

CHAPTER FOUR

Coyotes Can't Fly: Basic Characteristics of the Liberal Religion

For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths.

2 Timothy 4:3-4

Having traced the rise of the liberal religion, it is now necessary to examine more fully some of its specific theological characteristics in order to demonstrate its incompatibility with traditional/orthodox Christianity. In the next chapter I will show how each of the symptoms of the present crisis in the ACC is linked to the introduction of liberalism. Chapter Six will show how liberalism's embrace of the homosexual agenda is serving to bring to the surface the underlying division we have been exploring and creating a crisis situation. Chapter Seven will then demonstrate why General Synod 2019 will be a watershed moment for the Church and what its possible outcomes will be.

The previous chapter may have left the impression that I am saying that liberals always come to radical conclusions when they study the Bible. This is not so, of course. Many liberals are what we might call moderate critics who propose a picture of Jesus, for example, which is quite similar to that recognized by the traditional/orthodox mind. However, based upon their own assumptions, there is no way for these liberals to demonstrate that they are right and other, more radical critics, are wrong. Once the control of the text itself has been abandoned the only control left comes entirely from outside the text, ultimately the experience of the particular critic

or reader. There is no other source. Therefore, just as the human experience is infinitely variable, so are theologies of liberalism. This leads us directly to a consideration of its first characteristic.

Experience as Primary Authority

For liberals, "experience" has become a primary source of authority. Following a desire for a "scientific" theology, liberals used to imagine themselves to be champions of objectivity. But this is no longer the case. Now it is recognized by liberals themselves that it really is experience which is guiding their reading of the Bible. Instead of recognizing the obvious danger of such unbounded subjectivity, they have made a virtue out of a necessity by accepting experience as an authority superior even to Scripture, reason and tradition! Again and again one encounters statements such as "I know Scripture says that adultery is wrong, but it has been my experience that in fact adulterers are good people, no worse or no better than anybody else." This approach has been especially evident in the debate over homosexuality.

It is important to realize that the liberal, at least in his own mind, has not, in making this kind of statement, turned his back on the Bible. However, the Bible from which he draws his inspiration is a vastly different kind of Book than it has been to two millennia of Christians. To him it is a book that reflects the experience of Jewish people and early Christians as they encountered the Divine in their lives. It is to be honoured as the source of our particular tradition, but it need not be considered more inspired than the Koran or the Book of Mormon. Like all human efforts it is full of errors and contradictions. A product and outgrowth of a variety of many religions, cultures and philosophies, its authors portray widely differing views of God and how he relates to humanity.

Given this view of the nature of the Bible it makes perfect sense to pick and choose from among its teachings only those which are in accord with our own pre-understanding of the truth. Indeed, we are forced to do this if we expect to make any use of the Bible at all. It has become a smorgasbord from which we can select whatever appeals to us rather than a healthy multi-course

dinner carefully prepared and served up by a mother who expects us to eat what is set before us. Any teaching of the Bible that contradicts what I already consider good and true is just not acceptable. Instead of being subject to the Word of God, the Word of God is subject to us.

If, then, as liberals allege, the Bible is merely the uncertain record of one people's experience of God, then its authority is reduced dramatically. I say "merely" and "reduced", of course, because this is a big comedown for the Bible from its position in catholic Christianity. There it is considered to be the unique Word of God, inspired by the Holy Spirit, all its parts fitting together into a coherent whole, superior to all other so-called revelations and thus the final authority on faith and practice. For almost two thousand years the church has been sustained and renewed in its doctrine and mission by allowing itself to be shaped again and again by the teaching of the Scriptures.

In the Anglican tradition this was, as we have noted, expressed as the Church being "under" the Bible. The fractured and ambivalent Bible of liberalism obviously cannot have such a role. Indeed, in the liberal world the very idea of being under any kind of authority is to be challenged. With this view what is needed is a means of picking one's way through the shattered remains of the Biblical tradition. Which bits and pieces of the Biblical tradition are authentic for modern people? Which speak to present reality?

It is clear that in the liberal system we have to make the necessary choices ourselves. And in this we are guided by our own experience of God within the context of the wider community of our fellow pilgrims. This is assumed to be the work of the Holy Spirit as he/she/it reveals God's direction for the new age.

Revelation, then, rather than being confined to the Bible as was previously believed, actually continues in the ongoing life of the church. This "revelation", like that of the Bible, is filled with ambiguity and is not absolute or final. But it is quite capable of calling the teaching of the Bible itself into question. In this sense the Bible is "under" the church. Thus, in order to discern God's

word for today one does not primarily look back to the Bible but around to the experience of the community of God's people and even, finally, ultimately, of one's self.

In this system the careful exposition of the Scriptures has been superseded by an attempt to "discern the mind of the Church". Sermons tend to stress what has happened in the life of the preacher, the community, or the world rather than upon the truth of God's written Word. The Sunday School curriculum which focused on "The Whole People of God" found a ready market. The model of the preacher in his pulpit and the congregation in their rows of pews is fast being replaced by that of the facilitator on his chair within the gathered circle of the encounter group. Here, everyone's experience is a valid experience.

