



From the Review Editor

## Does the Church of England have a Theology of General Synod?<sup>1</sup>

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### *The Problem of the Laity*

In 1867 George Talbot (1816–86), the somewhat eccentric English Roman Catholic convert who served as papal chamberlain and who was the frequently distorting eyes and ears in Rome of the English Catholic Community, wrote a letter to Henry Manning asking: ‘What is the province of the laity?’ His answer was given partly in response to Newman, who had published his thoughts on consulting the faithful in matters of doctrine in 1859.<sup>3</sup> Talbot’s response to Newman, whom he regarded as a ‘wound inflicted on the Catholic Church’ and ‘the most dangerous man in England’, was simple and direct and displayed something of his aristocratic background: the province of the laity, he claimed, was ‘To hunt, to shoot, to entertain. These matters they understand, but to meddle with ecclesiastical matters they have no right at all.’<sup>4</sup> Such an estimation of the laity was something repeated by other prominent English Roman Catholics in the nineteenth century, including the future Cardinal Nicholas Wiseman, at the time titular Bishop of Melipotamus and responsible

1. This paper is a modified version of a lecture delivered at a conference organised by Affirming Catholicism entitled ‘Episcopally-Led, Synodically Governed’ on 24 November 2012 at St Mary-le-Bow Church, London. It took place four days after the rejection by the House of Laity in the General Synod of the measure that would have allowed the ordination of women as bishops.

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3. On the context and fallout of Newman’s article see Douglas Woodruff’s introduction in Lord Acton, *Essays on Church and State* (London: Hollis and Carter, 1952), esp. pp. 21–23.

4. Letter from Talbot to Manning, 25 April 1867, cited in E.S. Purcell, *Life of Cardinal Manning* (London, 1896), II, p. 318.

for the London District, in his pamphlet, *Words of Peace and Justice*.<sup>5</sup> This polemic was written in the context of the controversy over the (unsuccessful) attempt to establish diplomatic relations with Rome in 1848. Against the wishes of Wiseman, but supported by the *Tablet*, a meeting had been convened at Freemason's Hall to draft a memorial to Pope Pius IX, which claimed to be in the name of 'English Catholics', which opposed the normalization of relations. Anxious about upsetting the delicate situation, Wiseman spoke of the 'influx into ecclesiastical and spiritual affairs of principles belonging to temporal and social interests'. He sought a 'well-drawn boundary line'<sup>6</sup> between clergy and laity, so that the church would be governed by those 'whom the Church has trained, and God has anointed for this purpose'. Like Samuel they had been 'chosen to govern God's people'. Although it was clear that the church often sought the 'zealous co-operation', 'social influence', 'brilliant talents', 'weighty name' and 'abundant means' of the laity, it was nevertheless the case that 'the direction, the rule, belongs to us'. In short, he concluded: 'We will always gladly see you working with us, but we cannot permit you to lead, where religious interests are concerned'.<sup>7</sup> The clergy and the laity had quite distinct spheres.

Such an attitude towards the laity has been something shared by some who have occupied important roles within the Church of England. For instance, John Hooper of Gloucester, one of the most radical bishops of the Reformation of Edward VI, who was martyred under Mary, called the people 'that many-headed monster', which because of its ignorance was 'fascinated by the inveiglements of the bishops, and the malice and impiety of the mass-priests'.<sup>8</sup> The people, he felt, were ill-educated and superstitious, and deserved to have little

5. *Words of Peace and Justice: Addressed to the Catholic Clergy and Laity of the London District, on the Subject of Diplomatic Relations with the Holy See* (London: Dolman, 1848). On this, see James P. Flint, *Great Britain and the Holy See: The Diplomatic Relations Question, 1846-1852* (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2003), ch. 4; Saho Matsumoto-Best, *Britain and the Papacy in the Age of Revolution, 1846-1851* (Woodbridge: Royal Historical Society, 2003); Wilfrid Ward, *The Life and Times of Cardinal Wiseman* (2 vols.; London: Longmans, 1912), I, ch. 16.

6. *Words of Peace and Justice*, p. 15.

7. *Words of Peace and Justice*, p. 16.

8. Letter from Hooper to Bullinger, 5 February 1550, in Hastings Robinson (ed.), *Original letters relative to the English Reformation: written during the reigns of King Henry VIII., King Edward VI., and Queen Mary: chiefly from the archives of Zurich* (2 vols.; Cambridge: University Press for the Parker Society, 1846-47), I, p. 76.

