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A still more excellent way: Authority and polity in the Anglican Communion

ALEXANDER ROSS

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The term 'province' can be a confusing one for Anglicans. It can refer to dioceses grouped in an ecclesiastical province and often overseen by a metropolitan Archbishop, such as the province of Canterbury or York. It can also be used to refer to any of the 46 member churches (or 'national churches') of the Anglican Communion, such as the Church of England. Each 'province' in this sense may be internally organized as one ecclesiastical province, may be composed of several internal provinces, or may instead be extra-provincial. For Alexander Ross, this terminological confusion parallels a deep ecclesiological confusion in Anglican polity. What, he asks, is the fundamental unit of ecclesial polity within the Anglican Communion? As Rowan Williams explains in his introduction, 'Ross's groundbreaking and profoundly illuminating study grows out of a dissatisfaction with the simple repetition of mantras about autonomous national churches.' (p. viii) This may elicit a sharp intake of breath from ecclesiastical lawyers. The legal autonomy of the Communion's member churches is so ingrained into Anglican polity that it is all but taken for granted. Ross asks how it came about, if it was inevitable, what problems it might cause, and whether there could be an alternative.

He begins with the canons and councils of the fifth century dealing with metropolitan bishops, followed by a discussion of the provincial structures introduced into England at the end of sixth century. Even at this early date, Ross finds subsidiarity and collegiality present in metropolitan jurisdictions which are at once relational and institutional. In the sixteenth century, the doctrine of the Royal Supremacy brought to the fore the idea of the national church, an idea which spread with the Church of England's missions overseas. The tension between metropolitan authority and the Royal Supremacy is illustrated in the case of Colenso, Bishop of Natal and controversial proponent of biblical fallibility. Archbishop Gray of Cape Town pronounced Colenso's deposition in 1863, but on appeal the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council found the deposition to be *ultra vires*. Colenso, though ostensibly excommunicated by Gray and the other South African bishops, remained in his see till his death. The Colenso affair was famously the cause of the first Lambeth Conference in 1867, which many view as marking the birth of the modern Anglican Communion— and as we approach the 15th Lambeth Conference in 2022, questions of authority in Anglicanism remain as topical as ever.

By the early twentieth century, Ross notes, Archbishop William Temple was just one among many theologians speaking of the providential vocation of nations and national churches. In

1930, the Lambeth Conference explicitly approved the association of dioceses and provinces into national churches. This language fell out of favour in the post-war period, with national churches now— confusingly— being referred to as provinces. As nations became independent, there was, understandably, a desire to move away from ecclesiastical structures freighted with colonial legacy. Autonomy became as fundamental to the idea of a national church as sovereignty was to a nation.

In an apparently paradoxical yet nevertheless compelling argument, Ross relates the rising importance of national churches' autonomy to the assumption by the Primates' Meeting of Communion-wide (albeit non-coercive) authority. In the early church, the designation of a see as primatial had been mainly an honorary title. From the twentieth century, however, Anglican primates were increasingly seen as personifying the sovereignty of the national church. Ross is concerned that this development has taken place without sufficient theological reflection or ecclesiological rationale. Here, as throughout this book, what may be a familiar story is enriched with original archival research and new insights.

Why should we be dissatisfied with the autonomous national church approach? For Ross, it is a polity drawing the churches inexorably towards both isolationism and centralisation. It can neither answer the pressing questions of Anglican identity and doctrine nor fully manifest the marks of the church catholic.

To demonstrate 'a still more excellent way' for the Church, Ross draws on his knowledge of the Anglican Church of Australia, where he serves as a parish priest. In Australia, dioceses are considered the fundamental unit of the church, acting autonomously, establishing their own constitutions, deciding whether or not to adopt the canons of the General Synod, and so on. Ross builds on recent scholarship to show how a provincial polity developed that could transcend 'Australian diocesanism.' He takes Victoria as a case study, explaining how dioceses in that Australian province chose to come together in recent years to make a united, specifically *provincial* response to the challenges of professional standards and safeguarding. Because Australian dioceses and provinces relate together canonically from the ground up, both autonomy and relationality can be respected. This model is offered as one that could be used to reshape our ideas of the Anglican Communion.

Ross therefore wants Anglicanism to rediscover an ancient and relational provincial polity, still latent in its structures, which could authentically unite the church locally and globally. His conclusions may translate more readily into the situations of Anglican churches like Australia and Canada, which are composed of multiple provinces, and where subsidiarity is already a deeply embedded part of synodical and canonical structures. It would require more work to understand what Ross's study might have to say to those Anglican churches (the majority) which are formed of only one ecclesiastical province. But Ross isn't intending to serve up ready-crafted answers to the Communion's questions. He instead invites us to consider a paradigm shift, a radically re-imagined way of looking at the Communion and its churches which is rooted in historic ecclesiology and yet which might offer new, fruitful, and creative solutions to the problems of Anglican polity.

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