This new "theology of experience" is commonly accepted and practiced throughout much of the Anglican Church of Canada. In the absence of any common body of beliefs, we have reached the point where if an Anglican holds an opinion then it must be accepted as a valid one. There is no agreed-upon mechanism to help us sort through such opinions. That would require clearly articulated and authorized doctrinal standards by which to measure them and, as we have seen, this is precisely what is impossible in today's Church.¹

How then can the Church arbitrate between various opinions and experiences in trying to make up its common mind on particular issues? Asking this question will bring us face to face with one of the more serious implications of having adopted experience as the ultimate authority. The uncomfortable truth is that in such circumstances the only thing that really matters is power, raw political power.

That is, it becomes a question of whose opinions and experiences will guide the denomination in matters of doctrine. It cannot be a question of right or wrong for we no longer have any way of answering. Not only that but the liberal mind will not even acknowledge the validity of asking

¹ See p.63, above.

such a question in the first place. All we are left with is power. Who within the denomination has the power to make their opinions count?

This question is complicated by the fact that the authority structure of the ACC suffers from a high degree of ambiguity. In large part this stems from the fact that a hierarchical model (archbishops, bishops, priests, deacons and laity) has been overlaid by a congregational/democratic model (congregations, vestries, diocesan synods and General Synod). The dynamics of the power relationship between these two sources of authority are very complex. They are interconnected in a number of ways. For example, synods elect bishops, but synods cannot make decisions without the concurrence of their bishops. However, it is probably fair to say that the real power centre of the denomination, as a whole, lies in General Synod.

Leaving aside the vexing question of who controls General Synod or sets its agenda, the simple truth is that major policy directions of the ACC must gain the approval of this body. It meets every three years and brings together all of the bishops as well as representatives of the clergy and laity from every diocese. In a very rough analogy it can be seen as the Parliament of the Church.

As a result, General Synod has become the focus and battleground for various interest groups who wish to influence the direction of the denomination. And there is no way to have any idea what direction that will be when you are in theological free-fall. No way at all. It only takes a voting majority in General Synod. There is no accepted truth against which its decisions can be measured. There is no effective Constitution or Supreme Court to which to appeal. The fact that a large majority of "the people of God" might not agree with General Synod is a moot point. They have no vote.

This last point is not quite true. Ordinary members of a parish have a vote at the Annual Meeting. Here they can have a say in who the parish sends to the diocesan synod, and those persons, in turn, have a vote in who that synod sends as delegates to General Synod. However, both at that level and the diocesan level, delegates are encouraged not see themselves as representatives of

those who sent them but as independent "members" of synod who vote according to their own conscience. Furthermore, politicking, or organizing into parties to vote in blocks, is heavily frowned upon, although it certainly goes on behind closed doors.

No system is perfect. One can only hope that the "mind of the Church" as expressed in General Synod is indeed the expression of the Holy Spirit. Our tradition, however, as we have seen², suggests extreme caution in making such an assumption. The point here is that General Synod is a long way from the pews and, in the absence of acknowledged authority, is a long way from being able to provide wise leadership in matters of doctrine.

Inclusion

Following from this emphasis on experience, the second basic characteristic of liberalism is its strong emphasis on inclusion. There is little doubt that this attitude arose originally out of a generosity of spirit nurtured within the womb of Anglican comprehensiveness. However, what used to be a way of expressing our diversity within a commitment to a common core of beliefs has now become something quite different. Liberals really seem to want to find a way to include everybody. Every experience is a valid experience. Every voice is a valid voice. Every opinion is a valid opinion. If you call yourself an Anglican Christian then you are an Anglican Christian, no matter what theology you might hold. We hear many calls for unity but are never told of what this unity consists other than our shared membership in the same institution. By this fact alone we are expected to consider each other's positions just as valid as our own.

It must be recognized that this undefined and hence unlimited inclusiveness is a completely novel idea in the history of the church. Not only is it novel, but it is completely contrary to both Scripture and tradition which strongly uphold the idea that there is a right and a wrong in matters of faith. Jesus in fact saved some of his harshest criticism for certain religious leaders of his day and warned his followers to disregard their teaching as that of the blind leading the blind. (Matthew

² See p.7, above.

15:14) He even went so far as to deny their claim to be children of God, saying instead they were of their father the devil! (John 8:42ff.) He also taught that the church would contain many tares among the wheat and that the former would come under eternal judgment. (Mathew 13:25ff.)

As far as our tradition is concerned, the Book of Common Prayer calls upon a bishop to "...banish and drive away all erroneous and strange doctrine contrary to God's Word; and both privately and openly to call upon and encourage others to do the same." (p. 663) This is clearly a long way from the spirit of inclusion that has now entered the life of the Church. Some of its proponents have raised it to the level of absolute dogma. Much of the leadership of the Church has adopted it as a fundamental rule by which discussion proceeds. How did this happen? As we have seen it is certainly not part of our tradition or of our official positions.

