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I AM AN ANGLICAN

This article of Fr. Ralston's, reprinted from 1991, speaks again to us. Fourteen years later we are faced with the "intention" which he dreaded, and his words ring true once more.

There used to be a little jingle sung to the tune of "God Bless America" that commenced this way: "I am an Anglican, I am P.E." It went on to say "not R.C., not a Presby, not a Baptist, white with foam"—"I am an Anglican, PECUSA's my home." Well, home is where the heart is, and despite the elimination of P(rotestant) from the official name, reducing us simply to ECUSA, we are still commonly called "The Episcopal Church," and because this name is the name of our Church home we love the name as locating us within the whole family of Christ.

And we have been proud of it. Those who have found and cherished our dangerous balance of catholic faith and protestant freedom, whereby as Churchmen we declare our solidarity with the "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church," and as persons realize we must "work out (our) own salvation with fear and trembling," have understood they have come upon a pearl of great price, a very special and good way to attempt Christianity. I truly love the Anglican way in the faith. It has been little tempted to fanaticism or exclusivism, and though English in origin and temper, has found itself able to be translated throughout the world, everywhere English-speaking people went, into the languages and cultural textures of multifarious nations. It has stood the acid test of universality and particularity which is at the heart of proclaiming Christ within and to the world.

It is its peculiar manifestation within the English-speaking community which, I confess, makes it lovely to me. It has produced saints and martyrs and holy people all over the world, but it is the peculiar Anglican saints, our local and special glories, that endear to me the Anglican way, of which our Episcopal Church still claims to be a part.

It is a comfort to think of Columba and Patrick, and the whole Celtic Church; it is wonderful to remember Alfred, that paradigm of Christian monarchs who set English speech firmly on its course as one of the great world languages; and of the great galaxy which appeared at the Reformation, the Church of Shakespeare and John Donne, of Queen

Elizabeth and Lancelot Andrewes; and on to our own days, even to our own neighborhood, and William Porcher du Bose. It is startling how many of our greatest Churchmen have been laymen, not clergy. I suppose, to take two examples, one could almost define the peculiar temper of Anglican Christianity by Samuel Johnson on the one hand and Evelyn Underhill on the other; he so massive, so immediately ethical, so intense; she so otherworldly, so reflective, and yet so practical. They both inform our common life.

We have these deep spiritual wells from which we can drink. I confess that the troubles of the ecclesiastical institution have distracted me all too often from those things that ought to claim my first attention, and which can nourish the soul in a dry season. It was so refreshing this summer to read *The Tempest*. The theology and the religion articulated through the action and argument of the play, not as exhortation or explicit statement, but as substantive understanding and form, is like a living testimonial to the best of the Anglican mode of comprehending the world in which we live, both in its particularity and its universality. Everything is there on that island, and the end of it is prayer.

And so "I am an Anglican." I am one in a peculiar and provincial way, no doubt, but I remember that what I share in is a universal mode of Christian profession, spoken with a local accent.

The trouble is that in order to continue being an "Anglican Christian" it may be necessary to cease being an Episcopalian. I never imagined such a day might come. Even when some of my best friends went into what is called "the continuing church," by which is meant the various bodies formed by departure from the Episcopal institution, most of which have "Anglican" in their titles, I still could not think I had no place in the Episcopal Church, my home, and then the home of my family for too many generations to count.

But the time has come for me to face some hard distinctions and discriminations. I cannot say that I think the present Episcopal Church, as embodied in and expressing itself through its General Convention, is congruent with its Anglican past or present.

I am not sure what it is, but it does not feel like home anymore, and my heart is not in it. "Teach us to care and not to care," and "do not let your right hand know what your left hand is doing." The poet reflects in contemporary terms the paradox given us by our Lord. I find that I still care, very much; but I also find in myself an impulse not to care at all.

I could never not love the Episcopal Church, even in estrangement and radical dissociation from those who now formally govern it and, in my opinion, abuse it. Their abuse and ill-governing cannot affect the substance of our Church in its essence, or what it has delivered to us for our comfort and joy. But it may indeed dissociate the institution we know as "The Episcopal Church" from that substance, inherited and still living in the minds, hearts, and wills of the faithful of our Anglican Communion.

And so we may come to the point where we must say "I am an Anglican," affirming our solidarity with the long history of our particular Christian way—the tradition of the Celtic Church, King Alfred, Cranmer and Hooker, the martyrs of Uganda, the missionaries to China and

Japan, Bishop Kemper, and all the goodly company; and go our way, perhaps as a remnant within the Episcopal Church, perhaps as part of a larger and more inclusive Anglican province or presence.

The question is one of intention. Does what calls itself "The Episcopal Church" intend to remain faithful to what we have received, to appropriate it, bring to it the best spirits and most profound minds and clearest hearts of our time, and thereby renew and refresh our tradition, so that its living witness may still be seen and felt and heard in the world? Or does the Episcopal Church despise its particular heritage and way, and wish to become a "new thing," another kind of Church? If the second is true, and it seems increasingly likely that a great many people who govern our institution desire that metamorphosis, even to the point of repudiation our past and our inheritance, then we must in charity leave them with the name, and find another, more truly Anglican ecclesiastical structure within which we can live.

The Episcopal Synod [now Forward in Faith North America—a convocation within the Anglican Communion Network] has declared that we are now in actuality two churches under a single institutional name and organization. And we hear about an "inclusive circle," whose circumference enlarges to include each special group and its ideology as each appears.

But every circle also has a center, and one looks in vain for a center in the Episcopal Church. Christ is the only possible center for a Christian Church. But who is the Christ if not the one whose words are venerated and obeyed, whose ministry is revered and maintained, whose truth is celebrated in creed and doctrine, whose spirit informs prayer and sacraments? And how do we know that it is indeed the very Christ, apart from the tradition, the vast collective remembrance of him? Without, in our case, the Anglican tradition, we may fashion an idol, a creature of our own desires, a figment of our own imaginations. That is why "I am an Anglican." I begin to doubt that the Episcopal Church any longer intends this for itself. It is, I fear, becoming something else, in which I have no place or part.

The Rev'd. William H. Ralston, Jr.

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