



## **Joking apart comedy, irony, and the limits of accommodation**

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A candidate for one of the most teasing opening lines in modern English literature must be from Rose Macaulay's *The Towers of Trebizond*:

"Take my camel, dear", said my Aunt Dot, as she climbed down from this animal on her return from High Mass...'<sup>1</sup>

*The Towers of Trebizond* is an absurd, comic and beautiful tale, which offers the inimitable Aunt Dot, her niece Laurie and Father Chantry-Pigg, and their expedition to Turkey to explore the scope for converting the Turks – not just to any old Christianity, but to Anglicanism. By establishing a High Anglican mission, the trio hope to bring salvation and civilisation to the country. Aunt Dot is particularly keen on the emancipation of Turkish women: through a wider use of the bathing hat.

Despite Macaulay's comic novel, there is, ironically, a well-established Anglican presence in Turkey. But the scope of this paper is not to take issue with parodies of Anglicanism (e.g. 'CofE' = Comedy of Errors). It is, rather, to introduce the work of James Hopewell,<sup>2</sup> an exponent of congregational studies and contextual theology, to examine the comic and ironic identity of mainstream Anglicanism, and thereby identify those hidden aspects of its appeal that have turned a single English denomination into a worldwide presence.

Globally, there are around 77 million Anglicans. They are spread over 36 self-governing churches, comprising 500 dioceses, 30,000 parishes with around 65,000 congregations, located in a total of 165 countries. Whilst not ranking amongst the largest groupings of Christians, the Anglican Church is, after the Roman Catholic Church, arguably one of the most widespread and influential denominations in the world. (So, Anglicanism is by no means confined to the Commonwealth, which has 53 countries – less than a third of the total in which Anglicanism is to be found). However, the 'Anglican Communion' also evokes what Benedict Anderson describes as an 'imagined community'.<sup>3</sup> Most its members have never met one another, and never will. Yet members will readily acknowledge a deep, horizontal comradeship of belonging. The Communion is bound together by an ethos, codes, memories and aspirations that allow it to cohere in the minds of its members, but without that coherence necessarily being practiced at either a deep or extensive level. In this regard, we can regard the Anglican Communion as a kind of filial network of understanding (not unlike a family: see Sykes, etc),<sup>4</sup> in which certain types of belief and certain modes of behaviour are cherished. As Pascal Boyer notes:

'One thing modern humans did and still do vastly more than any other species is exchange information of all kinds and qualities, not just about what is the case but also what should be or could be; not just about their emotions and knowledge but also about their plans, memories and conjectures. The proper milieu in which humans live is that of information, especially information provided by other[s]. It is their ecological niche.'<sup>5</sup>

There can be no question that Anglicanism, and its ecological niche, contains elements of coherence, and a notion of a shared life and identity, bound together through a common sense of purpose, history and teleology. But what exactly are those 'things' that are particular to Anglican identity? Authors such as Sykes, Avis, Booty and Wright would be able to nominate particular theological priorities. From a sociological perspective, we can point to Pickering's work that identifies ambiguity and aesthetics as being culturally significant,<sup>6</sup> or my own suggestion that Anglicanism is a 'sacralised system of manners' as being

somehow vital to its understanding. 7 Analogically, Boyer suggests that:

'If we consider the whole domain of information [within an organization] over time we have a gigantic "soup" of representations and messages. The messages are constantly changing because the contexts change... However, we also find that there are lumps in this soup of messages, that is, bits of information that seem to appear in rather similar form at different times and in different places. They are not strictly identical but we find a small number of templates that seem to organise them. Religious concepts and behaviours are like that...'. 8

In this essay, I want to suggest that the 'soup' of the Anglican Communion contains such lumps. However, here I am less interested in the obvious theological priorities of the Communion and more concerned here with the nascent cultural distinctives that shape and flavour the Communion. In exploring and analysing these, and using the work of James Hopewell, I will seek to demonstrate that much of Anglicanism is an inherently ironic and comic type of faith, which when understood culturally, can in turn illuminate some of the current theological and ecclesiological debates that preoccupy the church. Again, as Boyer notes:

'Religion is cultural. People get it from other people, as they get food preferences, musical tastes, politeness and dress sense. We often tend to think that if something is cultural then it is hugely variable. But it then turns out that food preferences and other such cultural things are not so variable after all. Food preferences revolve around certain recurrent flavours, musical tastes within strict constraints, and so do politeness codes and standards of elegance...'. 9.