It happened partly because inclusivism is a logical necessary condition to the free exercise of liberalism. The latter is, as we have seen, infinitely variable because it is based on a theological method which no longer has an anchor in the Holy Scriptures (or in any other authority besides experience). Not only does this result in liberal theologies succeeding one another over time as the culture evolves but also at any one time in the Church there will be a significant number of alternative liberal theologies, rooted as they are in the differing experiences of their proponents. To insist that any one of these was to be excluded would raise the problem of the basis for such an exclusion. It would imply that there was a canon or standard of some kind from which the excluded theology had departed.

Liberalism has long since discovered that its methodology is unable to produce such an agreed-upon doctrinal core. It therefore correctly regards any attempt to define such a core as a profound threat (c.f. Michael Peers' response to Essentials 94³). The underlying methodology of liberalism would have to be rejected in the process. Furthermore, if such a core were to be defined it would exclude any number of theologies and their followers who are now bona fide members of the liberal Anglican establishment. Add to this the likelihood that many liberals are

³ See p.71, above.

well aware of their own personal departure from the official doctrinal positions of the denomination and you can begin to appreciate the attachment to the inclusivist dogma. Many are naturally very nervous about any possibility of the re-imposition of these positions because they themselves would be excluded. For these reasons, among others, liberalism demands inclusivism. It has no choice.

Before leaving this discussion of inclusivism it is necessary to touch on the serious effects of adopting such a position. Here I am referring to the almost self-evident truth that the insistence upon inclusivism has the effect of excluding those who still hold to the traditional/orthodox faith which underlies the official doctrines of the Church. These persons continue to insist that there are a number of basic doctrines which everyone in the Church should accept simply because it is difficult to see how anyone could claim to be a Christian while denying them. These doctrines literally define the faith, have always been part of the Anglican way, and cannot be surrendered or compromised. Now those who insist upon them are being routinely scolded by many in positions of power who claim that such "exclusivist" views are intolerant and unloving.

Non-liberals, it must be emphasized again, hear these pronouncements as attempts to marginalize and silence them. How can they be expected to feel genuinely included in the discussion when their basic defining conviction about the nature of Christian truth is excluded from the outset? The insistence upon inclusiveness clearly means that the results of the debate are determined in advance, at least to the extent that the traditional/orthodox position is forbidden to even suggest that other positions might be wrong. The rules of the game will not allow it.

Liberals, if they wish to be truly inclusive should drop this kind of intimidating language and be truly welcoming of all views. After all, as has been pointed out, the traditional/orthodox position is enshrined in the official doctrinal positions of the Church and it seems strange indeed that it is the one that is being frozen out. Strange, perhaps, but logically necessary. The truth is that inclusivists cannot include exclusivists and vice-versa because these concepts are totally

incompatible. Inclusivists cannot welcome the conviction that inclusivism is not right. The exclusivist cannot play by the inclusivist's rules. The former has set boundaries and will always be forced by this to make judgments about what views are inside the fence and which are not. She cannot accept all views and she especially cannot accept inclusivism. To do so she would have to exclude herself!⁴

Much of the difficulty in resolving the conflicts in the ACC stem from the inability of either side in the debate to face up to the implications of this reality. Liberals continue to make statements that they think are meant to invite the participation of all Anglicans but which in fact exclude and offend many. On the other hand, traditional/orthodox Anglicans continue to make statements which imply that their own desire for a defined core of "essentials" should be accepted in an institution whose leaders are generally committed to being inclusive. Such statements are instinctively and correctly seen as a threat to the basic belief system of liberals. Naturally they resist and even obstruct. It makes perfect sense. Once again, we are at an impasse. There is simply no way forward until both sides accept the fact that we are dealing with two different and incompatible religions. This is the truth that, if acknowledged, might set us free.

We are coming to understand that any common life requires a shared set of underlying values in order to survive. It has been my argument that this is absent in the ACC today. Liberalism has done little in the sacred or secular worlds to engender much confidence in its ability to establish and articulate such values. Indeed, secular liberals, such as Todd Gitlin in book, The Twilight of Common Dreams, seem to be waking up to this reality. There is a serious message in here for the Church.

Universalism

⁴ Many readers will recognize in this debate the same debate in the larger society. It has spilled over into the church because we are all breathing the same air. Anyone who has been to university or read a newspaper (even on-line!) in the last 25 years will know that "diversity" and "inclusion" are part of the ascendant culture (especially in academia) that in many ways is descending into chaos all around us. It is threatening to take with it those churches most invested in it.

A third basic characteristic of liberalism is universalism. This is the view that all humanity will eventually be "saved". In plain language it simply means that no one is going to go to hell or spend an eternity outside the presence of God. This belief often arises out of the conviction that a loving God would not, by definition, condemn anyone to everlasting punishment. Besides, such an old-fashioned view puts limits upon God's infinite love for the human race.

