

CHAPTER 7

THE RELEVANCE OF CELTIC AND AFRICAN SPIRITUALITY FOR THE CONTEMPORARY ANGLICAN CHURCH

7.1 Introduction

In this chapter, the specific applications of Celtic and African Spiritualities for the Anglican Church in particular, and for the contemporary church in general are discussed. The chapter begins with a discussion of the unique nature of the Anglican Communion, which has a bearing on its approach to teaching, worship and church structures. This is followed by a discussion of ways in which Celtic and African spiritualities may be used to strengthen the church, and specifically the Anglican Church.

Both African culture and thought and the culture, art and traditions of the ancient Celts have come to occupy a prominent place in the popular imagination. Their popularity is connected to the desire to be in touch with the earth, and with the sacredness of ordinary things. Unfortunately, many Western people tend to understand these forms of spirituality as inherently opposed to Christianity and to the Church. This perception is reinforced by a large section of contemporary popular literature and much of the media. One of the purposes of this study is to demonstrate their relevance to the Church and to the Christian gospel, and to show that both Celtic and African spirituality are valid expressions of Christian faith and life.

7.2 The Nature of the Anglican Church

In discussing the Anglican Church, it is necessary to recognise the central place in church life occupied by the liturgy, and the prayer book in general. This, together with the authority of the bishop, is the foundation of unity within the Anglican parishes of a particular diocese, and within the dioceses that make up a province.

The great strength of Anglicanism is its ability to unite extremely diverse forms of worship and belief, from extreme Anglo-Catholicism to extreme Evangelicalism, as well as churches strongly influenced by the Charismatic Movement, which may be either Anglo-Catholic or Evangelical. These churches share a common liturgy, which may be adapted to local needs with the permission of the bishop. They are not primarily united by common

beliefs or specific worship practices. As members of one world-wide communion, many beliefs will be shared. However, Anglicans may hold radically diverse beliefs on specific issues, for example, the ordination of women, and still remain members of the Anglican Church.

Faith is not seen as a private matter between God and the believer. Faith is corporate: it is the common experience of the Church into which new members are baptized and come to participate in the power of the paschal mystery. The individual enters into a dying and rising with Christ which is understood as the common experience of all the baptized, so that the church itself is seen as an article of faith, the fellowship of all those who share a common identity in Christ. Our unity in Christ is nourished by the sharing of the Eucharist, not as an act of private piety, but as the celebration of that common identity which baptism has created. The Church's outward rites, its sacraments and all those signs which give external expression of God's inward activity, are thus fundamentally related to the Anglican understanding of the gospel (Weil 1988:58).

Thus, Weil makes the important point that Anglican unity and belief is primarily expressed in liturgical worship, particularly in communal sharing in the Eucharist, rather than in doctrinal statements. This enables individuals to share in corporate acts of worship while holding diverse theological views.

By virtue of baptism, a person is seen to share in Christ's identity, sacrifice and victory over sin and death, together with all others who are united to Christ, through faith, but also through sharing in the visible sacraments of the church. While the authorised prayer book is the primary vehicle for liturgical expression, adaptations of the prayer book liturgy are permitted on occasion, and there is scope for a great deal of creativity in using the established prayer book services. This allows for creative expressions influenced by Celtic and African spirituality, such as Celtic Eucharists, or the use of traditional African beer instead of wine.

Speaking at the Tenth Session of the Anglican Consultative Council in Panama City, 1996, Peterson (1997:28) describes the world-wide Anglican communion as follows:

Ours is an inclusive tradition. Ours is a gospel tradition. Ours is a liturgical tradition. Ours is a Christ-centred tradition which allows Christians to think, pray and work in an atmosphere of discovering what our minds and hearts tell us as we listen for God's word in our age. Scripture, tradition, reason and experience prove to be excellent guides for us as a faith community.

Peterson would not claim that this tradition applies only to Anglicans and not to other groups of Christians. However, it is a good, general description of the Anglican tradition, with its often cited “guides” – Scripture, tradition, reason and experience.

Thomas (1998:250) says of the Anglican understanding of the church, and of church doctrine “Anglicanism, since its beginnings, has been forged on the anvil of ecclesiological controversy”. The Anglican church began its life as a political compromise between warring ecclesiastical parties (Catholic and Protestant) and has developed into a world-wide communion of dioceses, each having a unique, local character, and functioning as an autonomous unit, while remaining part of the whole. A wide range of theologies, and approaches to spirituality and worship may be found within the same diocese, although all parishes are under the authority of the bishop, who is the focus for diocesan unity.

