
Chapter One

The Anglican Consciousness

Anglicanism is a mode of making sense of the experience of God. To put it another way, Anglicanism is a particular approach to the construction of reality, or to the building of a world.

What do I mean by “building a world”? The point is crucial for our discussion; so this illustration may help. Three couples are planning to take a vacation together and they are discussing whether or not to go to the beach. One couple strongly urges that they go. Think of the sun, the sound of the ocean, they say, lying on the beach with nothing to do but relax. They recall their own youth when trips to the beach were the happiest occasions of their lives. Another couple resists. One of them recalls when as a small child she almost drowned in the ocean. She retains a deep fear of water. The husband finds lying on the beach a waste of time. He recalls a life of having to prove himself by hard work. The third couple is willing to go, but memories of sunburn and a week of rain two years before dampens their enthusiasm.

What is the question here? It is not what is intrinsically the nature of an experience of the beach — “the beach in the raw.” None of us ever experience the beach that way. It is what each couple makes of the experience of the beach based upon their memory and its way of shaping their consciousness of the beach that makes the difference. It is not necessarily a matter of whether one couple is right and the rest are wrong, although it would be if one insisted the beach was inhabited by man-eating tigers. Each

couple has a distinctive way of building a world of meaning or constructing a reality around the experience of the beach. That world of meaning obviously determines each couple's willingness to go to the beach.

One way of understanding Anglicanism is to know that it is a unique way of looking, making sense, and acting in the experience of God disclosed to us in the person of Jesus Christ. This is to say that it is a manner of being conscious, which manner was given birth in the history of a people whose culture, language and institutions came into being in the British Isles. It is well to remember that these islands, until the discovery and colonization of the New World by Europeans, were the frontier of the civilized world, removed from the centers of culture. It was the end point of successive invasions from the north and east: the Celts, the Anglo-Saxons, the Norse and the Normans (who were Norse that had originally settled in France). Anglican consciousness is the product of a montage of geographical, social, political, economic and racial forces that have created a peculiar historical memory. That memory has been handed on through the centuries, and while modified by subsequent events (e.g., the colonization of North America) remains distinctive at heart.

An example of Anglican consciousness is Julian of Norwich, an obscure fourteenth century anchorite. In some ways Julian was a commonplace phenomenon of her age. She lived in a cell attached to the parish church in an East Anglia town. From a window in her cell she could view the Eucharist and from another window she could assist people seeking spiritual counsel. There were many such persons in later medieval England, but none known to us of the genius of Julian.

In 1370, Julian received a series of revelations or showings, in which the crucified Lord appeared to her. The image of the suffering Christ, which was the persistent form of these visions, was not remarkable for the times. It was consistent with the popular religious art of the century. What is arresting is Julian's reflections upon this experience setting forth the world she constructed out of her experience.

Julian lived in a time of suffering and confusion. The Black Death had wiped out perhaps as much as a third of the population of England. The once proud and noble warrior-king, Edward III, was living out his last years in senility, mourning the death of his promising son, the Black Prince. Edward III was followed by his

grandson, Richard II, who was broken against the misfortunes of his times despite his efforts to resolve England's problems. Deposed, Richard II died in prison. Throughout this period England was enduring an incredibly cruel and draining war with France, which we know as the Hundred Years War.

It is in this world that Julian spoke with a certain calm. "Our life is founded," she said, "on faith with hope and love." The basis of her faith was the Christ, who described himself to her as "the ground of her beseeching." Julian was no foolish optimist. She had a deep awareness of our sin, yet believed that God has allowed us to fall that he might raise us up that much higher. "Sin is necessary," she says; but immediately adds in her best known words, "All will be well, and every kind of thing will be well."

What kind of world does Julian see which allows her such confidence in a time of confusion and despair? It begins, first, with sensibility. I use the word "sensibility" in an unfamiliar meaning. It is the ability to apprehend or incorporate into our awareness the totality of an experience in all depth and breadth. Sensibility refers to the capacity to be sensitive and to accept what our senses tell us, even when that is not what fits into our neat categories. It implies an openness to experience, even when the meaning of that experience is ambiguous, incongruous and obscure.

Julian's sensibility is seen in her insistence that God lets us rebel against him in order that he might raise us up even higher, which is a profound paradox. She said that there are five activities that arise in her at the same time: rejoicing, mourning, desire, fear and true hope, meaning that we know Jesus in both consolation and desolation. We are repelled by God and drawn to him at the same moment. There is an ambiguity to our awareness that reflects a consciousness of the experience that is not neatly drawn. Life is like that when perceived in its fullness, light and darkness, with shades of gray in between.