This opinion is so pervasive in the ACC that it is a genuine shock to hear anything else. This is in spite of the fact that it clearly contradicts the teaching of Jesus, the whole of the New Testament and the consistent teaching of the Church for two thousand years. There is no Biblical text which, interpreted in context, supports the concept of universalism. On the contrary, it doesn't take much reading of the Bible, the BCP or the BAS to see that the whole of our Faith is predicated on the truth that there is a heaven to gain and a hell to shun.

Jesus tells us that when he comes in glory at the end of the age he himself, as the King, will be the Judge who decides the destiny of every person. The wicked "...will go away to eternal punishment but the righteous to eternal life." (Matt. 25:46) In a passage familiar to all Christians Jesus says:

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. (John 3:16-18)

When we bring our children for baptism the priest reminds us that "...our Saviour Christ saith, None can enter into the kingdom of God, except he be born anew of Water and the Holy Spirit." (BCP: p. 523) In the funeral liturgy of the BAS we pray "O worthy and eternal Judge, do not let the pains of death turn us away from you at our last hour." (p. 576) Against a background of universalism all this makes little, if any, sense. Rather, the possibility of eternal punishment is

part of the warp and woof of our whole liturgical life, from baptism to burial, from Advent to Christ the King. Again, and again we pray that we might be granted eternal life based upon the work of Christ. Why would we do this if we are all to be saved anyway?

The best minds the church ever produced spent themselves seeking to understand a faith which held to a God of both love and judgment. Their deep probings into this paradoxical mystery produced some of the richest veins of contemplation ever explored. Much of the classical Christian understanding of our "free will" and its relationship to the sovereignty of God arises out of this discussion. If the church had had the liberal perspective from the beginning it could have saved itself an awful lot of theological ink! A person could be driven to despair when contemplating the sheer volume of writing, the intensity of argument, the concentration of energy and the dedication of entire lives that have been wasted.

Driving all of this discussion and seeking was a conviction that the Bible was entirely true in its portrayal of God, and that there is great merit for the Christian in accepting and exploring this truth, even and especially when it appears contradictory. God, after all, is beyond human ability to fully comprehend.

The reasons that the traditional view has been rejected by liberals are clearly related to their basic theological method. Once you abandon the traditional/orthodox view of Scripture, thus permitting yourself to pick and choose from among the biblical data according to your experience, it is little wonder that the doctrine of eternal punishment is among those first to go. The human heart and mind naturally object to it. Surely, we tell ourselves, as the serpent suggested to Eve, God didn't really say that. Our concept of a loving God precludes such a notion. Once we no longer have to accept it simply because the Bible so clearly proclaims it, it becomes a definite non-starter.

Simply denying the reality of eternal judgment may seem to enhance the concept of a loving God but in fact it only creates significant problems for our understanding. For example, if all are

eventually saved then presumably human beings are not truly free after all. If no one is able to resist the love of God, then human dignity as free agents is called into serious question. In classical theology, human beings in the end have the ability to say "NO!" to God himself! Take this away and they are reduced to being something like puppets in the hands of an arbitrary God.

I say arbitrary because such a view has a serious problem explaining why human beings suffer at all. How can a God who will eventually override all resistance to his love and spare us the pain of judgment continue to simply stand by as we endure pain in *this* life? What reason could there be for his inaction? He has the power to override our sin, our mistakes and natural disasters. Just do it!

I am not suggesting that there are no liberal answers to these questions. It is just to say that they demonstrate that no system can avoid the complexities of trying to understand God and his ways. It seems such a simple and attractive thing to do away with the concept of judgment and hell, but if we do, the questions just move to another level. If we reject a God who could condemn someone to hell in the life to come, how can we accept a God who allows such real pain in this life? Can such a God be a God of love?

These questions suggest that the adoption of universalism has extremely serious implications for the whole of Christian theology. Certainly, it could be argued that it turns Jesus into a very unreliable guide to spiritual matters. How can we trust him about eternal life when he is so wrong about eternal death? If he is this unreliable how can we consider him to be the one and only Son of God? Of course, as we have already suggested and shall soon see in more detail, the liberal can simply deny that Jesus said these things in the first place.

Universalism also casts doubt on the need for the Cross as the act in which God the Son died for the sins of the world. Perhaps the Cross has some residual power as the ultimate expression of God's love, but this lessens its place in our Faith. Evangelism is no longer a call to repent and be saved but, if anything, an attempt to let people know the "good news" that they are already

saved. As a direct result the very essence of the Gospel is altered. The very idea of being saved by faith, or being saved at all, is without serious foundation.

There can be no doubt that universalism belongs to another belief system altogether than traditional/orthodox Christianity. Just tacking it on does not work. It is like trying to play a CD on your old record player. It just doesn't work. You have to purchase a completely different machine.

To press matters a bit further, universalism is a logical and even necessary extension of the inclusivism that marks liberalism. If being inclusive means that everyone who claims to be in the Church is in the Church, then universalism merely widens the circle to include everyone else. The final frontier has been reached.