The next section will therefore look at Hopewell's 'cultural reading' of the church in order to identify and explicate these 'lumps', 'tastes' and 'preferences'. From that vantage point, it will then be possible to explore the Anglican Communion as a cultural system (granted, it is strained and multi-flavoured). A final section returns to the idea of Anglican culture, and evaluates its coherence.

### Anglicanism as Irony and Comedy

Hopewell is well aware that it is only recently that 'participant observation' has gained any credibility in academic studies of culture, and that this in turn has been driven by anthropologists and ethnographers, who have urged scholars to become 'immersed' in the very field of their enquiry. However, participant observers who have studied congregations in any depth are still comparatively rare. Most studies tend to be, in Hopewell's words, 'travelogues', giving accounts of churches and congregations that are based on anecdotes and texts. In contrast, Hopewell, who in turn acknowledges his debt to the work of Melvin Williams and Samuel Heilman, 10 argue for the studies of congregations to be undertaken through the 'observing participant' – congregations themselves learning to function 'as if' they were themselves outsiders. It is through such strategies that congregations and scholars can become attuned to the myriad of manners and codes that participants often take for granted. Thus, Hopewell suggests that 'sounding the depths' of a congregation must be a deeper task that pays attention to such things as:

'jokes, stories, lore...parish conversations that follow administrative meetings...sermons, classroom presentation...use of space...line of authority...use of time...conscious and unconscious symbols...conflict...'. 11

But how could paying attention to such trivia and ephemera reveal something about the fundamental nature and identity of a church, or something as complex as the Anglican Communion? To illustrate this simply, consider the following three jokes about Anglicanism:

Question: How many Anglicans does it take to change a light-bulb? Answer: Five – one to put in the new one, and four to admire the old one.

One day, the Archbishop of Canterbury is sitting alone on the beach, trying to enjoy a holiday and a retreat. It has been another hard year. He gazes out towards the horizon where the sun is still rising, and sighs. Presently, his eye catches something gleaming in the sand. He brushes away the grains, and pulls out a brass canister. Seeing an inscription, he spits on it and polishes it, but before he can read it, the canister explodes in a haze of blue smoke. The Archbishop rubs his eyes, and is surprised to find, standing before him, a large Genie. 'Your Grace', says the Genie, 'I will grant you one wish – whatever you want: just name it'. The Archbishop reaches inside his cassock pocket, and pulls out a map of the Middle East. With a crayon, he draws a large red circle around the whole area. 'I'd like you to bring peace to this region', he says. The Genie does not reply. He sits on the sand, and looks at the rising sun. He says nothing for ten minutes. Then, turning again to the Archbishop, he says: 'I have never said this to anyone before, but what

you ask is beyond me. It is too difficult. But if you have another wish, I will grant that'. The Archbishop pauses, and then reaches inside for another map. This is a map of the world, with 165 countries coloured in. 'This is the Anglican Communion', says the Archbishop, 'and all I ask is that you help all the many different parts to get on a little better'. The Genie sits back down on the sand again, and looks towards the sun. Again, for ten minutes, he says nothing. Then he stands up, and turns to the Archbishop. 'Your Grace', he says, 'do you think I could have another look at that first map?'