The result of this development is that Anglicans do not hold to a common ecclesiology, that is, they cannot offer any consensus on the constitution of the church. However, Anglican church structures and doctrinal policy have set Anglicans free to engage with their own history and with the theological issues raised for them by that history. For example, in South Africa the Anglican church was forced to develop a strategy to combat apartheid, and in the new South Africa, needs to address problems such as poverty, crime and Aids. While there is a danger that a diocese or province could become isolated from the wider church, in practice, the dioceses and bishops are in constant dialogue with one another, and are free to decide to help one another with a particular project. Concern with local needs and problems does not preclude concern for the rest of the world community, as Anglicans have demonstrated.

The loose structure of the Anglican communion is seen as a strength, allowing Anglican churches to be flexible and relevant to contemporary location-specific needs, while remaining true to the gospel. Instead of being bound by a rigid set of doctrinal statements, the Anglican church is described as “a confessing church which must demonstrate its credibility by the way it meets successive challenges of faith and history in its ongoing life” (Thomas 1998:260). This responsibility is not unique to the Anglican church, but it is definitely a characteristic of the Anglican churches which is an outcome of their structure and inter-relationships.

Another distinctive contribution of the Anglican church to the wider church, besides the all-accommodating structure, is the development of synodical church government. The Anglican church was responsible for introducing democratic, representative government into church structures, an adaptation of the English parliamentary system. 'If England is in some sense the "Mother of Parliaments", the Church of England is also a mother of representative government within the Church' (Shriver 1998:209). For diocesan synods, each parish is represented by its clergy as well as three lay representatives, all of whom have voting rights, and may participate in any plenary debates. This development has been taken further in the Anglican Diocese of Johannesburg, where synods include a large number of unofficial delegates, who participate in group discussions, but may not address the plenary session or vote. Thus, for example, ordinands in training are able to attend synod as observers and unofficial participants.

Avis is speaking primarily of the Church of England when he says that the three major factions within the Church – Anglo-Catholic, Evangelical and Liberal – have historically been known to "reinforce their prejudices all along the line through party patronage of livings, partisan theological colleges and tame newspapers and journals" (1988:463). This is less true of Anglicanism outside England. In South Africa, all of these theological trends are represented. However, the divisions between them are less rigid than in England. In England, an evangelical ordinand will attend an evangelical seminary, and then minister in an evangelical church. In South Africa, clergy are encouraged to fraternise across confessional lines within the Anglican church¹. Different traditions will also be found within one parish, although usually one tradition will dominate.

Carey describes the open nature of Anglican doctrine and practice as follows:

I truly believe that the openness of Anglicanism is a great gift to world wide Christianity. The tolerance and breadth that has characterised our tradition has nothing to do with vagueness, wishy-washy faith or lack of commitment. It is characteristic of a faith which welcomes others and wishes there to be as few barriers to Eucharistic sharing as possible (1997:12).

¹ Recently, for example, two priests in the Diocese of Johannesburg took part in an exchange between parishes for a period of six months. One came from the most charismatic parish in the diocese, and had to learn to genuflect correctly in one of the more Anglo-Catholic parishes. The Anglo-Catholic priest, however, had to learn the skill of catching people when they are slain in the spirit and fall over backwards. This contrast illustrates the extent of the diversity present within a single denomination, and a single diocese.

In this description, Carey emphasises the inclusive, people-centred approach to faith and liturgy which is an important component of Anglicanism. This openness and unity is under threat currently over the issue of the ordination of openly gay bishops. This issue may be the greatest challenge to Anglican unity ever faced.

7.2.1 The Role of the Prayer Book in Anglican Worship and Unity

While a minority of Anglicans, primarily of the evangelical wing, set great store by doctrinal statements, from the Thirty Nine Articles onwards, most Anglicans rely on the prayer book and its services to nurture their faith. It is largely true that “Within Anglicanism, the Prayer Book is a living expression of the profound union between what we believe and what we pray” (Weil 1998: 67). The prayer book is used to guide congregational worship and private prayer. Prayer books also contain theological and doctrinal statements.

The older prayer books contain the Thirty Nine Articles printed at the back. The Church of the Province of Southern Africa’s *Anglican Prayer Book* does not include this original Anglican doctrinal statement, but includes a comprehensive catechism, set out in a question and answer format.

Those outside the Anglican Church often do not realise the extent of the close connection between liturgy and belief within the Anglican Church. Doctrine is influenced far more by liturgy than by authoritarian statements of church officials. This is attested by the reaction of certain traditionalist Anglicans when a new liturgy, with modern wording, was introduced in 1975, with the authorisation of the bishops of the Church of the Province of Southern Africa. Many older Anglicans, or those with a more traditional mind-set, refused to use the new liturgy².

