up my first academic post at the Episcopal Theological Seminary of the Southwest. Full of excitement, I listened to my first student sermon, but was simply taken aback by its vacuity. To begin with the student asked a wonderful question. "What is the Christian Gospel?" His answer through the course of an entire sermon was this. God is love. God loves us. We, therefore, ought to love one another." I waited in vain for some word about the saving power of Christ's cross or the declaration of God's victory in Christ's resurrection. I waited in vain for a promise of the presence of the Holy Spirit. I waited in vain also for an admonition to wait patiently and faithfully for the Lord's return. I waited in vain for a call to repentance and amendment of life in accord with the pattern of Christ.

The contents of the preaching I had heard Sunday by Sunday from the pulpits of the Church of Uganda (and from other Christians throughout the continent of Africa) was simply not to be found. One could, of course, dismiss this instance of vacuous preaching as simply another example of the painful inadequacy of the preaching of most seminarians; but, over the years, I have heard the same sermon preached from pulpit after pulpit by experienced priests. Only the examples change. The standard Episcopal sermon, at its most fulsome, begins with a statement to the effect that the incarnation is to be understood (in an almost exhaustive sense) as a manifestation of divine love. From this starting point, several conclusions are drawn. The first is that God is love pure and simple. Thus, one is to see in Christ's death no judgment upon the human condition. Rather, one is to see an affirmation of creation and the persons we are. The great news of the Christian Gospel is this. The life and death of Jesus reveal the fact that God accepts and affirms us. From this revelation, we can draw a further conclusion. God wants us to love one another, and such love requires of us both acceptance and affirmation of the other. From this point we can derive yet another. Accepting love requires a form of justice that is inclusive of all people, particularly those who in some way have been marginalized by oppressive social practice. The mission of the church is, therefore, to see that those who have

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been rejected are included, and that justice as inclusion defines public policy. The result is a practical equivalence between the Gospel of the Kingdom of God and this form of social justice. The statements "It's a matter of the Gospel" and "It's a justice issue" stand on all fours one with another.

This latter statement is of particular importance if one is to understand the fervor of many who support the recent actions of ECUSA's House of Bishops and its General Convention. For many who view these events from the "outside," the actions in question represent a denial of something fundamental to the Christian way of life. For many "inside" they constitute a primary expression of Gospel truth. The simple fact is that neither party to this dispute considers the present conflict a matter indifferent (adiaphorous). Both in fact believe that their stand is a matter of Gospel truth. "Trade offs" are inappropriate in the eyes of both. A deadlock of this sort suggests that the Anglican Communion is faced with what in fact may be more a theological divide than an ethical one.

III

The theology of divine acceptance (rather than redemption) that underlies the working theology of ECUSA is at present expressed in more serious ways than the ethical change in respect to sexual relations its adherents support. A more fundamental expression of the theology of acceptance is to be found in the increasingly common practice of inviting non-baptized persons to share in the Holy Eucharist. The invitation is given in the name of "radical hospitality." It's like having a guest at the family meal, so its advocates claim. It's a way to invite people in and evangelize say its proponents.

Within ECUSA, a sure test of whether an idea is gaining favor and a practice acceptance is the appearance of a question on the General Ordination exam that seems to point in the direction of acceptance of a practice or belief that previously has been considered unacceptable. Questions on divorce and remarriage, the ordination of women, sexual behavior, and abortion all have preceded changes in ECUSA's teaching and practice. Now there is a question about "open communion." I do not mean to suggest that all these changes have proven ill founded, for they have not. I suggest only that "open communion for the non-baptized" is far more than a cloud on the horizon within ECUSA. It is a change in doctrine and practice that is fast becoming well established, and perhaps should be of even greater concern to the Anglican Communion than the recent changes in moral teaching and practice.