Once liberalism lost confidence in the possibility of being able to agree on the content of the Gospel it began to realize that it would be logically inconsistent to exclude non-Christians from the kingdom. To do so would imply that such "outsiders" were in mortal error and as we have seen this is simply outside the rules of the game. According to them, again, truth is relative. No one is allowed to say that she is right and thus someone else is wrong (again, see Archbishop Peers' remarks⁵). For the same reasons that liberalism leads inevitably to inclusivism it also leads to universalism. It is a slippery slope.

It must be said that liberal revisions of the Christian message were all done with the best of intentions. There was a great desire to make the Gospel relevant and more acceptable to modern people. The great irony has been that this revised version of the Gospel has resulted in the Church being more and more marginalized by an uninterested public. How this is related to its inherent universalism was brought home to me in a simple but profound encounter.

I happened to be talking to a very devout Christian who had reluctantly left the Anglican Church for another denomination after many years of faithful service as a layreader (the kind of

⁵ Please see p.71, above.

conversation, by the way, all too familiar to those of us in local leadership). I asked him for his explanation of the fact that the church was so ineffective in recruiting people to its fold. He had a two-word answer: "Funeral sermons."

Startled, I asked for more. "Well," he said, "at my age I go to a lot of funerals and, from what I can gather from the sermons, everyone goes to heaven no matter what kind of life they lived or what they believed or did not believe. No mention is made of the possibility of judgment or of hell. It is no surprise to me that people don't see any need to go to church. If I believed those preachers, I wouldn't either!"

At first, I wanted to argue with him but he had a point. In fact, I have often pondered that conversation. As I have done so, I have been drawn to the conclusion that he is right. Think about it. It has certainly caused me to be more careful about what I say at funerals (but probably not careful enough!), one of the few times I have an attentive congregation composed of many unchurched people.

Underlying all these characteristics of liberalism is a view of human nature which is also contrary to the official teaching of the Church and its Scripture. I refer here to the proposition that human beings are basically good. As such they do not need to be changed so much as to be empowered to be themselves, casting off any restrictions.

Once again, we encounter the central theme of "liberation" found at every level of the liberal program: all the way from using counselling techniques in which individuals "get in touch with their true selves" to advocating social change through revolution as proposed by strands of "liberation theology".

This approach incorporates an optimistic view of human nature and denies not only the Fall, but also its corollary, the need for a Saviour. We don't need to be saved, changed or transformed because we ourselves are not intrinsically sinful. Sin is exterior to us, like a straight-jacket in which

we are bound. We need only be freed up to be our true selves. A careful reading of the Eucharistic Prayers in the Book of Alternative Services reveals that they uniformly reflect the view that Jesus came to set us free, not *from* our sin, but only from the power of sin.

This denial of the Fall is most evident in so-called "Creation" theology which begins with the affirmation that what God created is good and goes on from there to suggest that what we are deep inside is what God intended us to be.⁶ We only need to be set free from the distortions of our true self that have been imposed upon us by tradition or society.

Some liberal theologies are even talking about the divine which is inherent in us all. Getting in touch with it then becomes an essential part of our spirituality. We need not look to the Cross of Christ but within ourselves. In fact, we can, in a sense, save ourselves (even though such language is inappropriate because there is nothing objective to be saved from in such schemes except the very real consequences of our inauthentic choices).

The effect of this kind of reasoning within the life of the Church is most clearly seen, perhaps, in the debate over homosexuality. Many now conclude that because homosexuals are "born this way" then they are simply part of God's good creation. End of argument.

The Scripture, on the other hand, is abundantly clear that although God did pronounce the Creation "good" upon its completion, sin was subsequently introduced into the world through the disobedience of Adam and Eve. This changed everything. Evil and wickedness entered our very souls. Jesus, in a breathtakingly casual manner, referred to his listeners as "evil" and taught that sinful deeds arose out of sinful hearts (Matt. 7:11, 15:19). In other words, we are sinful from the inside out, not the other way round. According to St. Paul all of those descended from Adam are "in Adam" and are subject to sin and death (Rom. 5:12). All of us are sinful by nature and, in fact, all have actually committed sinful acts as well.

⁶ Cf., Original Blessing [1983] by Matthew Fox

The whole structure of our salvation is erected upon this foundation. We need a Saviour. "While we were yet sinners", Paul tells us, "Christ died for us." (Rom. 5:8) We need some way to have our sin removed. Unable to do this ourselves, we recognize that it can only be done by an act of God's grace. This traditional/orthodox understanding is powerfully expressed in the Exhortation at the beginning of the Baptism service in the BCP:

Dearly beloved in Christ, seeing that God willeth all men to be saved from the fault and corruption of the nature which they inherit, as well as from the actual sins which they commit, and that our Saviour Christ saith, None can enter into the kingdom of God, except he be born anew of Water and of the Holy Spirit, I beseech you to call upon God the Father, through our Lord Jesus Christ, that he will grant to this Child that which by nature he cannot have: that he may be baptized with Water and the Holy Spirit, and received into Christ's holy Church, and be made a living member of the same. (p. 523)

All of the above elements of Christian faith are either explicitly rejected by liberals or implicitly contradicted by the logic of liberalism. It makes little sense to say these words while at the same time holding to universalism and the basic goodness of the human person. Again, we have come up against the familiar reality that liberalism and the traditional/orthodox theology of our official doctrinal standard are fundamentally incompatible, representing as they do, two different religions.