Secondly, Julian is aware that the extraordinary love of God is to be found within the ordinary. The vision of a hazelnut comes to mind, from which Julian learns three things: that God made, loves and preserves his creation. What could be more ordinary than a little hazelnut? Julian had a gift for perceiving what another Englishman, Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889) called the inscape or inner reality of things. This takes a way of seeing beyond the common sense reductions of the cynic, who can only see the outer appearance.

This gift for the extraordinary sometimes works in another direction. The commonplace ideas of the culture can be elevated to illumine the meaning of God in a new way. Julian takes the dying ideal of feudal chivalry, with its notion of the courteous knight, and applies it to God. "For God sees one way and man sees another way," said Julian. "For it is for man to meekly accuse himself, and it is for our Lord God's own goodness courteously to excuse man." The word "courteous" carries all the meaning of mercy, gentleness and compassion. God is seen in a startling new, but recognizable light. He becomes almost human in his goodness.

Thirdly, Julian attributes to God the consciousness of a mother. She is, in fact, placing upon God that awareness which is characteristic of herself and her English church. "Jesus is our true Mother," she said, "and he is our Mother of mercy in taking our sensuality." This is a remarkable statement, which, while not original with Julian, has been made most evident in her writings, that Christ thinks as a woman is one way of translating what she is saying. What could she mean? God is caring, intuitive, receptive and open. As Christ was incarnate he knew what it was to live in a body, and like a pregnant woman to sense in the body the joy of new life.

Perhaps Julian could be criticized for not revealing the dark side of that motherly or feminine consciousness, which through the ages humankind has associated with death, the unpredictable and the ominous. The awareness at one and the same time of good and evil, so characteristic of a feminine mode of consciousness, is dread. Dread is a property of that sensibility of what we have already written. It is the knowledge that in nature where there is life there is death, where there is joy there is pain, and where there is knowledge there is ignorance; but ultimately, Julian tells us, there is also true hope.

Julian provides a prototype of Anglican consciousness. In order to explain how this is so I need to describe a theory — perhaps we could call it a model which challenges us to look further — of human consciousness. It is that our thinking falls into one of two patterns or modes. Traditionally these modes have been called "thinking with the right hand" and "thinking with the left hand." Right hand thinking is analytical, logical, requiring one-to-one unambiguous representations, and is characteristic of computers. Left hand thinking is intuitive, analogical, metaphorical, symbolic and characteristic of poetry, art and music. If our primary goal in thinking is to be as clear as possible with no loose ends, and the

experience related to a system, we think with the right hand. This is the consciousness of science, but it only describes things as they appear to be. If our intention in thinking is to draw together as much of an experience as possible, with items unresolved and with large, nagging questions in the middle of what we have described, then we are thinking with the left hand.

Fantasy literature is an example of thinking with the left hand. The English are rather good at this kind of writing. The Inklings, a literary group that met in Oxford during World War II to criticize one another's work, produced some remarkable fantasies. They included Dorothy Sayers, who wrote mystery novels; C. S. Lewis, who wrote the Narnia chronicles and three science fiction novels; Charles Williams, who wrote novels dealing with the occult; and J. R. R. Tolkien, who is famous for the stories of the Hobbits. I would claim that there is a relationship between the gift for writing fantasy literature found among the English and that thinking with the left hand which is characteristic of Anglicanism.

We Anglicans are not given to writing great theology. There are notable exceptions, but they are difficult to remember; but when Anglicanism is at its best its liturgy, its poetry, its music and its life can create a world of wonder in which it is very easy to fall in love with God. We are much more adept at the left hand than at the right.

In this spirit the three points we made about Julian of Norwich are to be understood as characteristic of our particular way of constructing reality.

First, there is the Anglican proclivity to sensibility, the taking into account the whole of an experience — ambiguity and all. Sensibility is a difficult quality. T. S. Eliot suggested that English literature has failed to capture it since John Milton. The antidote to sensibility is common sense and if we wish to avoid living in a perpetual paradox, we insist that everything is simply a matter of common sense. Anglicanism can appear this way; but we are at our best when we acknowledge the penultimate nature of our answers to the character of God and his will for us. This modesty is often expressed as a "yes, but." "Yes, Jesus is my personal Savior, but this does not mean he is a white, upper middle class American. Yes, I believe that God has a purpose for me after death, but I am skeptical of the accounts of people who claim to have died and lived again. Yes, I believe that Christ is present in the bread and wine of the Eucharist, but this does not mean that for a particle to fall on the floor is tantamount to sacrilege."