One day, the queues of people to get into heaven are so long and thick that the Angels guarding the Pearly Gates begin to panic. They fly off to see Jesus and ask for advice. Jesus suggests that potential entrants are graded. He will ask a question of everyone seeking entry, and depending on how they answer, they will either be placed in the slow track, or granted immediate entry. The question Jesus proposes to use is the same question he once put to the disciples: 'Who do you say that I am?'. The first person Jesus encounters at the gates is a Methodist minister. Jesus asks her, 'who do you say that I am?'. The minister hesitates, and then answers 'well, at Conference last year...'. But Jesus interrupts her immediately. 'I am sorry', he says, 'but I asked you for your opinion, and not for your denominational line. Would you mind going to the back of the queue? Thank you.' The next person to step forward is a Roman Catholic monk. Jesus poses the same question, to which the monk replies 'well, our Pope says...'. But Jesus again interrupts, and points out that he wanted the monk's opinion, not the Pope's. Third, a Baptist minister approaches. His response to Jesus' question is emphatic: 'the Bible says...'. But Jesus again interrupts, and reminds the minister that he wanted his opinion, not his knowledge. Finally, an Anglican priest approaches. Jesus regards the minister somewhat quizzically, but puts the question to him nonetheless. The Anglican replies categorically: 'You are the Christ – the Son of the living God'. Jesus is slightly taken aback by such an ardent response from an Episcopalian, and is about to let the Anglican priest in, when he adds 'but then again, on the other hand...'.

These jokes reveal several things about the nature of Anglicanism. First, they are jokes told by Anglicans to one another, as well as to others, suggesting that they possess a serious capacity for gentle self-mocking comic irony. Second, the light-bulb joke makes a serious point: admiration of the past is an important feature of Anglican life. But it can get out of hand. Third, the joke about the Archbishop and the Genie recognises the acute difficulties in maintaining Anglican polity. Fourth, the joke about the Anglican priest at the Pearly Gates celebrates the inherent ambivalence of Anglicanism; the way in which it glories in seeing situations from different points of view, and holds a variety of viewpoints together, even though such convictions may be competing with another, and cause a degree of tension. Fifth, the jokes reveal a real fondness for the way Anglicanism is, including its flaws. Indeed, the flaws are being intrinsically linked to its virtues, which all three jokes highlight, albeit ironically.

The careful noting of this apparently incidental material is important for any ethnography of a church, let alone an entire Communion. Paul Willis, in his *The Ethnographic Imagination* 12 suggests that many conventional types of ethnography overlook the sensate and felt aspects of bodies, societies or situations under scrutiny. He argues that careful attention paid to artifacts, poetry, sayings, humour and sensations can provide important registers of the mood and shape of a given subject. Therefore to try and capture the visual, sensate and experienced aspects of a community can provide important indicators that conventional fieldwork might normally miss. In this respect, Willis is doing no more than building on Raymond Williams' earlier work on cultures, 13 arguing that they are often constituted through 'structures of feeling'. Indeed, we might go further here, and suggest that the Anglican Communion itself is a 'structure of feeling'; its senses its kinship, ties and shape, but hardly ever sees these fully reified.

Thus, and to return to the Anglican jokes, the mere fact that Anglicans appear to be able to tolerate (or even celebrate?) a certain amount of gentle self-mocking comic irony reveals something about the nature of the movement itself. Because it would still appear to be meaningful to speak of Anglicanism as a 'community of moral discourse', in spite of the stresses and strains on particular issues, 14 the role of humour and irony (in diffusing disputes and mediating wisdom) may turn out to be more critical than many will readily realise.

But before tackling that issue, we need to explore what a community of moral discourse might be? Hopewell suggests that it is a gathering of people that are explicitly intent of surveying and critically assessing their personal, social and moral convictions together, because there is already some prior nascent consensus about the loyalty that binds them together as a group. Such ties need not be explicit. Indeed, we might say that any attempt to make them so can be problematic. Part of the genius of Anglicanism arguably lies in its fundamental 'unsolvedness'. Its major problems of moral coherence only emerge when it attempts to clarify itself, instead of allowing competing convictions to continue to gestate

within a broadly sacramental understanding of the church.