Some of my readers may feel that I have been dealing too much in generalities and theory in this chapter. There is some justification for this view. I have striven mightily (with some success, I might add) to avoid getting into personalities, finger-pointing, or "he said"- "she said" scenarios. Such approaches are ultimately unproductive and do need to be avoided.

At the same time, I am not merely shadow-boxing with the bogeyman of liberalism! Real people live by these ideas. I have stated on several occasions that many of them are in positions of authority in the Anglican Church of Canada. It would be irresponsible not to provide at least one

specific example of what I mean in order to put some flesh on my arguments and assure my readers that I have at least one foot in contact with the ground.

As it turns out, one of our most prominent bishops, Michael Ingham of New Westminster (Vancouver), now retired, provided an excellent case in point. In an address entitled "To Whom to Bow", the bishop deals with precisely the issues I have raised in the above argument.⁷ It is a clear and straightforward presentation of liberalism at work and is recommended reading for all Anglicans. We should all be grateful for Ingham's willingness, as a bishop, to speak out so clearly and forcefully on these matters. It is all too rare.

In his article Ingham defines "inclusivism" (which he claims he does not hold) as the conviction that while salvation is possible for non-Christians it is still somehow through Jesus Christ alone. That is, if a Muslim finds himself in heaven it is because of the work of Christ even though he did not know anything about it. All that is required is that he "hold sincerely to the path and desire of genuine knowledge of God in whatever way is open to him". (p. 8) If he does so, the salvation won by Christ is extended to him. He becomes a sort of honorary Christian. In this view Christianity remains the ultimate faith but its borders are extended to include all sincere believers of other faiths. (Of course, it also denies the integrity of those faiths.)

The "pluralist" position, which the bishop holds, goes rather further than this. It refuses to put Christianity above any other religion. All the "great religions of the world offer authentic pathways to God" (p. 8) in and of themselves. They have no explicit need of Christ or his salvation. Rather, all these religions have a way in which the individual can know the fullness of God. Seeing Jesus as divine is the Christian expression of this common theme. Other ways in other traditions are equally valid for their adherents. Christianity has nothing to offer that they don't already have. It may have something to offer those of no particular religion or "whose lives are set on a

⁷ A recent internet search fails to turn up a trace of this item. I am afraid the reader will just have to take my word for its contents at this point in time.

destructive path" (p. 9) but the bishop is vague as to who these people are and what the church can do for them beyond committing itself to peace and justice.

What Bishop Ingham really objects to is what he calls Christian Exclusivism. This is the traditional/orthodox view that Jesus Christ is the only Saviour and that the church is under orders to present him as such to non-Christians. Ingham quotes a "speaker" at Essentials 94 (actually it was the world-renowned scholar and author J.I. Packer) to this effect: "We are obligated in practice to evangelize on the basis there is no salvation for anyone whom you encounter apart from faith in Christ." The bishop then refers to The Montreal Declaration of Anglican Essentials which declares Jesus to be "...the only Saviour; penitent faith in him is the only way of salvation" (from Article 4). Ingham then comments:

The basic problem with (Christian exclusivism) in my view is not so much its inherent bigotry, which is astonishing to anyone who has close friends among people with other faith traditions, or who has any exposure to the spiritual depth of other great world religions; the basic problem is its implicit doctrine of God...a God that is repugnant and abhorrent. That God should actually condemn everyone who is not joined to the church ...defies all moral sense and contradicts everything we know about God from the witness of Scripture and from the life of Jesus himself. (p. 7)

Some of my more conservative readers may feel like crying in frustration after reading this last sentence. You know perfectly well that it is the clear and straightforward "witness of Scripture" and of Jesus that the Bishop is rejecting. How can he make such a statement? It seems to be blindly stupid or even perverse, but it is neither.

What must keep in mind is that the liberal Bible is not the Bible we are familiar with. For Ingham and other liberals it is rather a smorgasbord from which one can, in their mind, legitimately reject some parts and accept others. Or perhaps it is better pictured as pot of stew from which each diner can select or reject various ingredients according to preference. In this fashion those who

only like carrots could in some sense claim to have eaten the "stew" even though they may have had only the carrots.

In this way any particular combination of accepted parts of the Bible can be called "the witness of Scripture". Those texts that might, in context, modify this witness are simply eliminated from consideration. Either they are directly removed by modern biblical criticism as inauthentic or they are radically re-interpreted. If you can throw out everything except the carrots, you then can enthusiastically eat the (altered) stew which remains.

This is exactly the process used by Bishop Ingham when asked how he can reconcile his position with what Jesus says in John 14:6: "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." Now anybody just reading that statement would have to say that it is a pretty exclusivist saying (not to say arrogant or even bigoted, according to liberal definitions!).

