Contextualise the Denominational History of Anglicanism within the Setting of Reformation History and Theology

Introduction

The Church of England (CofE) is a Reformed Church inasmuch as it went through a process of reformations during the sixteenth century¹. As such, the Anglican Communion, having grown from the CofE, primarily during the height of colonialism, is a Reformed Communion of churches by virtue of the strength (until recently) of its ecclesiological and theological unity with the CofE. Yet the English Church experienced a very different process of reformation than mainland Europe did. Its subsequent history as ‘Anglicanism’ has been shaped significantly by this fact and is responsible in no small part for the distinctive nature of Anglicanism today.

Further still, where the theological Reformations of mainland Europe did reach British shores, they only did so in part. The magisterial Reformation (Lutheranism and Calvinism) was the primary manner in which the theology and ecclesiology of Rome was challenged², whilst Anabaptism (the radical Reformation) and the Catholic (Counter-) Reformation had comparatively little impact, other than the brief political return to Rome under Queen Mary. She, along with Henry VIII and Edward VI before her and Elizabeth after her, held great sway, arguably more political than theological³ over the course

² McGrath, A.E., Historical Theology: An Introduction to the History of Christian Thought, pp. 158-9
³ MacCulloch, D., op. cit., pp. 18-30
that the English Reformations ran, though that is contested by some.\textsuperscript{4} As McGrath notes:

“This is not to say that no theological debates took place in England at the time of the Reformation; it is to note that they were not seen as of decisive importance. They were not regarded as identity-giving.”\textsuperscript{5}

During the century or so that identifies the Reformations in European history, the development of the English Church, which traces its roots back many centuries earlier\textsuperscript{6} into the CofE, was thus a very complicated process. The first part of this essay attempts to isolate some of the major theological and ecclesiological themes that accompanied it, along with the events themselves. The second part looks onwards beyond that period to the development of the CofE into Anglicanism and, ultimately, the Anglican Communion. This process has a similarly obtuse history, yet there are trends that are in considerable similarity to the theology that was prevalent during the Reformations.

**The Reformations**

**Scriptural Authority**

Perhaps the best known *motif* of the Reformations as a whole is *sola scriptura*, ‘Scripture alone’. In England, this and other new “…challenges to established religious authority were read with mixtures of relish and horror…”\textsuperscript{7} That is not surprising given the manner in which Tyndale’s English New Testament was being received: he was

\textsuperscript{4} Olson, R.E., *The Story of Christian Theology: Twenty Centuries of Tradition and Reform*, p. 431  
\textsuperscript{5} McGrath, A.E., *op. cit.*, p. 171  
\textsuperscript{6} Redfern, A., *Being Anglican*, p. 9  
\textsuperscript{7} Haugaard, W.P., ‘From the Reformation to the Eighteenth Century’ in Sykes, S. et al., *The Study of Anglicanism*, p. 5
Yet, whilst the authorities may not have liked it at first, the people read it with joy, and it was not long (1538) before Henry had made a trademark U-turn, and “ordered the English Bible to be placed in parish churches where ‘parishioners may most commodiously resort to the same and read it.’”9 Whilst Henry’s motives for the part he played in the English Reformation may be dubious, the theology that he embraced in doing so was championed by many evangelicals within English society, and sola scriptura was primary amongst this theology. Thomas Cranmer, then Archbishop of Canterbury and at times a close ally of Henry’s, counselled him in the need of the people to be able to read the Scriptures in their own language. Cranmer believed that in Scripture “all manner of persons … may … learn all things that they ought to believe, what they ought to do, and what they should not do…”10

The primary place of Scripture in the Anglican tradition was thus assured during the Reformations. The “...authority of scripture and the right and duty of a particular church to reform its life and worship in the light of scripture...”11 is very much a part of Anglicanism’s identity and the outworking of this understanding is playing a vital rôle in the Communion’s present troubles.