Therefore, in cases of multi-national congregations, where there is a language barrier, the liturgy is likely to follow the same patterns as these people know from their home

² There were cases of people arriving for a service, being given the new booklet, turning around and leaving! Much of this opposition was a reaction to the interim nature of “Liturgy 75”, as the new prayer book, published in 1989, was far more widely accepted.

churches. Therefore, they are able to participate in worship with some understanding, and will be able to become more and more a part of a local church community.

The churches of the Anglican communion are united by a common liturgy which, while it may be adapted to express both local interests and theological biases, retains a common structure, and often similar wording. The first two Books of Common Prayer, published in 1549 and 1552, form the foundation of all later developments in Anglican theology and practice (Stevenson 1998:188). The majority of provinces of the Anglican Communion produced local prayer books during the second half of the twentieth century, based on a common structure, but adapted to local needs.

Gibson (1997:116) states that the development of local liturgies should be encouraged, incorporating local verbal and symbolic expressions, while preserving traditional elements of Anglican liturgy, such as “reverence, a balance of contemplation and doxology, predictability, respect for individuals, a coherent liturgical use of scripture”. This is what has happened on a world-wide scale through the liturgical movement. While preserving essential elements of Anglican liturgy, local variations have allowed for considerable creative expression and contextualisation of worship.

The South African “Anglican Prayer Book” was published in 1989, and this was later than other local versions, giving the compilers the opportunity to learn from earlier local liturgies. A further revision is planned, but production is not yet in progress due to financial constraints. It has been suggested that the new version of the Anglican Prayer Book should make more use of gender inclusive language when referring both to God and to human beings. The most obvious example of this is the following: in the existing liturgy for ordination, reference is made to male and female candidates for the diaconate, but only to male candidates for the priesthood. This reflects the situation in the Church of the Province of Southern Africa when the liturgies were compiled, that only men were ordained priests until 1992.

The translation of the psalms used, however, is also unnecessarily gender-specific. For example, Psalm 1:1 reads “Blessed is the *man*³ who has not walked in the counsel of the

³ Italics mine

other parts of the world in recent years. In general, however, there have been few attempts to understand what Celtic Spirituality is about except on a very superficial level. Celtic crosses and other jewellery are worn by many, and Celtic masses have enjoyed popularity recently as well. Celtic books of prayers, poems and stories have been sold in record numbers to Christians and to others. However, generally the root of all this popularity often is a fascination with Celtic art works or poetry, rather than an appreciation of the underlying values and world view.

It remains to be seen whether future Anglican liturgies will be influenced by Celtic Spirituality. At present, the planned revision of the Anglican Prayer Book by the Church of the Province of Southern Africa has been put on hold due to financial considerations. The popularity of Celtic prayers and liturgies could be influential in the future, but this will depend on the liturgical committees responsible.

If the Church does not capitalise on this widespread interest and give clear teaching on the meaning behind Celtic symbols, an important opportunity will be lost, in the areas of teaching church members (communication within the church), and also in the areas of evangelism and apologetics (that is, communication with those outside the church).

7.4 Contribution of African Spirituality for the Anglican Church

The Anglican Church in Africa is still in the early stages of exploring the riches which African Spirituality could offer for its life and its worship. This is particularly true for South Africa, where African Theology and African Spirituality have recently become more prominent, and are being discovered by many ordinary Christians.

African Anglicans take great pride in their church, but unfortunately tend to emphasise the outward forms, often without an understanding of their meaning. Thus, particular ceremonies are conducted in precise ways, and there is widespread intolerance of those who believe or act differently. There is a great need for teaching in this area, and there is also a need for a sharing of understanding between different groups within the church.

(For example, this portion of liturgy was used at a service held at St. Alban's Cathedral, Pretoria on 16th May 2002, to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the ordination of the first women priests in the Church of the Province of Southern Africa).

With few exceptions, Black South African Christians tend to focus on restructuring their African identity, through developing African forms of prayer and worship. In this context, it is important to note that there has been considerable opposition to the (officially sanctioned) Africanisation programmes in traditional churches, often by older people. These people tend to feel either that African forms of worship are incorrect, or less than Christian.

This attitude, of course, comes from the legacy of Western missionaries. In South Africa, the predominant missionary influence was Anglo-Catholic, resulting in a strong Anglo-Catholic bias amongst Black Anglicans, for example, in the Anglican churches of Soweto. Those who were evangelised as children and taught that particular practices constitute “Anglican Worship” and all others are incorrect, understandably have a prejudice against those who worship differently. This problem must be overcome by means of teaching and dialogue.