To press the discussion a little more, we note that anthropologists such as Geertz distinguish between the ethos of a community and its worldview. The worldview is the 'ideal' shape of the world (to come?) that guides the life of community. In contrast, the ethos refers to those values and codes that the group currently maintains. The two are of course related, and as Hopewell points out, the bonds that link ethos and worldview are not only creeds and formal religious statements, but also whole value systems and narrative streams that may be seldom understood or explicitly revealed. In my own participant observation of Anglicanism (indeed, as an observing participant, since I am an ordained Anglican priest), I have been continually struck by the capacity of the wider Communion for what I have already described as gentle self-mocking comic irony. Could it be, in Hopewell's and Geertz's terminology, that this characteristic actually links the ethos and worldview in Anglicanism? In other words, the cultural ecclesiology of Anglicanism is mild, temperate, given to measured humour, but also anticipates the ultimacy of a sacramental resolution to all serious forms of dispute and the threat of schism or incoherence? In order to investigate this further, it is necessary to explain Hopewell's understanding of comedy and irony in ecclesiological narrative streams, and then test this 'reading' of Anglicanism against current debates.

### Hopewell : The Comic and Ironic Turns

In David Hare's *Racing Demon*, 15 an ironic and comic play about Anglican clergy in London during the 1980s, a central feature of the plot is the division between those who think 'things will work out alright', and those for whom the church has reached breaking point. The latter position is represented by a fictitious Bishop of London, who consistently narrates a 'tragic' understanding of the church and the world. In Hare's play, the divisions between the characters are, on the surface, theological. But Hare is able to exploit the deeper partitions that separate the characters, and these are more typically concerned with worldviews and expectations. Although the play ends, to a degree, in a mire of tragedy, its overall character is ironic-comic. According to Hopewell, true comedies begin with entering a world in which there is misunderstanding, crisis and calamity, but end:

'in unions, pacts, embraces and marriages – that symbolize the ultimately trustworthy working of the world. Created in misinformation and convoluted by error, a comedy is resolved by the disclosure of a deeper knowledge about the harmonious way things really are...'. 16

Hopewell sees the comic genre as one that pivots on integration. Personally, a situation of ignorance is responded to with enlightenment, with the resolution being peace. Socially, discord is met with wisdom, and leads to harmony. Cosmically, illusion is addressed by process, and resolved through union. The key cognitive feature of the comic worldview is wisdom, and because of this, the minister is most commonly a 'guide', the Eucharist a 'sacrament', the church 'pilgrimage' and the gospel 'consciousness' (Hopewell, 1987, pp. 70-71). Granted, these descriptions from Hopewell must be understood as characterizations to some extent. But they are a reasonable 'fit' for much of the 'inner life' of Anglicanism. For example, when Canon Jeffrey John was forced to step down from being nominated as Bishop of Reading in the Diocese of Oxford in the summer of 2003, his parting shot was to write to the local paper in Reading, and state that 'love, in the end, will win'. This was his response to the chaos of potential schism and disharmony: to reassert that there was bound to be a truly 'comic' ending to a tragic farce.

For many people reading Hopewell, the denominational thinking that would most closely correspond to the comic genre (or 'gnostic negotiation', as Hopewell prefers to call it) is Quakerism. This is not an unreasonable assumption, based on Hopewell's own understanding of the worldview that he articulates. However, the genre also closely resonates with the kind of idealised and slightly mystical sacramentalism that characterizes much of Anglicanism's own absorption with its (imagined) Communion. Put another way, doctrinal differences or moral incoherence will ultimately 'melt away', since the Communion is gathered around one table, sharing in one common baptism, and will be unable to resist exchanging the kiss of peace. Differences over gender, sexuality and other matters will be seen in their true light: as secondary issues that do not interfere with the primacy of the sacramental nature of the Communion. Communion is about unity, not uniformity: difference can be celebrated where there is peace and harmony.

In this regard, as Hopewell correctly points out, the comic genre is 'utterly dependable': bafflement and confusion are ultimately overcome by wisdom and love. Harmony replaces discord. This is, of course, a positive and optimistic ecclesiology, which assumes a kind of 'inner energy' within the ethos that drives it, teleologically, towards its worldview. Ultimately, all in the end is harvest. Not even death can stand in the

way of a mystical unity, for which, at worst, a broken Communion points us towards.

