

Church and Culture: No Simple Pluralism

By Peter Selby

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One of the great gifts I received as a result of being asked to speak at *The Witness'* awards banquet at last year's General Convention was the chance to sit in on a meeting of the House of Bishops. The gift was not just an opportunity to hear interesting debates; it was also a time to observe different ways of doing things. To look at different provinces is to look at different cultures and to be made alert to the way in which, for all our high-powered theological arguments, culture and history make crucial differences to the way churches operate.

Obviously, U.S. Episcopalians' anti-monarchist origins affect the way authority is exercised in the U.S. church -- specifically in terms of the expectations of bishops and those who hold other church offices. Here in England, even people who might profess to have their doubts about the monarchy are subtly influenced to find the monarchical traditions of episcopacy quite comfortable. We are inclined to think we have managed to give substance to the right of the church to choose its own bishops and that the historic rights of the British monarch in the matter are now just formalities. But, in reality, those historical formalities subtly condition the way we think about our bishops and those who choose them, and all kinds of unquestioned assumptions still obtain.

Similarly, I find it fascinating to see how the ideological assumptions behind the U.S. constitution profoundly affect the U.S. Episcopal Church's self-understanding. The commitment to allowing the People of God to govern their own life works itself out in institutional behavior that looks very little different from the political elections that produce the President, members of Congress and holders of a host of local offices. For both our different churches, then, the arrangements we have evolved look simply to be the way in which God's people have worked out -- and should work out -- ways of regulating their life.

The same would of course be true of Anglican provinces throughout the world. As the Anglican Communion becomes, rightly, an association of provinces working out their life in very changed circumstances, putting behind their origins in the colonial thinking of a British ascendancy, we can expect to see patterns of church life that are recognizably American, African, Latin American, Australian, Asian and all the rest.

But that, in turn, mustn't lead to a simple pluralism: The ideology of "autonomous provinces" can simply mean everyone going their own way without making use of the potential to understand yourself better by seeing what you do in the mirror of what others do. It might be right to resist more centralization of authority; but not in favor of accepting that none of us has the right to question what another province does. Only such a process of mutual questioning enables us to get at our unquestioned assumptions, enabling us thereby to reconstitute ourselves



according to the Spirit of Christ. There'll never be a church that bears no cultural marks; but all churches need to have the capacity and the humility to discern what it is about their life that is so historically conditioned that it gets in the way of the Gospel.

That seems to me to be particularly important for British and American Anglicans searching for an ecclesiology for our time. Our histories and present experience of military and financial power as nations means a constant temptation to think that the way we have come to do things represents, quite simply, the way for Christians to act and behave. I have huge sympathy with the difficulty many U.S. Episcopalians have had over the way many of the decisions of the 1999 Lambeth conference of Anglican bishops turned out [see *The Witness*, March 2000]. But underneath were real conflicts about the power of money and how to handle the globalization of issues that can no longer be left to each province to deal with just as it chooses.

The fact is that some of us are more powerful than others in an international assembly of that kind. Being more powerful doesn't mean you are bound to be wrong; but it does mean being pretty careful when you become quite certain that you are bound to be right! What looks like the radical demands of the Gospel to us becomes, as it crosses cultural barriers, simply another form of colonialism. God's project, a global and local community called after Christ and sharing Christ's mind, turns out to be mixed up with handling the movements of culture and power in our time. Nothing new in that; but as Tanzanian bishop Simon Chiwanga said in his opening sermon at Lambeth, the need is for "awareness, awareness, awareness."

And the awareness we most need is self-awareness.

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