Freedom and Covenant: The Miltonian Analogy Transfigured

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My purpose in what follows is to draw positive attention to the Windsor Report's "Proposed Anglican Covenant". It is a part of the Report that has received little attention, apart from initial media hyperbole; and what it has received has generally been negative. The proposed Covenant's obscurity in discussion has perhaps been due to the fact that, on most accounts, it is in any case a long-term project, and what we really need to deal with are immediate concerns over North America's place in the Communion and sexuality. But the Primates in their February 2005 Communiqué commended the proposal in general, and asked that steps be taken quickly by the Archbishop of Canterbury to have it considered by Provinces before Lambeth 2008. The Covenant is, in my mind, a critical, even essential piece through which the character of "autonomy in Communion" can be lived. For U. S. Episcopalians, the Covenent – even in its proposed particulars (which are, of course, up for grabs) – may well prove the best means of maintaining the proper tension, and perhaps even balance, between two often competing values at the heart of our Christian identity. My goal is to lay out these two values, and then simply to ask if the Covenant is not a clearly effective way of granting them a constructive life together.

The Religious Value of Autonomy

The commitment to ecclesial "autonomy" in ECUSA's provincial self-understanding goes to the heart of the current conflict in the Communion, certainly insofar as the Windsor Report is concerned. Numerous responses to the Report by US bishops and the advocates of General Conventions 2003's actions point to the "peculiar" character of ECUSA's democratic culture, as it properly informs our ecclesial life. This is a long-standing claim on the part of American Episcopalian apologists ("the General Convention is the single magisterium in our most democratic polity", according to one bishop). It has been repeated frequently of late especially by Presiding Bishop Griswold, who has sought to explain ECUSA's communion- troubling actions on the basis of a polity that is "open, democratic, and participatory – flowing out of the life of the community" (March 29th Letter to Lambeth Commission). "Autonomy", within a culture of "democracy", represents a vital piece of Episcopalian self-imaging.

But where does this understanding come from? One might be tempted to say that it is simply the result of ECUSA's long immersion in an American culture, and more recently a kind of appropriation into its self-consciousness, of the secular foundations of American government. Surely, some of this is right. But just as surely the claims to "open democracy" made by ECUSA leaders in the midst of the present debate over "communion" are not bound to or even simply expressive of this cultural-political reality. Most apologetic rationales given – despite the rhetorical calls to "new revolutions against the monarch" that one comes across on the House of Deputies list-serve -- lie in a more purely theological sphere: they claim that the values of openness, legislative participation, and democratic decision-making all represent enactments of the religious virtues of diverse processes of truth-seeking, of "growing into" deeper unity through dynamic engagements with "difference", of providing an ecclesial structure that allows

the Holy Spirit to speak in the unfolding work of historical debate, experiment, and correction.

There *is* a theology – not just a cultural simulacrum – here. It does not, however, look much like the theology expressed by the 18th-century organizers of the original Episcopal Church, whose interest in democratic voting was real, but limited (and certainly not universally shared). Instead, the biggest theological problem confronting the inventers of American Episcopalianism was, quite simply *bishops* themselves, and how to justify them in a political and religious context in which "prelacy" was not only suspect but often attacked as instrinsically oppressive and seditious. While 18th-century Revolutionary ideals were extended by some into organizational reflection, this was not the case for most American Anglicans. William White's goal for the yet-to-be established Anglican body in the United States was that it should provide a religious *option* for those who were drawn to "episcopal" forms of ecclesial life and worship.

Today's historical-pneumatic claims to liberty on the part of defenders of ECUSA's autonomy are something else altogether. I have no interest in tracing the actual genealogy of these claims – it is an exceedingly complex bit of cultural history (cf. my essay "Children of Cain: The Oxymoron of American Catholicism" at anglicancommunioninstitute.org). But the shape of this claim, within the context of historical *Anglican* debate is quite surprising: for it turns out to be far closer to the reformed congregationalist radicalism of someone like John Milton, than to anything resembling "Episcopal" values. And what are we to do with it?

