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The Crisis of the American Episcopal Church

Paul F.M. Zahl

As an American Episcopalian who is also Evangelical, I have to say that the crisis in (Protestant)ECUSA is painful almost as much for what it says about aspects of 'Americanness' as it is for its window into a certain kind of theological opacity.

In the aftermath of September 11, 2001, Americans are having to become aware, sometimes for the first time, of their obliviousness to the rest of the world. Their obliviousness has created a disconnect. This disconnect exists between the way we understand ourselves and the ways others understand us. The problems of (Protestant)ECUSA could not have come to the boiling point if influential sectors of the American Church had not repudiated Lambeth 1998 as if it never happened. American Episcopalians in large numbers declared, 'We do not care one bit what the rest of the Communion thinks about human sexuality. We will go our own way.' To those people, many of them ordained leaders, it is as if Lambeth '98, like the Kyoto agreement on global warming, never existed.

The presenting symptom for our (Protestant)ECUSA crisis, expressed in intra-church terms, has been the rule of 'liberal catholicism' in that church. This 'liberal catholicism' combined 'liberal' ideas of anthropology (i.e., no original sin, thus an overly high view of human nature) with a churchiness that feels a little like William Laud without his passion. Because Anglican evangelicalism died in the U.S. in 1874 as a result of the so-called 'Cummins schism', there has been no counter-weight since that time to the ascent of 'liberal catholicism'. That ascent, combined with the fairly common Anglican virus of penultimacy, i.e., churchiness rather than Gospel imperative, has made much of American Episcopalianism aggressively superficial. I grew up in it, was schooled in it from childhood, and have served within it for almost thirty years.

So we are in a crisis. It is true. The crisis has fanned out over the whole Anglican world. What happens in the U.S., for better and for worse, becomes epidemic given the American cultural and economic rule. How did (P)ECUSA

get to this point? There is an explanatory voice-over at the start of a 1968 Hammer film entitled 'The Lost Continent', a film which has to be seen to be believed. In the film, the captain of a tramp steamer and his passengers are stranded in a weird Sargasso Sea colony run by the Spanish Inquisition. Literally. The opening shot of "The Lost Continent" pans over a group of people crowded onto the deck of the steamer, apparently involved in a burial at sea. We see a few conquistadors in armour; some modern sailors and ship's mates; two Indian squaws; three Spanish seoritas from the sixteenth century; a group of 1950s English tourists; a hippie or two; and a knot of buckskin-dressed frontiersmen. Then the voice-over begins: "How did we get here? Where did we come from?"

So it is, a little, with the (Protestant) Episcopal Church in the United States of America. When we look at the eclectic and conflicted church that is the main expression of the Anglican Communion in America, we have to ask, 'How did we get to this point?' How did the Christian Church which came to this country in 1607 with Captain John Smith and the earliest English colonists, the Church of George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, the Church of J.P. Morgan and FDR, discover itself in 1998 to be standing on a lone rock of massive alienation from its co-religionists around the world?

Here is the basic narrative, a description of what has taken place to get us to this point. Up until 1874, the (Protestant) Episcopal Church in the USA was like the Church of England in its Prayer Book and Articles and in its overall self-understanding. Its main principal difference from the mother Church was its legal separation from the state. That was the 'cost' of the American Revolution, for prior to 1776 the Episcopal Church was the Established Church in several of the Thirteen Colonies.

Like the C. of E., (P)ECUSA had 'high', 'broad', and 'low', was broadly liberal in its clergy leadership, broadly Protestant in its churchmanship, and also somewhat uncomfortable, as a whole, with revivalism and extreme evangelicalism. With the rise of the Oxford Movement and also the rise of theological 'liberalism', the Protestant Episcopal Church was unable to sustain a strong Christian identity alternative to the world. Like the mother Church in England, (P)ECUSA was disturbed to its toes by Tractarianism and by its child, Anglo-Catholicism. And like the mother, too, the daughter

was rocked to the core by the 'liberalism' of *Essays and Reviews*. Unlike the mother, however, the daughter lost 'and lost to a man' her Evangelical ballast. This crucial loss occurred in 1874 when Assistant Bishop George D. Cummins of the Diocese of Kentucky led a small but assertive group of self-consciously evangelical clergy out of the Church. They established the Reformed Episcopal Church. That church went off to relative obscurity, although it has experienced some resurgence in the last twenty years. The point for (P)ECUSA is that we lost our theological Evangelicals.

After 1874, the old Evangelicals, or their 'children' rather, morphed almost without exception into twentieth century 'liberals'. Meanwhile, Anglo-Catholicism grew, at first slowly, but later, without the theological counter-weight of Evangelical Protestant thought, rapidly. By the 1970s the main ideological force in American Episcopalianism had become both 'catholic' and 'liberal', or better: 'liberal Catholic'. This is an indisputable fact. It became explicit in the new, identity-shaping 1979 Book of Common Prayer. The 1979 'Prayer Book', which was not supplemental to the former Book but was rather the officially required replacement of it, became the high point of 'liberal catholicism' in the American Church. It includes comprehensive theological 'corrections' to the old Catechism (*i.e.*, the 1979 'Catechism' is Arminian from stem to stern); alters completely the focus on doctrine that existed in the old consecration service for bishops, in favour of 'church unity' abstractly conceived; reduces the Thirty Nine Articles of Religion to an 'historical document' on a par with the 'Lambeth Quadrilateral'; replaces entirely the old Morning Prayer preaching tradition Sunday mornings with rubrical pressure to use only the 'Holy Eucharist', and in practice the non-penitential 'HE, Rite II'; and offers a host of 'options'—which have become in practice universal, indeed mandatory—that are superficially 'catholic' but in fact quite kitschy. I can speak about the 1979 'Book of Common Prayer' because I have had to use it for almost twenty-five years. It was a wrong turn then and it has shaped us into what we have become.