say in the running of the church. However much sympathy there might be for such judgments about the role of the laity in Church Government after the November 2012 defeat of the measure which would have allowed for the ordination of women bishops in the Church of England by a small number in the House of Laity, there are very few Anglicans who would seek to deny the laity a say in the governance of the church. There can be very practical reasons for this. In a time when the financial burdens of the church increasingly fall on the active laity, at least in England, there is a sense in which the principle of no taxation without representation needs to be taken seriously. Just as the origin of the two houses of Convocation derived from the need for mediaeval kings to gain the consent of the clergy for taxation,<sup>9</sup> so the representation of the laity makes sense on purely pragmatic terms. It is interesting to note that despite his High Church inclinations, Bishop Robert Gray of Cape Town, who was one of the pioneers of Synodical Government in the Anglican Communion, established a House of Laity in the Province of South Africa from the very beginning on such grounds: the church could not be governed without the consent of the laity who were expected to pay for it. The laity were included in the synod, which was formally set up in 1876, according to Peter Hinchliff, 'not as a result of theological or historical justification, but because they possessed the money and power which was needed and because by the nineteenth century a purely clerical gathering would have been not merely unthinkable but unworkable'.<sup>10</sup>

### *Synods and the Problem of Division*

This indicates something crucial about the nature and theology of synods. While much of the literature tends to assume that they are rather grand assemblies whose debates and discussions are geared towards the clarification and articulation of important matters of doctrine and order, they are frequently, at least in origin, very worldly councils. Although Convocations acquired the rights to create canons

9. See Eric Kemp, *Counsel and Consent: Aspects of the Government of the Church as Exemplified in the History of the English Provincial Synods* (London: SPCK, 1961), esp. pp. 63–142.

10. Peter Hinchliff, 'Laymen in Synod: An Aspect of the Beginnings of Synodical Government in South Africa'. in G.J. Cuming and Derek Baker (eds.), *Studies in Church History. VII. Councils and Assemblies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), pp. 321–27), at p. 327.

through the Middle Ages, they spent the bulk of their time discussing the very worldly aspects of church affairs.<sup>11</sup> And often they provided a check on the power and claims of the monarch towards absolute sovereignty over matters both temporal and spiritual. Perhaps because of these very worldly concerns, there has been remarkably little discussion of the theology of synods in the Church of England. Although there have recently been some detailed discussions of the so-called 'conciliar movement' of the Middle Ages,<sup>12</sup> there has been remarkably little theological analysis of our domestic synods, either through history or today.<sup>13</sup> The last full-scale account of synodical history was Eric Kemp's comprehensive 1960 Bampton Lectures, which offer a thoroughgoing analysis, legal, theological and financial of the development of Convocation and later of the House of Laity in the Church Assembly. Nevertheless, even when synods are discussing such worldly matters as parochial fees, it remains important to think through the theology of the synodical system. The problem, however – and this is something that has been blindingly obvious in recent years – is that they do not seem very theological. Instead they are messy, full of conflict and very political. Often they do not appear to be possessed of the great Christian virtues of faith, hope and love at all. And furthermore they seldom embody anything more than a modicum of unity or consensus.

The Church of England has embraced a system of church government characterized by conflict, compromises and sometimes downright hostility between the factions. This has become apparent ever since the revival of an active Convocation from the middle of the nineteenth century and the creation of the Church Assembly in 1919. When the authority to make its own decisions was returned to the church following the long dominion of parliament after that body had long ceased to be a purely Anglican institution, the horse-trading and political wheeling and dealing did not evaporate. What emerged was a system established not on the fact that people agree; instead it quickly became that place where people who disagreed with one another came together to try to make

11. Kemp, *Counsel and Consent*, pp. 65–86.

12. Francis Oakley, *The Conciliarist Tradition: Constitutionalism in the Catholic Church, 1300–1870* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); and Paul Valliere, *Conciliarism: A History of Decision-Making in the Church* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

13. See Kemp, esp. pp. 87–112. See also the 1902 Report: *The Position of the Laity in the Church Being the Joint Committee of the Convocation of Canterbury (1902)* (reprint with an introduction by Norman Sykes, Westminster; Church Information Board, 1952).

decisions. Synods were necessary not because of any spurious comprehensiveness or unity-in-diversity, but precisely because of the disunity of the church. This means that it is crucial to bear in mind from the outset that any theology of synodical government is always going to be a political theology: it will be about putting things into practice in a society which is not perfect and which is made up of people with very different ideas of what constitutes truth. It requires what Ephraim Radner has recently called 'eristology', or the study of Christian divisions in their relation to political power.<sup>14</sup>

For very many members of General Synod the decision to reject the women bishops' measure was very tough – six votes in the House of Laity postponed what almost all members of the General Synod regarded as inevitable. Like many others I had a sense of bewilderment and anger as I reflected on the bruised feelings of the many hundreds of women clergy I have trained. But the decision also offered a good example of just how central politics is in the Church. From my experience, the current General Synod has not been a particularly happy place; it is highly politicized, and its debates, at least in relation to controversial ecclesiastical matters, so often lack the qualities of listening and learning. But even this example of the manner in which an ecclesiastical body governs itself is not simply a matter of pragmatic politics. It is also something deeply theological, but it requires a special form of political theology. Synods may claim to be about discerning the will of God for the Church, and all churches require some mechanism or structure to discern where God is acting. They need a polity or a form of government. But because the church is made up of that odd mixture of saint and sinner that we call human beings, any form of Church government, from the most authoritarian to the most democratic, is always deeply political. Indeed all politics, whether in the church or in the state or in the parish council, is about power, authority and legitimacy. And, of course, in a strange country like the United Kingdom, where the monarch is still anointed by the church, the boundaries between church and state are sometimes rather fluid.