Indeed, it is worth playing out this similitude, not for reasons of actual historical connection, but in order to demonstrate the paradox – and irony – of current ECUSA official theology, in the midst of debate about *Anglicanism* and her communion in particular. For it appears as if the most extreme of anti-episcopal ("anti-prelatical") theologies has currently been wedded to an ecclesial body primarily distinctive – in its American context – through its commitment precisely to "prelacy".

The Miltonian Analogy

We know Milton as a supreme poet of the English language, and less so, perhaps, as a brilliant religious controversialist and theologian (his last work, in Latin, was a systematic scholastic dogmatics). Still, his intellectual evolution moved in a clear direction: from a young conformist Anglican of relatively unexceptional Protestant (Reformed) leanings to a political and ecclesial radical, who understood Christian identity in terms of the individual conscience freely conformed to the truth of Christ. The connection between individual and freedom became absolutely key for Milton, and dictated the shape of church and society that he labored incessantly to promote. While his famous discourse known as the *Areopagitica* (1644), against Parliament's "licensing" (censoring) authority has a limited focus, it represents an entire theology of Christian life that remains consistent, if not sharpened, through his disappointment with the Commonwealth. We can note a few crucial elements of this well-known pamphlet.

First of all, Milton was committed in general to a notion of society – including the Church – as a gathering of intellectually unconstrained religious seekers. Laws governing speech and limiting publication on the basis of putative religious truth were in fact contrary to the basis of Christian liberty. Why? Because, secondly, the Christian "truth" itself is so clouded in its human apprehension by sin as to demand constant debate in order to be unveiled, however partially, in time. Not only is the exposition of the truth served in open and unregulated debate, but so is the Christian soul itself, by being consistently pressed towards the truth through a honing of intellectual and inner virtue. This is why, thirdly, ecclesial (and civil) constraints upon the publication and promotion of given opinions and doctrines – however wrong – is anti-Christian. And Milton's consistent and violent attack upon bishops in particular derives directly from his conviction that ecclesial hierarchy, exercised authoritatively and regulatively, represents necessarily a "quenching" of the Spirit, and thereby sets in motion an array of social corruptions, and disorders. True "unity" is provided as Christians struggle together for the truth:

"Where there is much desire to learn, there of necessity will be much arguing, much writing, many opinions; for opinion in good men is but knowledge in the making. […] What some lament of, we rather should rejoice at, should rather praise this pious forwardness among men, to reassume the ill- deputed care of their religion into their own hands again. A little generous prudence, a little forbearance of one another, and some grain of charity might win all these diligences to join, and unite in one general and brotherly search after truth; could we but forgo this prelatical tradition of crowding free consciences and Christian liberties into canons and precepts of men" (citations from the Univ. of Oregon *Renascence Editions* of the *Areopagitica*, 1997, available online). Echoes of current ECUSA arguments are obvious here.

Two further, more peculiarly theological, convictions undergird Milton's promotion of unregulated discourse. First is the belief that divine Providence works in such a way that the Truth will certainly emerge through the disputations of diverse opinions. "For who knows not that Truth is strong, next to the Almighty? She needs no policies, nor stratagems, nor licensings to make her victorious; those are the shifts and the defences that error uses against her power. […] Yet is it not impossible that she may have more shapes than one […] How many other things might be tolerated in peace, and left to conscience, had we but charity, and were it not the chief stronghold of our hypocrisy to be ever judging one another?". And this historically determined emergence of the Truth through diverse and tolerated opinions implies a more startling consequence: that is, that the Truth itself is something that continually "emerges" through time, as a kind of "continuing revelation" in the Spirit:

"Truth indeed came once into the world with her divine Master, and was a perfect shape most glorious to look on: but when he ascended, and his Apostles after him were laid asleep, then straight arose a wicked race of deceivers" who mutilated her wholeness. "From that time ever since, the sad friends of Truth […] went up and down gathering up limb by limb, still as they could find them. We have not yet found them all, Lords and Commons, nor ever shall do, till her Master's second coming; he shall bring together

every joint and member, and shall mould them into an immortal feature of loveliness and perfection. " (ibid).