Ingham's first line of defense is to cast doubt on the "authenticity" of this quotation. "The issue here" he says, "is whether Jesus said those words at all." (p. 9) He goes on to present a scholarly theory which holds that these words were put into Jesus' mouth around the end of the first century by a "Johannine" Christian community. Under Jewish oppression their attitudes began to harden and they created a version of Jesus that is more compatible with their new absolutist views. Thus, the sayings of Jesus in the Gospel of John are especially suspect. As Bishop Ingham puts it, "The question is do they arise from the Johannine community or are they found on the lips of Jesus?" (p. 9) In other words, the Jesus of history did not really say these words and therefore they can be safely ignored.

But even if we insist on going against this scholarly opinion and accept the saying as authentic, there is a second line of defense. Here it is best to quote the Bishop more or less in full.

Then the question arises: 'What do they mean? ... to whom are the words addressed?' Remember that these words are spoken in context of conversation with Thomas ...who

says, 'Lord we do not know the way, show us the way.' And Jesus says, 'I am the way'. It could well be that Jesus is saying that 'no one of you comes to the father but by me'. But the church in its later years interpreted that as an absolute statement covering every human being on the face of the earth. Other ways of interpreting this statement could be this: if I were to say to you what is the way to Vancouver from Victoria: Well it's that way...its North and East. Is there one path to get there? No there are several paths from here to Vancouver, but there is one way. So it is possible, and the inclusivists would argue this, that Christ is present on every path because he is the way. And I think that is quite a supportable interpretation. (p. 9)

Putting aside the question of whether or not such an interpretation is really supportable, for us it is only important to note that it has the effect of turning a clearly exclusivist saying of Jesus into an inclusivist one. The obvious straightforward meaning of the text has been reversed and turned inside out. This, my friends, is the liberal Bible. It is putty in your hands. You can make it say whatever you want it to say.

The question then becomes "What do you want it to say?". In the case before us, Bishop Ingham wants it to say that sincere followers of world religions are included in God's salvation. Their way to heaven is just as valid as the Christian way. A straightforward reading of Scripture does not yield this doctrine. If it did all Christians would long ago have come to this position. But they did not.

As the quotation below demonstrates, Bishop Ingham is fully conscious of the fact that the Church has consistently proclaimed the opposite to be true for two millennia. That he pronounces such terrible judgment upon his own heritage raises many questions that go far beyond the scope of this book to address. What remains important for our discussion is to discover upon what basis he can so confidently set aside the great weight of biblical material which led the church to its exclusivist doctrine. What is it that has more authority than the very words of Scripture?

It is clearly what I have called "experience". As I have pointed out earlier in this chapter, liberals have replaced the authority of Scripture with the authority of experience. In Bishop Ingham's case he makes this quite clear himself. He tells us that he has personally had the privilege of having close friends who belong to other world religions and they are perfectly fine people who exhibit no need of salvation. He has also been exposed to the spiritual depth of their various faiths.

We have historically believed our religion to be superior to everyone else's. It is only in the modern world that we have come to regard with shame some of our own history. As we have come to live as modern people in Canada, side by side with people of other faith traditions, and have come to know them as colleagues and friends, it is only in recent times that this belief in Christian absolutism has been questioned by Christians themselves. (p. 7)

Having had these experiences, he feels free to characterize other Christians, who still hold to the traditional position of the Church, as bigots. And the long history of Christians, including the Apostles, evangelizing those of other faiths, something to be ashamed of. While such language is indeed unfortunate, it clearly reveals the depth of his conviction. What he has learned from "experience" is superior to what he has learned from the Bible as it has been handed down to us. Once having accepted this new doctrine, he tries to make the "Bible" of his own making agree. It turns out that he has brought his own can of peas and slipped them into the stew so that he can pick them out and enjoy them later.

Conclusion

Enough has now been said to support my contention that liberalism and traditional/orthodox Christianity are in fact two different and incompatible religions. The immediate question is not "Which religion is true?" but "How can they go on living together in the same institution?" They

are in conflict at every level, from basic assumptions to liturgical formulations. I recognize that it is a very serious matter to make such a claim. Therefore, some further explanation is still in order.

Certainly, from the point of view of liberals, the notion that they worship a different God must be at best puzzling and at worst inconceivable or offensive. But, from the point of view of traditional/orthodox Anglicans it is a valid and even necessary conclusion. It is extremely important for liberal Anglicans to understand this if they truly desire to listen to every voice in the Church. I certainly have no wish to offend anyone, least of all fellow Anglicans, but I am compelled to say this and to say it as clearly as I can because from where I and many fellow Anglicans sit, it is the simple truth.

Traditional/orthodox Anglicans, consistent with their assumptions, have no option but to see liberalism as a different religion. Liberalism, equally consistently, denies even the possibility of any such distinction. It is clear that the real problem is rooted in the differing assumptions that each side brings to the debate. This is at least part of the reason that we find it so difficult to talk to one another, to really listen to each other's voice. We recognize, even subconsciously, that our very right to exist is called into question by the position of our fellow Anglicans. No wonder we call each other bigots or heretics! This is harsh language, but it is nevertheless true language within each view. It exposes our fundamental division, a division that goes to the very heart of things, to the very purpose and mission of the church.