Because (P)ECUSA has not had theological Evangelicals on board the *navis ecclesiae*—except for a few who came in through the ministry of John Stott and other English Evangelicals during the 1970s and quite a few more who were converted through the Charismatic Renewal of the 1970s—the ship has been ruddered and driven since the watershed year of 1979 by

two other influences. The first influence is a generalized and precious churchiness. The post-1979 Episcopal Church, with its popular ‘Blessing of the Animals’, its well-meaning smorgasbord of Taize, ‘I’m OK’, ‘You’re OK’, Betty Pulkingham music (in small doses), together with politically sanitized but vacuous hymns that sound good but have little content, such as ‘Lift High the Cross’; its universalized vesture of cassock/alb and chasuble, this Episcopal church attracts the very small segment of the population who likes ‘church’. It attracts people who like to ‘do church’. But it is ‘low-octane’! It is Christianity-lite. Needy people bypass it on the way to the massive but gut-level pentecostal churches. Serious people bypass it on the way to Roman Catholicism, on the one side, or conservative Presbyterianism, on the other. We Episcopalians, are left with a small, if enthusiastic harvest of folk who like to ‘do church’. The second influence on us is, well, whatever voice is currently crying the loudest in our culture at large. Since the loud voices are generally the voices on the cultural ‘left’, churches like ours that have little Bible teaching, are easy push-overs. Thus the ‘gay lobby’ and earlier the ‘women’s lobby’ have been extremely successful with us. If nothing is clearly right—Bible teaching, for example—then everything is right. So, Take me, I’m yours! Churchiness coupled with ‘entitlement’ is the brew currently at the boil in American Episcopalianism.

Why would a Bible Christian stay with us? Why hang in there with (P)ECUSA given this practical assent to the non-enduring and the non-scriptural? You could ask the same question of Bible Christians today in any of the ‘main-line’ American denominations, such as the United Methodists, the Presbyterian Church in the USA, the Congregationalists, the American Baptists, etc. The question is a proper one. If my wife and I had not studied overseas and particularly among the Evangelicals of the Church of England, we would probably have gone out long ago. But God lifted us out of (P)ECUSA in very early days and put us in a circle of people like George Carey, Michael Green, and Colin Buchanan; and later in the sphere of bishops like Michael Nazir-Ali, Mike Hill, and John R. Taylor. Plus we were also able to spend three years with the systematic theologians at Tubingen, where ideas govern the Church’s future. All that became a strong anti-body injected into our bloodstream from our early 20s.

We think that the 1979 face of (P)ECUSA is probably an aberration in the history of Anglicanism. We believe it cannot finally flourish in a world the

needs of which and the catastrophes of which demand far more serious responding. The current ethos of (P)ECUSA has little to say, beyond ‘pastoral presence’, to a world in the aftermath of 11 September 2001. It has little to say in the presence of Islamic Jihad. So we are hopeful—if not hopeful in the short term—that events and the world’s insistent needs will overturn the silliness of (P)ECUSA and force our Church to return to roots. And the roots are there! There was a Nicholas Ridley once, there was a Charles Simeon and a John Wesley, there was a William Meade and an Alexander Viets Griswold, there was a Janani Luwum, and even, from a different point on the compass, a George Bell. We have not lost our hopes for Anglican Christianity in principle.

What is the solution? What is the solution for (Protestant)ECUSA’s problems? What are we hoping for and what should we pray for? A part of the solution may have come already in the trauma of September 11, 2001. It may be that the unconscious arrogance of American church leaders has been affected in the same way that the unconscious arrogance of American global policies has been touched. This may be. Time will tell.

The obvious solution all along—by no means obvious, however, to (P)ECUSA’s House of Bishops—has been some kind of alternative episcopal oversight for conservative parishes and clergy. American Episcopalians have been schooled to understand anything resembling a ‘flying bishop’ to be ‘congregational’. That is the word our bishops use reflexively, with hands raised in appalled horror. Nevertheless, some admitted form of alternative oversight by a ‘conservative’ or ‘traditional’ bishop would probably have prevented the Singapore consecrations and almost definitely stopped the Colorado ones. Now it is too late. We have our ‘alternative’, unkosher as it is.

What I am praying for is revival, bonafide Wesley-style revival among American Episcopalians. It is not a generic prayer, because I pray the same thing for the Church of England. Jerry Falwell once said a cockeyed thing— another one—to the effect that the Anti-Christ is probably growing up right now on the streets of Jerusalem. What I am praying for is a new John Wesley or two, growing up right now, a Wesley for England and a Wesley also for America. They may not emerge from Anglicanism, and they will not be confined by it, but he will speak the Good News to it.

The life and teachings of the historical Jesus remain immensely attractive today. The Bible's diagnosis of the problem of being human remains penetrating and apt: it handles the data. The Atonement of Christ, the 'Old, Old Story' of the Cross, still preaches. It still connects with people who carry 'baggage'. The universal discomfort with the apparent finality of death is addressed directly by the Easter hope. Stephen Jay Gould's death last May, with his total lack of a response to the natural phenomenon of termination, shed a dark light on the futility of humanist grapplings with death. On that front, we have something indispensable to offer. I am not surprised by the blithe and seemingly impermeable superficiality of most U.S. Episcopalianism. At the same time I am not ashamed of the Gospel. Thus, I am ever hopeful.

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