**The Church and the Monarch**

This right to self-reformation led to, amongst much else, a new and powerful link between the church and the state, with the monarch having

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8 MacCulloch, D., op. cit., p. 22
9 Haugaard, W.P., op. cit., p. 11
10 Hughes, P.E., Theology of the English Reformers, p. 16
11 Avis, P., The Anglican Understanding of the Church, p. 37
authority in and over both. Again, largely dictated by his desire to divorce and remarry which was being prevented by Pope Leo X, Henry pressed for political reform to make him “the only supreme head in earth of the Church of England”\(^1\) The English church had always understood itself as simply being church in an English way, and this was seen as an attempt to “maintain a local flavour over against the centralising authority of the Roman Catholic Church.”\(^2\) Others, like Thomas More and John Fisher saw it as England having “betrayed the unity of Christendom”\(^3\), but were executed for their objection.

When Elizabeth later, as monarch, became the ‘supreme governor’, a peculiarity of the CofE found its origin. Yet, as Furlong notes,

\[\text{“[T]he ideas of the ‘godly prince’ was not a new one – King Alfred had believed that the role of the king was to be Christ’s deputy on earth. Cranmer built upon this ancient idea ...”}\]\(^4\)

Cranmer suggested that monarchs had the right to create their own bishops and priests, but his theology was only able to produce an “experimental model”\(^5\) that found later clarity under Elizabeth. Her denial of any desire to “intervene in the ‘authority and power of ministry [sic] of divine service in the Church,’”\(^6\) may have calmed the fears of those Reformers who believed that their theology had only changed one kind of Pope for another. But Elizabeth had preserved for a considerable time one part of the Reformations that Henry had introduced, much else of which had disappeared under the influence of evangelical council to Edward. According to MacCulloch, the new appeal to Scripture that lead to the split from Rome, the new ecclesial

\(^{\text{12}}\) Haugaard, W.P., op. cit., p. 6  
\(^{\text{13}}\) Redfern, A., op. cit., p. 10  
\(^{\text{14}}\) Haugaard, W.P., op. cit., p. 7  
\(^{\text{15}}\) Furlong, M., C of E: The State It’s In, p. 34  
\(^{\text{16}}\) Haugaard, W.P., op. cit., p. 16  
\(^{\text{17}}\) Avis, P., Anglicanism and the Christian Church, p. 15
rôle of the monarch and the retention of cathedrals are the “three very considerable exceptions”\(^\text{18}\) to that pattern.

**The ‘Real Presence’**

That there was more than one act of reformation in England, however, allows for there to be a far greater legacy in Anglicanism from the Reformations in Europe than just those three. As an example, the reformers’ protests against the concept of the ‘real presence’ of Christ in the Eucharist remains part of the Anglican formularies of faith to this day, enshrined in the *Thirty-nine Articles of Religion*. Its rejection was based on it being seen as unscriptural, unreasonable, contrary to the senses and contrary to the apostolic age.\(^\text{19}\) However, as there was considerable unease about this rejection amongst the reformers,\(^\text{20}\) there was (and is) also unease within Anglicanism.

**Towards the Anglican Communion**

**Richard Hooker**

As the Reformed churches began to hold sway in large parts of Europe, including England, the challenge from Rome became less of a concern, and was replaced with sharp disagreement between former ‘allies’. The challenge for the theologians of the Reformed churches was now to be able to hold their own in the midst of myriad competing claims to legitimacy and authenticity.

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\(^{18}\) McCulloch, D., *op. cit.*, p. 23  
\(^{19}\) Hughes, P.E., *op. cit.*, p. 217  
\(^{20}\) McGrath, A.E., *op. cit.*, p. 200
The CofE’s tentative *via media* in the aftermath of the Reformations meant that it found itself confronted on many sides, particularly by the ‘puritan movement’ which railed against the established church for not having gone far enough with its reforms. There was great argument about what should and shouldn’t happen within the church. One of Anglicanism’s greatest theologians, and an apologist to the puritans was Richard Hooker. Hooker wrote extensively from his country parish, on all manner of topics relating to the church. Of particular significance was his work on the governance of the church, and what he developed has lasted almost intact through to the present day. For Hooker, the Anglican appeal for authority was to Scripture, tradition and reason. Whereas the puritans’ singular appeal to Scripture extended beyond salvation to all matters of Christian life, Hooker allowed Anglicanism to see its place in the context of the universal Church, and to use that tradition, as well as human reason, to interpret the Scriptures.