Indeed, it is important to note when examining the working theology of ECUSA that changes in belief and practice within ECUSA are not made after prolonged investigation and theological debate. Rather, they are made by "prophetic actions" that give expression to the doctrine of radical inclusion. Within ECUSA, prophetic action has become the favored way of effecting change. Such action has become common in large measure because it carries with it no cost. Since the struggle over the ordination of women, ECUSA's House of Bishops has given up any attempt to act as a unified body or to discipline its membership. Within a given diocese, almost any change in belief and practice can occur without penalty. Three justifications are given for such laissez faire practice. One I have mentioned; namely, the claim of the prophet's mantle by the innovators. Claim of the prophet's mantle is followed by a claim that the Holy Spirit is doing a new thing-one that need have no

perceivable link to the past practice of the church. Following these two claims comes another that portrays the nature of the church according to a Congregationalist model. Backed by claims of prophetic and Spirit filled insight, each Diocese can justify its action as a "local option." Local option within ECUSA is a term that refers to the right of a diocese or parish to go its own way (in contradistinction to common practice and belief) if there seem strong enough internal reasons to do so.

To return to the matter of open communion (now claimed by many as a local option) one can see hovering about a congeries of theological and moral innovations all of which stem finally from the doctrine of radical inclusion. One can see also an accompanying reduction in the significance of Christ's death and resurrection; and one can see also the eclipse of participation in Christ's death through growth in holiness of life as a fundamental marker of Christian identity. With the notion of radical inclusion and acceptance comes also the view that one need not come to the Father through the Son. Christ is a way, but not the way. The latter view is exclusionary and thus unacceptable, not being in accord with the open acceptance that has been revealed in the incarnation. The Holy Eucharist is a sign of radical acceptance on the part of God and God's people, and so should be open to all and sundry should they wish to partake. Further, this invitation need not be accompanied by a call to repentance and amendment of life.

IV

I make this latter point to underline the fact that the doctrine of radical inclusion that now serves as an epitome of the working theology of ECUSA works itself out in two directions. In respect to God, it produces a quasi deist theology that posits a benevolent God who favors love and justice as inclusion, but acts neither to save us from our sins nor to raise us to new life after the pattern of Christ. In respect to "the neighbor" it produces an ethic of tolerant affirmation that carries with it no call to conversion and radical holiness.

ECUSA's working theology is also congruent with a form of pastoral care designed to help people affirm themselves, face their difficulties, and adjust successfully to their particular circumstances. The primary (though not the sole) vehicle of pastoral formation offered ECUSA's prospective clergy has for a number of years been Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE). CPE takes the form of an internship generally located in a hospital or some other care giving institution. The focus of this form of education tends to be the expressed needs of a "client," the attitudes and contributions of a "counselor," and the transference and counter transference that defines their relationship. In its early days, CPE supervisors were heavily influenced by the client centered therapy of Carl Rogers, but the theoretical frame work employed by supervisors today varies widely. A dominant assumption in all forms, however, is that the "client" has within the answer to his or her perplexities and conflicts. Access to personal resources and successful adjustment is what the pastor is to seek when offering pastoral care.

I would be the last to say that this particular form of pastoral formation is without merit. Nevertheless, it does not lend itself easily to the sort of meeting with Christ that in traditional Christian terms leads through faith, forgiveness, judgment, repentance, and amendment of life. The sort of confrontation often necessary to spark such a process is decidedly frowned

upon. The theological stance associated with the form of pastoral care most frequently practiced by those who have been through CPE is not one of challenge. Rather, it is one in which God is depicted as an accepting presence not unlike that of the therapist or pastor.

It may seem that I am laboring the obvious when I say that many, if not most, of the classical themes associated with pastoral care can find no place within a theology dominated by the notion of radical inclusion. The atoning power of Christ's death, faith, justification, repentance, and holiness of life, to mention but a few, appear at best as an antique vocabulary to be either out grown or reinterpreted. So also does the notion that the church is a community elected and called out by God from the peoples of the earth for a particular purpose. That purpose is to bear witness to the saving event of Christ's life, death, and resurrection and to call people to believe, repent, and live in an entirely different manner. It is this witness that defines what many call "the great tradition", but a theology of radical inclusion must at best trim such robust belief. To be true to itself it can find room for only one sort of witness, namely, inclusion of the previously excluded. Indeed, the connection of the existence of the Church to a saving purpose makes little sense because salvation is not an issue for a theology of radical inclusion. God has already included everybody, and now we ought to do the same.