The positivism of the comic genre is, of course, only one half of the equation that shapes Anglicans' self-understanding of the Communion. The other half is more contingent, and is habitually posited in irony:

'Miracles do not happen; patterns lose their design; life is unjust, not justified by transcendent forces. Trapped in an ironic world, one shrugs one's shoulders about reports of divine ultimacies and intimacies. Instead of expecting such supernatural outcomes, one embraces ones brothers and sisters in camaraderie'. 17

Hopewell, in developing the ironic genre, tends to put a more reductionist gloss on the worldview than many would normally be prepared to own. The genre is characteristically 'liberal' in its orientation, with a strong sympathy for organic and contextual ecclesiological models. But this does not, in my view, necessarily mean that those who inhabit the ironic worldview are likely to dismiss the realm of the supernatural, which Hopewell often assumes will be the case. That said, Hopewell's characterisation of ironic ecclesiology contains many features that Anglicans will find resonant. The key motif is testing; variation leads (ultimately) to conformity. Personally, a situation of bondage is met with honesty, and resolved through love. Socially, oppression is met by justice and resolved through the establishment of community. The focus of valued behaviour is realism and integrity. Theologically, Jesus is a 'teacher'; the minister an 'enabler'; the church 'fellowship' and the Gospel 'freedom'. 18

Hopewell, in discussing this outlook, recognizes that ironic ecclesiologies and worldviews are in fact best characterised as 'cosmopolitan religion'. Living with differences is a sign of integrity. Thus, and following Wade Clark Roof, Hopewell notes that those who are most attracted to 'ironic' religion may want to avoid organised religion altogether, but tend nonetheless to be faithful church members who affirm:

'(a) the centrality of ethical principles in their meaning systems; (b) a parsimony of beliefs, few attributions of numinosity; (c) breadth of perspective; (d) piety defined as a personal search for meaning; and (e) licence to doubt'. 19

Perhaps inevitably, this draws those with primarily ironic worldviews towards a theological terrain that is packed with deep ambiguity and paradox. Within contemporary Anglicanism this tradition is perhaps best exemplified by writers such as David Jenkins, John Habgood and the early work of Richard Holloway. In working with congregations and groups where the ironic worldview dominates, one can observe how paradox is not only testing, but also persuasive and nourishing. Thus, phrases that can speak of the incarnation in angular and slightly avuncular ways (e.g., Launcelot Andrewes 'the Speechless Word', or Rowan Williams more recent notion of the 'spastic Christ-child') will invariably absorb individuals and groups in hours of patient spiritual musings. In the ironic worldview, anomaly and paradox are givens.

Given these remarks, it is perhaps reasonable to suggest that some of the core proponents of the Anglican Communion are, in Hopewellian terms, comic-ironic in orientation. Or, to return to Boyer, these are just two of the 'lumps' in the soup that is Anglicanism. They anticipate a form of sacramental unity that will ultimately bear its own fruit. But they are sagacious enough to know that the path to unity is littered with pitfalls and potholes that require the mind of an empiricist rather than an idealist. Again, in Hopewellian terms, the 'model' of the church that emerges from this worldview is a combination of perspectives. On the one hand it comprises organicist views: 'developing towards a final integrated reality which is unapparent in its present state'. 20 On the other, it is both mechanist and formist, which recognises that the church is a collectivity of structures that can be regulated and adjusted. Still again, the church is contextualist, shaped by the very cultural forces that it seeks to shape. For Hopewell, the analogy of the church (or Communion in this case) as a house allows an analyst to see that

'as a house within the world, 'house' emphasizes its participation in the frame of all language. Human imagination as a whole provides the particular idiomatic and narrative construction of a congregation; its members communicate by a code derived from the totality of forms and stories by which societies cohere. In such a picture...church culture is not reduced to a series of propositions that a credal checklist adequately probes. Rather, the congregation takes part in the nuance and narrative of full human discourse. It persists as a recognizable storied dwelling within the whole horizon of human interpretation'.