Whereas the puritans saw the Reformations as having rescued the Christian faith from a completely corrupt almost ‘non-church’, Hooker declared that what had passed still held a manner of virtue. The reformers had not “erected of late a frame of some new religion,” but drawn back from the errors of the Roman Catholic Church, with whom there was still unity where there was truth.

**The Book of Common Prayer**

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22 Chapman, M., Anglicanism: A Very Short Introduction, p. 41
23 Lake, P., op. cit., p. 99
24 Avis, P., op. cit., p. 40
Another clear way in which Anglicanism is marked out from other Reformed traditions is the place given to commonality of prayer.

"In other braches of Christianity the decisions of certain councils or the writings of particular leaders or certain confessional statements have possessed authority beyond that ever granted in Anglicanism to any council, individual or confessional statement."\(^{25}\)

Even the highly regarded Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral as a definition of Anglican belief does not hold as much sway as the *Book of Common Prayer*. In its various editions, revisions and even new manifestations (e.g. the *Alternative Service Book* and *Common Worship*), the uniformity of liturgy, whilst not distinctive to Anglicanism, holds great significance. The initial publication was a work of reformation zeal, though initially less controversial than desired, in an attempt to ensure publication.\(^{26}\) For others, it was already a step too far, even before its subsequent revisions. "It was too radical for ... priests who continued to use the old service books or to 'counterfeit Masses.'"\(^{27}\)

It has become a symbol of unity within the Anglican Communion, a 'common language' of prayer and worship that emerged, interestingly enough from a move away from worship in a 'universal language' – Latin. That Anglicanism has, perhaps as a result of this commonality of prayer developed down the line of *lex orandi, lex credendi* is not entirely surprising given the Anglican view of the universal church as identified by Hooker above, and even less so, when the amount of Scripture within *Common Prayer* is noted. Within the different attitudes to tradition during the

\(^{26}\) MacCulloch, D., *op. cit.*, pp. 28-9
\(^{27}\) Hatchett, M.J., *op. cit.*, p. 136
reformations, “[T]he magisterial Reformation was keenly aware of the threat of individualism...”28 By identifying itself in such a corporate and historically linked way, Anglicanism was able to enshrine itself in the ‘community of saints’ until the advent of the Enlightenment.

Conclusion

In time, the CofE became the Anglican Communion; a fellowship of churches committed, through particular formularies and values, to the unity of Reformed yet catholic Christian faith. The self-understanding that people like Hooker gave Anglicanism was of immense value in the process of forming this Communion. But in recent times this unity has been stretched, and calls for new re-formation of the Communion are beginning to rise from some corners. This time, the church’s error is either liberalism or conservativism, depending on your position.29

The development and acceptance of Biblical criticism has eroded some of the value of the Reformations’ appeal to Scripture for authority. Anglicanism, in giving a loose three-fold appeal has weathered this storm up to this point not without considerable difficulty. The monarchy’s link with the church is of limited appeal around the global Anglican Communion, and other focuses of unity are looked to, such as the Archbishop of Canterbury.30 This value given to a clerical rôle is as interesting as the reference to a common language above, in that it has the appearance of something that the Reformation was a movement away from.

28 McGrath, A.E., op. cit., p. 183
29 Chapman, M., op. cit., pp. 116ff
30 Podmore, C., op. cit., p. 68
Anglicanism, then, has an interesting relationship with the Reformations of Europe and, indeed its own Reformations. Whilst entirely indebted to them for its autonomy, there is a level of discord as a result of its desire for catholicity. It is useful in this sense to note that within Anglicanism, as Redfern says, “loose ends are acceptable”.\textsuperscript{31} In fact, their acceptance would almost seem to be a requisite.

\textsuperscript{31} Redfern, A., op. cit., p. 5
Bibliography


