

The Anglican DNA - does it all come from Henry VIII?

There is no doubt that sex and conflict make good headlines.

The recent Lambeth Conferences and the alternative gathering just before it, Gafcon, held in Jerusalem, had all the ingredients of a media bonanza.

Many of us had moments at Lambeth when we wondered whether the counsels of the Anglican Communion would ever get past sex.

On the other hand there might be those cynical people who would argue that it all began with issues of sex, after all. I am referring to the sex life of Henry VIII and his need for a marriage that could produce an heir to throne, taking him through a litany of marriages and resulting in the break with Rome.

Here was the man, the popular argument might run, to whom the Pope had given the title of "Defender of the Faith". And who just a few years later, and just to suit his marital aspirations, threw away his loyalty to the Catholic faith and Anglicanism was conceived, as it were in sin!

Well, that's the tabloid version of the story at least. Little wonder, you might say, that we keep getting caught up with debates about sex ... the DNA goes back to Henry!

But all that's a caricature; including the simplistic attribution of the English Reformation to Henry VIII.

In fact the Anglican pedigree goes back much further than the English Reformation. The English Reformers themselves were very conscious of trying to maintain continuity with something much earlier. They saw what they were doing as restoring what the Elizabethan Bishop John Jewel called the faith "of the Apostles and old catholic fathers".ⁱ

Christianity in England had always had its independent streak.

The exact date that the faith came to the British Isles is unknown. There are legends of visits by Paul and Joseph of Arimathea, but these are almost certainly just pious tales. What we do know is that from AD 84 Britain was administered as a Roman

Province under the Emperor Domitian. Christianity came sometime after, with traders or even soldiers, bearing their own quiet witness to the Lord without establishing a mission or founding a church.

The earliest reference to Christianity in Britain is made by Tertullian who wrote in the year 208 of:

Places among the Britons unapproached by the Romans but subdued to Christ.

The first known martyrdom occurred in AD 304 with the death of St Alban. British bishops are recorded as attending the Council of Arles AD 314 and possibly the important Council of Nicaea in AD 325.

In the fifth and sixth century Celtic Christianity flourished in the North and spread through the works of Columba and Aidan.

All this was at the edge of papal purview and it had its own character: monastic, missional, dynamic, linked to the land and built around community rather than geographical boundaries. It worked with the local princes and kings and was largely outside of the political organisation of the Roman Church.

That is, until Pope Gregory the Great decided that the English Church needed some organising and consecrated a priest called Augustine to do the job.

Augustine was not a man of particularly adventurous heart and he turned back once, before crossing the channel in 597 to arrive at Canterbury and establish first a community of monks, then a diocese and cathedral.

Augustine and his successors established the parish system in England, based on the Roman model. At the Synod of Whitby in 664 the English Church accepted the Roman system for calculating the date of Easter, and Roman structures and customs prevailed over the Celtic.

But the English remained an independent lot. They were never entirely at ease with the increasingly expansive claims of the papacy, and the Saxon rulers of the seventh and eighth century thought of themselves as Christian rulers of Christian kingdoms,

and as a consequence responsible for the souls of their people, as much as for their bodies.

Later, William the Conqueror drew on this tradition in a letter to Gregory the Seventh. Gregory had sent a letter to William in 1075 to collect the “Peter’s Pence” and to order William to do fealty to the Pope. William replied:

I refused to do fealty and I will not do it; for I did not promise it, nor do I find that my predecessors did fealty to yours...ⁱⁱ

Richard II forbade the Pope making appointments to the English Church and also stopped the English Church making appeals beyond the King to Rome. At the same time, scholars like Bede were gathering and articulating the distinctives of British Christianity.

So while always seeing itself as part of the catholic whole, Christianity in Great Britain has from the beginning had its own character and identity. Henry did not invent what we now call Anglicanism or give it its DNA. The 16th century Reformation itself was a complex affair, blending emerging nationalism across Europe with a movement in religious renewal.

Henry’s divorce provided an English tipping point in this complex story. However, there’s no doubting that Henry did influence the shape of the English Reformation, and through that the shape of Anglicanism today.