The demand here, politically and spiritually, was for the encouragement of pneumatic freedom on the part of individuals to grow into the many-corridored dwelling of God's truth, in the Scriptures as much as in anything. To be sure, Milton was happy to restrict the speech and writing of Roman Catholics – but that is precisely because, in their constricted "orthodoxy" (joined to threatened political sanction), they put obstacles before what ought to be the unimpeded quest for truth by the individual. Milton's almost counter-intuitive observation has in fact entered the mainstream of American social understanding: the imposition of conformity of thought actually leads to greater division. (This, by the way, is a frequent charge made by liberals against conservative Episcopalians in the debate over "who is causing division"):

"There be who perpetually complain of schisms and sects, and make it such a calamity that any man dissents from their maxims. 'Tis their own pride and ignorance which causes the disturbing, who neither will hear with meekness, nor can convince […] They are the troublers, they are the dividers of unity […] To be still searching what we know not by what we know, still closing up truth to truth as we find it […] this is the golden rule in theology as well as in arithmetic, and makes up the best harmony in a Church; not the forced and outward union of cold, and neutral, and inwardly divided minds." (*Ibid*.)

Thus, as Milton grew older, so also grew his opposition to organized constraint upon individual religiosity. Initially this was limited to the "prelacy" of Anglican (and Laudian) episcopacy; but in time (as in the controversy over his arguments in favor of divorce that provoked the *Areopagitica*) he turned against Presbyterian religious/political ordering, and later against other forms of religious control. Milton's early concern for "church discipline", which he based on careful Scriptural proof-texting, was something he eventually dropped – not because of a rejection of the Scriptural demand for it, but because of its corrupting character. In the last analysis, it is the individual's sense of conscience that provides the only and best "disciplinary" control that is Christianly acceptable: "But there is yet a more ingenuous and noble degree of honest shame, or, call it, if you will, an esteem, whereby men bear an inward reverence toward their own persons […]But he that holds himself in reverence and due esteem, both for the dignity of God's image upon him, and for the price of his redemption […cannot] fear so much the offence and reproach of others, as he dreads and would blush at the reflection of his own severe and modest eye upon himself**,**." (*Reason for Church Government* [1641], Bk II, c. 3).

What needs to be emphasized here is the way Milton's more particularly religious beliefs, as they are bound up with his system of "emergent truth through disputation", strangely follow the justificatory line of many ECUSA leaders and members. We see in both a focus on individual happiness, understood in terms of the free exercise of conscience before God (this lay at the root of Milton's defence of divorce for reasons of personal and spiritual peace, basing marriage on spiritual rather than physical realities), a cultural relativism regarding otherwise universally held norms (Milton defended polygamy under

certain constraints), a clear Arianism and Nestorianism in doctrines of God and Christ (these were bound, in Milton's case, to a kind of Scriptural literalism carried out within a historicizing context), and a certain Pelagianism with respect to human spiritual progress.

What is popularly known of Milton's intense Scripturalism may seem at odds with all this But because he had completely done away with that necessary communal character of Christianity and its apprehension of the truth by the end, and thus finally evinced the epitome of individualized Protestantism, his own speculations could go off in (socially regarded) strange directions, despite their Scriptural focus.

Prelacy and ECUSA

Although I have used Milton only as a kind of typological analogy to contemporary ECUSA apologists, I should point out that Milton's influence in the formative years of the United States was not negligible. He was read carefully by Jefferson (who used him explicitly in framing his Statute of Virginia for Religious Freedom), and the *Areopagitica* itself became a classic text for First Amendment and educational mythology (cf. Milton's presence on the NY Public Library murals). Still, his incorporation into the public pantheon of American Liberty was partly accomplishedby neglecting his primarily *religious* vision, which (at least for a long time) remained outside the accepted mainstream.

