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We all need the Anglicans right now

Joan Chittister | Sep. 17, 2007 From Where I Stand

Blaise Pascal wrote once, "The multitude which is not brought to act as a unity is confusion." But in the same place he wrote immediately thereafter, "That unity which has not its origin in the multitude is tyranny." Translation: The multitude needs unity but unity, to be real, requires the assent of the multitude.

Understanding the conjunction of those two ideas -- confusion in the face of uncertainty and tyranny as the substitute for consensus -- may have never been more important than it is right now. If a country, if a religious body, cannot develop a common vision, the chances that they will survive, let alone be effective, are at best low.

That possibility is about to be sorely tested in worldwide Anglicanism [1]. And no one of us need take any comfort in seeing it happen to someone else rather than to us. Yet.

Riven by the internal tension arising over the question of clerical homosexuality among the national churches of the denomination around the world, the delicately structured Anglican Communion, many say, is threatened by schism.

Some would say, "If you don't like it, get out." This "We-are-the-church-crowd" put themselves up as norms of the faith. Those who do not agree with them, who dare to question anything, who open issues deemed by some to be closed for all time, they label "evil" or "dissident" or "unfaithful." Catholics who accepted the notion of separation of church and state, for instance, labored under a shadow of suspicion for years. The loss of the theocratic state after the Protestant Reformation struck a blow at the very theology of power and authority. Not until Vatican II, did the church really accept as theologically acceptable the whole idea of sectarian -- that is, non-theologically aligned -- governments.

The debate over sectarianism may seem almost laughable now, but it was not funny when John F. Kennedy was running for president. The major political question of the time was whether or not a Catholic president could really be trusted to lead a government for the good of all the people, Catholic or not, or be expected to take orders from the pope -- as did the medieval kings before him.

Theology and government are clearly not parallel institutions. They are interactive ones. What affects one will surely affect the other. Which is where Pascal's second insight is the other side of the coin. "Unity that does not have its origin in the multitude is tyranny," he says. Groups themselves, in other words, must have a part in the making of law if the group is to be unified rather than simply repressed.

So the question the Anglican communion is facing for us all right now is a clear one: What happens to a group, to a church, that stands poised to choose either confusion or tyranny, either anarchy or authoritarianism, either unity or uniformity? Are there really only two choices possible at such a moment? Is there nowhere in-between?

The struggle going on inside the Anglican Communion about the episcopal ordination of homosexual priests and the recognition of the homosexual lifestyle as a natural state is not peculiar to Anglicanism. The issue is in the air we breathe. The Anglicans simply got there earlier than most. And so they may well become a model to the rest of us of how to handle such questions. If the rate and kinds of social, biological, scientific and global change continue at the present pace, every religious group may well find itself at the breakpoint between "tradition" and "science" sooner rather than later.

Theological questions driven by new scientific findings, new social realities, new technological possibilities abound. How moral is it to take cells from one person for the treatment of another if all human cells are potentially life generating? Is that the destruction of life? If homosexuality is "natural," meaning biologically configured at birth, why is it immoral for homosexuals to live in homosexual unions -- even if they are bishops? After all, isn't that what we said -- in fact, did -- when we argued "scientifically" that blacks were not fit for ordination because blacks weren't quite as human as whites? And so we kept them out of our seminaries and called ourselves "Christian" for doing it. Without even the grace to blush.

It is not so much how moral we think we are that is the test of a church. Perhaps the measure of our own morality is how certain we have been of our immoral morality across the ages. That should give us caution. We said, at one time, that it was gravely immoral to charge interest on loans, that it was mortally sinful to miss Mass on Sunday, that people could not read books on the Index, that the divorced could not remarry. And we brooked no question on any of these things. People were either in or out, good or bad, religious or not, depending on whether they stood at one end or another of those spectrums.

Clearly, the problem is not that definitions of morality can shift in the light of new information or social reality. The problem is that we don't seem to know how to deal with the questions that precede the new insights. We seem to think that we have only two possible choices: the authoritarianism model, which requires intellectual uniformity and calls it "community" or a kind of intellectual anarchism, which eats away at the very cloth of tradition in a changing world.

The problem is that threatened by change we are more inclined to suppress the prophetic question than we are to find the kind of structures that can release the Spirit, that can lead us beyond unthinking submission while honoring the tradition and testing the spirits.

It's not an easy task. And we have had schisms aplenty to prove it. Catholicism, interestingly enough, has done better at preserving theological differences than we may give it credit for doing. We called the differences "ancient traditions" or ethnic "rites," or "custom," or "the private arena." The church recognized that there were instances or cultures for whom some ideals simply were not true. But those things functioned in a sea of sameness, in cultures essentially monochromatic and in countries basically one-dimensional in language and history.

But now we live in an avalanche of awareness, of cultural interaction, of scientific-technological possibilities. To take too certain a position too quickly can shred groups to pieces now. Churches everywhere are polarized. In a study of churchgoers done in Minnesota in 1983, conservative Catholics and conservative Lutherans had more in common than conservative Catholics and liberal Catholics. But in a social climate like that, how do we maintain the best of the old and admit the best of the new?

Absolutism and judgementalism, insult and downright slander, have poisoned the atmosphere, are making unholy the search, have stifled conversation.

Conservatives, devoted to what they consider unchanging truth, adopt a mantle of fidelity to the past. Liberals, devoted to exploring the moral dimensions of new questions, see themselves as faithful to the future envisioned by Vatican II. But truth is commitment to what's under the changes and renewal is what's devoted to developing a tradition as well as reshaping it. They are not opposites. They are two faces of the same thing and, if we are all to survive together, we must learn to respect one another until the dawn comes and the light shines.

From where I stand, we need those who can develop a model of faith in times of uncertainty in which the tradition is revered and the prophetic is honored. Unless we want to see ourselves go into either tyranny or anarchy, we better pray for the Anglicans so that they can show us how to do that.

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