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Comic Endings: What is the Future for the Anglican Communion?

The late and lamented theologian, Robert Carroll, once described the Anglican way of doing theology as

'the Dodo's incorporative principle - a means by which everyone wins'. Anglicans, in trying to sort out doctrinal differences amongst themselves, were always arguing about the precise weight that should be given to scripture, tradition, reason and culture. The ground rules for such debates always guaranteed inclusion for participants and most reasonable points of view – even those one might passionately oppose. All sides in any debate could always claim a moral victory, since final decisions were seldom reached. It is precisely this kind of ecclesiology that has made Anglicanism – rather like a Dodo – such a rare bird for several centuries. But is the rarity and novelty of Anglicanism about to slide into self-inflicted extinction?

To be sure, one would want to begin any outline sketch for an answer by observing that the comic-ironic axis is not unique to the 'DNA' of Anglicanism. Quite recently I was lecturing to a group of United Churches of Christ pastors in Connecticut, who cheerfully informed me that 'UCC' stood for 'Unitarians Considering Christ'. They certainly understood the value of not taking themselves too seriously. Most of them accepted that there was a considerable gap between Kingdom of God/Gospel values and the life of the church. Similarly, when I have worked with Methodist educators in seminars and consultations, they have shown themselves to be almost wholly disposed to a Hopewellian ironic worldview, with mild flecks of comic ethos. So Anglicanism is not the only polity in which an ironic-comic worldview plays an important role.

Having said that, the Archbishop of Canterbury has a particularly unenviable task in trying to hold together some hotly held competing convictions. Liberals are calling on him to support the choice of an openly gay bishop, partly to confirm the identity of the church as being relevant and inclusive. Conservatives want the Archbishop to offer unequivocal condemnation, claiming that a gay bishop is a departure from all scriptural and ecclesial norms. It is a no-win situation for the Archbishop of Canterbury. Leading the Church of England, it is often said, is like trying to herd cats. Precocious and un-biddable creatures, they roam where they please. The job of leading the Anglican Communion then, is, therefore, many times worse. The Episcopal Church in America will go one way; Anglicans in Sydney and Nigeria will go another. Correspondingly, there is no shortage of prophets who are predicting that this is 'the beginning of the end': but is it?

It seems unlikely, given what we have already said about Anglicanism as comedy: it is hopeful about a harmonious future in which discord is ultimately banished. But comedy needs to be rooted in reality, and in Hopewellian terms, this is where an ecclesial synergy between irony and comedy can come into its own. The comedy can imagine a future together; irony can face the despair of separatism. So in all probability, the elixir that will sustain the Communion will be to find unity without imposing uniformity. Put another way, a degree of separation shouldn't necessarily mean schism, let alone divorce. Indeed, a slight loosening of the ties could help Anglican churches retain their global identity, whilst developing their provincial individuality. Instead of one single monolithic Communion, the possibility of developing a 'neighbourhood' or 'family' of Anglican churches, where there is some detachment yet attachment, may need to be explored more seriously. Specifically, Anglicans may need to examine the implications of agreeing to live apart, whilst still retaining filial links and obligations, and also remaining friends and neighbours. Such an ironic-comic turn should not be beyond the grasp of an Anglican Communion that combines humour, realism and hope in equal measure.

That said, there will be those who want to argue the very opposite of this, namely for a Communion in which the bonds between parties are deepened, intra-provincial obligations formalised, with discipline and coherence made far more obvious. This could lead to a stronger central structure, with (perhaps) a core canon law that could provide for Anglican ecclesiology as a whole. To be sure, this vision has its merits. But its actual implementation will depend, ironically, not on imposing the will of an elite on an 'imagined Communion' (to quote Benedict Anderson again). Rather, it will require the shared re-discovery of those values, courtesies, conventions and cultures that made the Communion what it was in the first place. With a typical ironic-comic turn, I prophesy that the Anglican Communion will only re-discover itself through grace; it cannot make itself by law.

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