There is a general desire within the Anglican Church in Southern Africa to maintain traditional worship, and also to introduce worship which is in touch with African cultural roots. In some congregations, the two are combined; in others, they are found in different services⁵. Forms of worship in accordance with African Spirituality should be encouraged, as a way to deepen and broaden the lives of Christians, and of church communities.

The richness of oral forms of communication and oral traditions is also an important part of *traditional African* culture, part of which survives both inside and outside the church. In particular, it is expressed among South African Anglicans by means of informal choruses sung during services, as well as informal preaching conducted by lay persons during less structured gatherings. These less formal expressions of spirituality are understood as an opportunity for those outside the authority structures of the church to lead and to express their thoughts. In particular, women (the majority of church members, often poorly

⁵ During an Easter all-night vigil at St. Augustine’s Church, Thaba Nchu, the formal prayer book Easter service and Eucharist was presided over by the parish priest, Revd Leslie Kotsi. At the end of this service, he and his altar party processed out of the church and the team leading the informal preaching and singing session took over. Moments later, the priest returned dressed casually in an open-necked shirt and joined the congregation. He made no attempt to control proceedings; he was simply another participant in this, very African, informal form of worship. In doing this, he expressed his approval of the African worship non-verbally.

represented in the male-dominated authority structures) play an important role in music and in informal preaching.

The growth of the world-wide church, and specifically the churches of the Anglican communion, among peoples of the two-thirds world, will have a growing influence on the development of church doctrine and policy. The centre of gravity in the church has shifted from North to South and it is the Southern Christians who increasingly hold the balance of power. For example, this was demonstrated dramatically in the last Lambeth Conference, where the issue of church policy on homosexuality, including same sex marriages and the ordaining of clergy who are openly homosexual, was discussed. The two-thirds world dominated the voting, so that the overwhelming decision was against both gay clergy and same sex marriages.

The Western church has declined in numbers and influence, and can no longer control the churches of the South. It is these churches, which are increasingly showing the way to the secularised West, desperate to recover a lost sense of spirituality. In this context, steps should be taken to ensure that alternative forms of spirituality do not merely become something “quaint”, but that Western Christians take them seriously and learn from them. Failure to do so will lend credence to charges of irrelevancy to contemporary society, which are often levelled against the world-wide church.

There is a danger that the churches of the West may ignore the beliefs and actions of less monied sections of the church, and continue with controversial actions regardless of the consequences to the unity of the church. The recent consecration of Bishop Gene Robinson by the American Episcopalian Church, in defiance of third world and conservative objections, is an example of such a callous action⁶. While this may increase the profile of the church in the media, effectively it makes the church less relevant to the needs and aspirations of the majority of human beings world wide.

The tendency for Western churches to overpower the more numerous but less economically powerful churches of the two-thirds world would be counteracted if the

⁶ Bishop Gene Robinson was consecrated Bishop of New Hampshire in November 2003, and is the first openly gay bishop in the Anglican Communion.

values inherent in African Spirituality and other alternative spiritualities were to be taught in the West.

7.5 Conclusion

The contemporary church faces a number of challenges from a hostile or indifferent social environment. The church can no longer continue to operate in time-honoured ways, ignoring the context in which it exists. Creative ways must be found to reach out to members of secular society, who may no longer be angry or disbelieving, but simply indifferent to the gospel message. The popular imagination has been influenced into believing that Celtic, African and related forms of spirituality are fundamentally opposed to the Christian world view, but if both are correctly understood and practised, there is no conflict.

The openness to theological and liturgical diversity within the Anglican Church makes it possible to introduce perspectives from both Celtic and African tradition into worship and teaching. This will serve to challenge people about deepening their spirituality and will help people to discover the historical roots of their faith, in a way which is attractive and designed to meet the needs and aspirations of contemporary human beings. There is a widespread hunger today for security built upon the foundations of the past, which is nonetheless able to equip the church for the challenges of life and social problems in the twenty-first century. Both Celtic and African spirituality incorporate perspectives on life which are relevant to these challenges. Therefore, including aspects of Celtic and African spirituality in liturgy is not merely harking back to the past, but serves to strengthen and build the church of the future.

Celtic and African spiritualities both represent a collection of ancient thought forms, worship practices and approaches to life. They have the depth of meaning which will satisfy those who sincerely seek to find a new dimension to their lives. The church needs to integrate valuable insights from Celtic and African thought into its theology, worship and spirituality in order to deepen its spiritual life and become a more effective instrument to help modern people in their search for God, and in order to present its message more holistically to a needy world.