I have said enough by this point to contend without undue fear of misunderstanding that perhaps the most serious problem with the working theology of ECUSA is that, within ECUSA, Christianity is no longer presented as a religion of salvation. Salvation, which normally refers to the restoration of a right relation between God and his creation, cannot rightly be the theme of Christian witness because God has accepted us all already (save perhaps those guilty of exclusionary practice). No! Salvation cannot be the issue. The theology of radical inclusion as preached and practiced within ECUSA must define the central issue as moral rather than religious, because exclusion is in the end a moral issue even for God.

V

I feel compelled to apologize for this truncated and admittedly impressionistic sketch of the working theology of ECUSA. I am fully aware that many will say things really can't be that simple (or that bad). There must be a more complex working theology than this. I know also that many will claim, rightly, that a theology of radical inclusion has its location in what I have called the Great Tradition. It certainly does; but, within this tradition, God's loving embrace is never divorced from his sacrificial act of atonement, his judgment upon all unrighteousness, and his call to holiness of life. Defenders of ECUSA's working theology have in fact divorced their articulation of a theology of inclusion from its full historical expression. Indeed, the credibility of ECUSA's working theology depends upon the obliteration of the complex nature of God's love in the name of a new revelation in which the true nature of God's relation to his people and his world has been fearfully distorted.

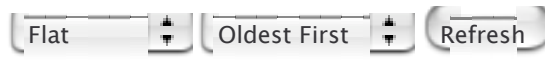
In fairness, one can raise questions about this presentation of ECUSA's working theology. I have tried to anticipate some of them. Nevertheless, when all is said and done, it seems to me that ECUSA's message, even when it comes from the mouths of its more sophisticated spokespersons, does amount to a long exposition of what can fairly be called "inclusion without

qualification." If I am right in this assessment, then the second of my initial questions becomes relevant, namely, how adequate is this every day fare as substance for the lives of Christians? In looking back over the sketch I have provided, I was distressed to realize that the epitome I have presented is little different from the basic message communicated during the course of my own theological education. And I thought it could easily be me that I have just described. But for one eventuality, that description might have proved accurate. Fortunately, God provided in my case an intervening event. I lived for some ten years among the Baganda, a people who dwell on the North shore of Lake Victoria. They have a proverb which roughly translated says "A person who never travels always praises his own mother's cooking." Travel allowed me to taste something different. It was not until I spent a considerable time outside the confines of my own denomination that I came to realize that its working theology stood miles away from the basic content of "Nicene Christianity" with its thick description of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; its richly developed Christology, and its compelling account of Christ's call to holiness of life.

Not everyone has such an opportunity, but there are many ways to travel. One is interior rather than exterior. It requires nothing more than to listen to someone who is different, and take to heart what they may be saying, no matter how strange it may seem. The voice now addressing ECUSA in theological tones that seem not just strange but unacceptable, comes from the Global South, and particularly from people who in the biblical sense are poor. What they are trying to point out is that the working theology of ECUSA does not accord with the great Christian tradition they received from the very people who now seem to be preaching a different gospel. Rather than dismissing this alien voice (as say the voice of fundamentalism or the voice of people who have never experience the Enlightenment) it might be more Christianly apt to adopt a more humble attitude and ask if what this strange voice is saying has any merit. In particular, it might be not only prudent but also charitable to ask if its criticism of ECUSA's working theology has the ring of truth.

It is likely that the future of Anglicanism as a communion of churches depends upon ECUSA finding the resources to dare pose such a question. For it will not do in the end, as official spokespersons for ECUSA tend to do, to reply by reference to ECUSA's Book of Common Prayer with the comment, "you see we are orthodox just like you are. We affirm the two testaments as the word of God, we recite the classical creeds in our worship, we celebrate the dominical sacraments, and we hold to Episcopal order." The challenge now being put to ECUSA is not about its official documents. It's about its "working theology" in which most of the Anglican Communion does not recognize the great tradition that gave it birth.

END



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