One of the most important ways Henry did this was through his emphasis on the relationship between Church and nation. Henry wrote at the time “this realm of England is an empire”.ⁱⁱⁱ It is strange language to our ears, perhaps, but what Henry was doing was making the claim that, like the Emperor Constantine, he would preside over matters temporal and spiritual; that the Church in England was subject to government within England and not from beyond.

The Reformers talked about what they called “particular churches”. They believed that the Church in each land was a full expression of catholic Christianity, and that each had its own call and character within its own land and people without need of outside jurisdiction.

The Church in each land, the Church in each people, is fully the Church; now here we have some true Anglican DNA!

At its best, our Church has always stood for the authentic indigenisation of faith in every land, with local culture and expression taken seriously. Each national Church was an autonomous part of the broader Church Catholic, held together by common faith and bonds of affection rather than central authority or hierarchy.

There was a moment during the opening service at Lambeth that imaged it for me. It was the Gospel procession.

The Melanesian Church from our own Pacific Region led this part of the service. There were the bamboo drums and pipes of Melanesia. The Gospellers were dressed in the traditional attire of Melanesia, grass and feather, bare breasted women. They brought a wooden canoe forward and placed the Gospel book within it, and with vibrant dance and drum, they processed the Gospel down into the Nave of the great Canterbury Cathedral. And the dance of Melanesia was as much authentically Anglican as the high vaulted ceiling of Canterbury under which it occurred.

This is the polity, the dance of Anglicanism. At our best we believe in a Communion of equals held together by relationship. At our best we take seriously the local, the minority, the indigenous, the different, and hold these things in Community without coercion. At our best we hold together through giving honour to each other rather than by imposing on each other. At our best we understand that authority works through people rather than upon people.

At times it can get messy. At times it can take us longer to make decisions or resolve conflicts. At times autonomous churches can exercise their autonomy in ways that bring grief to others. At times I can be frustrated and wish we had a Pope, with a “plenitude of divine authority”, or even better that I was the Pope! ^{iv}

But in the end, I believe that through accident and providence, there is something of Gospel in this vision of Church as a fellowship of equals, of the Gospel finding its place with full power in every land and culture, of autonomous communities living together and struggling together within bonds of affection.

How can I believe such a thing, when the Media contrasts what it sees as the floundering of Lambeth with the triumph of World Youth Day, occurring at the same time?

My reasons have more to do with the world than the Church.

In our ever-shrinking pluralist, diverse and radicalised world, what will it take for people to live together in peace and well being? In a world of fragile resources and the ever present risk of conflict of those resources, what will it take for us to handle conflict without destruction?

For me, the answer does not lie with empire or superpowers. It does not lie with the imposition of dominant power, through military might, technology or economic weight. It does not lie in the suppression of the different, the elimination of opposition.

It lies in a vision of community where autonomy is respected, people live relationally, the less powerful do not have a lesser place, cultural distinctives are treasured, and in times of conflict the first resort (not the last) is listening engagement, restraint and a bending towards the other.

At its best that what Anglican polity stands for in the world: human communities daring to live in mutuality; honouring the autonomy of others, sharing power without the need of a superpower. That's all in the Anglican DNA.

Do we live it? Often we are not brave enough and resort to the patterns and the politics of the world around us.

But our heritage calls us to something different. It calls us to a vision of autonomous human communities living together in Communion, without coercion and dominance.

For all its frustrations it's a vision I hold still, for the sake of the Gospel.

ⁱ Norris, J 1998, "Episcopacy", *The Study of Anglicanism*, rev. edn, (eds) S. Sykes, J. Booty & J. Knight, SPCK/Fortress, London, p. 334.

ⁱⁱ Kaye, B. N 2003, *Reinventing Anglicanism - a vision of confidence, community and engagement in Anglican Christianity*, Openbook, Adelaide, pp. 17-18.

ⁱⁱⁱ Avis, P 2002, *Anglicanism and the Christian Church*, rev. and enlarged edn, T & T Clark, Edinburgh, p.14.

^{iv} Avis, P 1990, *Christians in Communion*, The Liturgical Press, Collegeville Minnesota, pp 1-4.