But what the use of the Miltonian analogy should make clear is that ECUSA's adoption of this religious vision – through a complicated historical trajectory – has now placed it at odds with its own genetic ecclesial identity. First of all, ECUSA's *episcopal* identity stands in an almost suicidal relationship with the Miltonian anti-episcopal understanding of religious liberty. And most certainly the interest of early US Anglicans lay exactly in embracing this episcopal identity, whatever character of "democratic" processes were lodged in its conventional life. Not all the players in the drama of post-Revolutionary American Episcopalianism were "Seabury"-ites in their views of episcopacy, but the entire organizational drama of PECUSA focused on this question. Practically speaking, the avenues for the embrace of the episcopate are what tied the Episcopal Church to the Church of Enlgand in a formal way (e.g. the final revision of the American Book of Common Prayer and the doctrinal constraints around creeds and even organization that were finally accepted by the new church were tied to the episcopal dependence of the Americans upon the English).

Secondly, there is the *theological* import of the American church's commitment to the episcopacy. It is not insignificant that William White's use of the term "communion" in his famous *Case* refers not only to the relationship held among American Episcopalians, but describes also the relationship they hold with the Church of England. For theologically, part of the deep and common bond experienced among themselves, one expressed in the ordering of the church by bishops, lay in the Americans' commitment to "apostolicity". Again, White (despite his weaknesses on the matter) makes this case overtly, and for all his Whig proclivities, it was informed by the deep theological bequest from the 17th and 18th centuries of the High Church primitivists. (Some of these readings

continued to be officially commended by General Convention to ordinands well into the 19th century.) The episcopacy was "apostolic", furthermore, because it was Scripturally given and upheld by the early Church. Ultimately, this two-fold criterion became the centerpiece of standard Epsicopalian self-understanding until relatively recently. The Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral represents a clear, evolved and self-conscious embrace of this prelatical-Scriptural identity, and its implications continue to have borne elaborated fruit in ecumenical theology until the present. It lays at the foundation of ECUSA's consistent embrace (until recently) of the ideology of the Anglican Communion itself, in its major "instruments of unity".

It should be noted that none of this precluded a consistent celebration of American "exceptionalism" with regard to the Episcopal Church' s character. From early on, and especially in the context of *apologias* of a more missionary kind, Episcopalians pressed their church upon their countrymen by making distinctions between PECUSA and the Church of England precisely in terms of the former's wonderful system of self-governance, rational, noble, and true. But this defense too was generally based on "apostolic" considerations: the necessity of elections, of connection between people and leaders and so on all being part of the original apostolic practice of the early Church.

So now we are at place where Miltonian character, allied perhaps to this American distinction but very different in its impulse, has now raised its head within ECUSA with astonishing vigor. We use the term "provincial autonomy" to describe the ecclesial virtue we seek to protect. But in our case we are using the term in a very particular way these days. Pointing out this novel character can do two things: the Miltonian similitude itself connotes the nobility of the commitment – Milton's mythic status rightly underlines the values of freedom and justice and the intrinsic good of these commitments to these things. ECUSA, in engaging in a Miltonian task – whether specified in terms of oppressed persons or in systems of ecclesial government -- has not taken hold of something base. I would not suggest otherwise, however much I might dispute particulars. But a new Miltonianism at the heart of ECUSA policies also points to a profound inner tension (contradiction?) that is pulling the church in a direction away from the "apostolic" ordering and constraints given in her own innate character. Indeed, this new element places a strange and distorting emphasis upon the residual (and still essential) prelatism of ECUSA as it asserts itself in conflict (cf. the recent fracas in Connecticut). If the heart of ECUSA is exploding, it is because we do not have an ecclesial mechanism for resolving theologically this tension.