It makes little sense for liberals to talk about worshipping a different God or having a different religion. As I have pointed out, it is a fundamental liberal principle that all religions are, in fact, worshipping the same God even though they may well have radically different understandings of who he/she/it might be like. Religions are merely the codification and symbolic expression of a people's experience of God and no one of them can be said to be the only authentic one. Thus, Judaism is the result of the religious experience of Israel, Christianity, that of the followers of Jesus, Shamanism, that of indigenous Canadians, Hinduism, that of parts of the Indian

subcontinent, etc. These are all human attempts to grapple with the divine which is itself fundamentally beyond human thought and language.

Therefore, from the perspective of right and wrong it would seem that it is not an ultimately serious matter for a liberal to be charged with being a follower of a different religion than traditional/orthodox Christianity. For her this does not imply any real departure or “apostasy” at all. It is only a way of saying that different symbols are being used to represent the continuing (and necessarily unfolding, changing) understanding and experience of God in the community. To vision God differently, to attribute different characteristics to him/her/it than someone else does is necessary and healthy.

So if your God is a male monarch (i.e., a king) and mine is a pregnant female we are dealing with the same reality in different clothes. Both expressions are authentic and valid if they genuinely arise out of the experience of those that employ such symbols. That is the criterion. Within such a framework it is literally nonsensical to raise the possibility of worshipping other gods. There are no other gods in the objective sense. There are just different understandings and symbols of the same divine reality.

The only problem with this whole approach to religion, as we have seen, is that it stands opposed to the consistent witness of Holy Scripture taken as the unchanging Word of God and the teaching of the Church for 2000 years!

And God spoke all these words: I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me.... You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name. (Exodus 20: 1-3 & 7)

Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,

in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2: 9-11)

Almighty God, who by thy blessed Apostle has taught us that there is none other name given among men whereby we must be saved, but only the Name of our Lord Jesus Christ: Grant we beseech thee, that we may ever glory in this Name, and strive to make thy salvation known unto all mankind; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen. (BCP, P. 320)

Between these two religions there can be no compromise. Perhaps these words of our Lord are relevant here:

No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch will pull away from the garment making the tear worse. (Matthew 9: 16)

There is one more point which still needs to be made yet again! I recognize that for the sake of clarity I have been forced to make abstractions from reality. This means that I have often had to make hard and fast distinctions in a world which does not lend itself readily to such analysis. There is no way to avoid this process, but it does have its dangers.

One of these, for me, has been that I may have left the impression that the Anglican Church of Canada is made of up of two distinct and easily identifiable camps: traditional/orthodox Christians on the one hand and liberals on the other. Such, of course, is not the case. Most of us are somewhere on a spectrum between these options, partly because we are confused and partly because we have not disciplined ourselves to consider the implications of some of the positions we adopt. Having had our anchor in Scripture severed during our theological studies, we each drift along until we reach a comfortable resting place to watch others either stopping in another location upriver or simply continue downstream past our location and out into the ocean. Whatever.

I recall a member of the clergy confessing to me that she could accept all the traditional doctrine of the Church with the exception of the Virgin Birth. This did not make her a non-Christian or call into question her salvation. But it did put her whole belief-system at serious risk. In this one area she had decided to put aside the teaching of Scripture. She gave no reason why she drew the line there and not at the bodily resurrection of our Lord (other than her own opinion on the "evidence"). If she were to apply consistently the same principles to the rest of the Bible, as many others have, she would undoubtedly change many of her convictions and fall more completely into the liberal camp. She could certainly not object to others coming to more radical conclusions than her own. It's just a matter of opinion and doesn't *really* matter.

The same situation applies to the creeping inclusion/universalism one finds extant in the Anglican Church. Many have enthusiastically embraced this theory without pausing to consider what it actually entails. They have no intention of changing their understanding of Jesus or of the Cross or of the mission of the Church. But, as I have tried to explain above, all of these doctrines and more are modified or even made redundant by a belief in universalism. Even though an individual can become a universalist and remain traditional/orthodox in the rest of his faith he is merely being inconsistent, a human failing we all share. Even me.

I like to call this the "Wile E. Coyote" principle. Most of us who grew up with television will recognize this aspect of serious theological reasoning. It comes from the "Roadrunner" cartoons, nearly all of which had Wile E. Coyote trying some harebrained scheme to catch the ever-elusive Roadrunner (Beep! Beep!). Usually, however, Wile E. is tricked by the speedy bird and finds himself going over the edge of the canyon. There he remains suspended for a moment or two, his feet still spinning, until the realization dawns on him that, no road beneath him, he is in serious trouble! Then gravity takes over. Down he goes, disappearing into a tiny dot down below! There is a satisfying THUD! when he finally hits bottom.

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So it is with traditional/orthodox Christians who adopt any of the principles of liberalism. For a while the rest of their belief system will remain intact. Eventually, however, gravity will take over. It always does. The difference between their fate and that of Wile E. is only this: for them there is no bottom to the canyon. They have fallen into the abyss.