Sensibility requires a willingness to face the darkness of chaos without romanticism. One of the reasons that Anglicanism sometimes appears merely cynical or sentimental is that we do not have the courage of our best instincts. We refuse to enter the darkness. Obscure essays from the pulpit, a fascination with the past and a fondness for empty, polite chatter are among the ways we defend ourselves from our birthright.

Sensibility is a recognition that the inexpressible nature of God can never be reduced to our categories or our simplistic notions of the divine will. This leads us to acknowledge the metaphorical nature of all religious conversion and theological discourse. For Anglicanism this recognition is coupled with the fact that God is the creator of everything that is, and that the knowledge of God requires only that we look at his handiwork. This is the second point. It is why British empiricism and its ally, American pragmatism, are very much a part of the Anglican way of thinking. For example, an Anglican approach to miracles might be that God does not run around suspending the predictable course of nature, but that there is more to God's creation than that for which our intellectual constructs can account.

Radical Protestantism and its expectation that the presence of the Holy Spirit is evident in unusual phenomena, such as speaking in tongues, finds its adherents within Anglicanism from time to time. We have no need to repudiate this. After all, Julian of Norwich, for one, exhibited some fairly unusual behavior. Our tendency is to look for a natural cause for such phenomena, not because we do not believe God speaks to us in this way, but because we believe that God makes himself known and is known in the ordinary routine of life. The Carmelite mystic, Brother Lawrence (1605-1691), who came to know God in the kitchen, is someone whom we can appreciate more than Simon Stylites (c. 340-459) sitting on a pillar for forty years.

Taken too far, of course, this fondness for the ordinary can make us very dull. Unless we enter into the world of the left hand, we will end up like a theological Scrooge (a character typical of English literature). The mystery of the ordinary will be dismissed with a "bah" and a "humbug." There is a perversity within us to carry the metaphor along, which produced in Puritan times the town crier, wandering the streets of the village on the night of December 24, calling, "No Christmas tonight." It is not that we should reduce our transcendent to the ordinary routine. It is that

for the sensible consciousness the extraordinary shines through the ordinary.

Thirdly, the consciousness of Anglicanism is dominantly feminine. In medieval times England was known as the "land of Mary." The devotions that developed about the Mother of Jesus have always found a receptive home in the British Isles. This should not be too surprising in a country which counts among its greatest monarchs several queens. There is something peculiarly compatible between a feminine consciousness — be it in a man or woman — and the Anglican outlook. This is another way of speaking of the sensibility of Anglicanism, but one that will lead to some distinguishing characteristics discussed later in this book.

We often speak of Anglican "comprehensiveness." If this is a way of making relativism palatable or a means of accommodating all shades of opinion with no regard for truth, then it needs to be rejected. If by comprehensive we mean the priority of a dialectic quest over precision and immediate closure, then we are speaking of the Anglican consciousness at its best. This sense of a community of thought as opposed to a well-defined, definitive position, is what is meant by a feminine consciousness. This is why Anglicanism has never been a confessional church, as in the case of Lutheranism and Presbyterianism. It is the reason that while Puritanism, Latitudinarianism, Evangelicalism, Ultramontanism, Modernism and American Protestantism (i.e., a kind of banal "practical religion") have all been embraced by some Anglicans, none of them have been capable of comprehending the Anglican experience. They are all ultimately out of place.

A particular danger of the feminine religious consciousness is that it becomes dotty, what the dictionary defines as "amiably eccentric." In the 1980 movie "10," the role of the priest was obviously that of an Anglican. His insincere grin, his huge dog, the flatulent, ancient housekeeper, his inane conversation, the grossly lighted portrait of himself in vestments and his terrible music were all a caricature of the dotty Anglican. It is the same genre as the novels of Anthony Trollope.

Feminine consciousness possesses a darkness, as well as a light, and it is this which protects itself against amiable eccentricity. It is helpful to keep in mind that Mother of God was the person who held both the infant at Bethlehem and the crucified body of the dead Savior. The angels and demons inhabit the awareness of reality, and herein lies the ability to speak to people in the very

depths of their souls. The Anglican Richard Baxter (1615-1691) reminded us that "Christ leads us through no darker rooms than he has gone before," and if we are not aware of those dark rooms we are missing the point. Julian put it this way. "For our sin is so foul and so horrible that our Lord in his courtesy will not reveal it to us except by the light of his mercy."

The form of our consciousness obviously shapes what we make of our experience. This initial chapter has far-reaching implications, therefore, for the rest of this book the reader needs to carry the awareness of this particular outlook with him or her as the exploration proceeds in the subsequent chapters. It will enable, explicitly or implicitly, much to come clear.