The Windsor Covenant as a Way Forward

I would simply suggest that the Windsor Report, in its proposal for a Covenant, in fact offers an arena in which the American Church can be true to her dual character. After all, what does the WR see the Covenant as doing? It is an attempt to hold together, by constitutional agreement and representative functions, the autonomous character of particular Anglican churches (the Communion is described, in a venerable Lockean manner, as a "voluntary association of churches", WR 119) within each church's "calling"to communion (described as "inviolable" – Cov, 6). As a whole, the Covenant

is designed to act as the "communion's visible foundation", even while it "protects [the] distinctive identity and mission" of her churches" (WR 119).

The Covenant, in its particulars, is committed, not surprisingly, to an episcopal focus, through which Communion life will be ordered. The WR as a whole had already placed great emphasis on the character of the bishop as teacher of Scripture, and as instrument of collegial unity (58, 63-66); and the Covenant spells out this Prelatical ministry with clear force, placing great responsibility for maintaining communion upon the choices of individual bishops (Cov. 13).

But the Covenant also seeks to place these responsibilities within a context of "adjustable" consultation and/or mediation and resolution. The doctrinal substance of the Covenant's agreed definitions is relatively thin (although it still would have disturbed an Arian like Milton), and great weight is placed upon the constraints of "communion concerns" that are simply not defined in advance. What this means is that individuals – bishops accountable to their churches and to one another – are given enormous responsibilities to listen, discern, and choose rightly within a process of common decision-making around the world. The onus of the constraining mechanism remains one of freedom assumed and limited collegially and within the constitutional systems of local churches and provinces.

For all the expressions of dismay (Miltonian in its horror) that we have heard from some Americans and others at a set of constraining commitments across provinces that the Covenant implies, the actual mechanism of this constraint is one of "voluntary" responsibility, both in terms of self-restraint and mutual accountability. Obviously, such accountability can engage sanctions of discipline, if they are mutually agreed to. But the sanctions themselves – not to say the agreements – are taken up in an amazingly unfettered liberty of decision. At the same time, one of the benefits proposed for the Covenant by the Commission is that it will serve to protect the *freedoms* of local and provincial churches, vis a vis state regulations, by making clear that the Christian commitments of Anglicans are tied up with a complex international web of mutual concerns and constraints (WR 119). There really is a concern about liberty in the proposal; but it is a liberty that finds its home within transformed Christian body.

If the peculiar character of ECUSA is seen simply in terms of vying Miltonian and Prelatical values, the Covenant's hedging of autonomy by the mutual accountabilities of communion might seem to some as a kind of compromise to save an institution (and saving the Communion is, in fact, one of the rationales given for the proposed Covenant – WR 119). Americans, I suppose, might want to embrace it on this basis as the "lesser of two evils". But the Covenant represents far more than this. For the Covenant's "conciliar" character points to something much deeper, which is now reemerging in the present debate over the nature of "communion", and not only among Anglicans: that is, the *divine* character of freedom exercised in mutual subjection for the sake of unity, in character of the "mind of Christ" described in Philippians 2:1-11. The elements of election, representation, common dependence, and subjection to the whole – all within the ambit of Scriptural revelation, offering, demand, and coherence – constitute essential

characteristics of traditional conciliar theology, dating from the Middle Ages, and groped after in a developing way now by Anglicanism itself in an ecumenically pioneering way. These characteristics stand, certainly not as the affirmation of ECUSA's war within her heart, but as the transfiguration of the warring players themselves (whether described in Miltonian terms or not). I have avoided explicitly theological arguments here. But if they are to be pursued, they must begin here.

If there is any value to this imaginary reading of ECUSA as it confronts the Windsor Report, it is this: it makes clear that the rejection of a Covenantal embrace by ECUSA in particular, will mark her as something other than a "communion" church, just as the Windsor Report indicates. Such a rejection would constitute the choice for a pure Miltonianism, and ECUSA would thereby declare herself as being a Protestant body whose commitments to individual autonomy are moving in the direction of a radically new religion altogether. Just as did her illustrious paragon.

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