#### *A Theology of Synods*

So where are we to start with a theology of synodality? To many people the obvious answer would be in the doctrine of the Triune God. But if synods are founded on conflict and the institutionalization

14. Ephraim Radner, *A Brutal Unity: The Spiritual Politics of the Christian Church* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012), p. 4.

of disagreement (just like parliaments) then it seems to me to be somewhat disingenuous to suggest that the starting point for the theology of synodical government should rest in the doctrine of the Trinity, which, with rare exceptions, has seldom been used to explain conflict, disunity and division. As the political theologian David Nicholls once noted: 'We are urged to think of God as a "society". But what kind of society or community? A good society, undoubtedly. But what is a good society like? What degree of unity is appropriate to a human social group?'<sup>15</sup> His answer was far from straightforward: conflict and division seemed central to human growth and flourishing, a feature he even located in the tensions between Father and Son in the Godhead.<sup>16</sup>

Such reservations about the appropriateness of the doctrine of the Trinity in grounding human political communities, however, are rare. Instead it has become a commonplace in church reports and much of the rest of theological literature, including nearly all writing on mission especially after David Bosch's seminal work *Transforming Mission*,<sup>17</sup> that somehow all the church needs to do is simply to model itself on the harmony and relationality of some imagined Trinity. Father, Son and Holy Spirit offer and receive love to and from one another in a relationship of perfect reciprocity or mutual indwelling. Divine dances and inclusive embraces have become the new orthodoxy in theology.<sup>18</sup> This means that what little theological reflection there has been on the nature of the structures of the General Synod and of the more local synods of the Church of England has simply assumed that somehow the obvious place to start theological reflection on church government should be the doctrine of the Trinity. For instance, in the 1997 Report *Synodical Government in the Church of England*,<sup>19</sup> which

15. David Nicholls, 'Trinity and Conflict', *Theology* XCVI (1993), pp. 19–27 (19).

16. See my essay, 'The Social Doctrine of the Trinity: Some Problems', *Anglican Theological Review* 83. 2 (2001), pp. 239–54.

17. David Jacobus Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), e.g. p. 390.

18. This approach is exemplified, for example, by Colin Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993); *The One, The Three and the Many: God, Creation and the Culture of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Paul S. Fiddes, *Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2000) and Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God* (London: SCM Press, 1981).

19. Review Group by the Standing Committee of the General Synod, *Synodical Government in the Church of England: A Review* (London: Church House Publishing, 1997).

remains the most extensive discussion of the nature of the General Synod,<sup>20</sup> the brief theological sections which preface the very practical body of the report, simply assume that the social doctrine of the Trinity is the obvious place to start. Somewhat self-referentially it cites two earlier Church of England reports. Its opening section 'Theological Principles and Historical Development' quotes directly from the Turnbull Report which claimed, without explaining precisely how, that the life of the Church was 'utterly Trinitarian in its ground, being and hope'. Thus, the Turnbull Report continued, the Church is 'also firmly part of God's good creation, an assembly of men and women of varying gifts and abilities, who love and support one another through all the joys and difficulties of their daily lives'.<sup>21</sup>

The report on Synodical Government then goes on to cite the Cameron report on *Episcopal Ministry* which describes the church as existing to 'nurture and sustain the relations of human persons joined, as far as it is possible for us as creatures, in a resemblance to that Trinitarian life'.<sup>22</sup> The Church, then, becomes that arena where human beings seek to model the Trinity in all their harmonious relationships. This Trinitarian life – which was also a particular emphasis of the Turnbull Report<sup>23</sup> – was upheld by the gifts of the spirit. The church is given the capacity to live the divine life as different people embody the diverse gifts given them by the spirit and use them to build up the common life of the church. Thus the Turnbull Report suggests at the end of its theological section: 'In a theology of gracious gift the first words must be gratitude, love, service, humility and trust. In such a way the Church can, in its very structures and processes, embody the mission on which it has been sent.'<sup>24</sup> What is conspicuously lacking through the reports, however, is much of a conception of the Church as a political institution riddled with conflict and division and consequently forced to use the dirty ways of the world to make its decisions.

A theological account of Synodality, it seems to me, needs to start somewhere else. It cannot begin with the ideal of a mutual relationship of

20. The report, *Government by Synod* (London: Church Information Office, 1966), deliberately avoided theology since it sought to create a General Synod from the Church Assembly without the need for parliamentary legislation.

21. Archbishops' Commission on the Organisation of the Church of England, *Working as One Body* (London: Church House Publishing, 1995), §1.6.

22. Archbishops' Group on the Episcopate, *Episcopal Ministry* (London: Church House Publishing, 1990), §19.

23. *Working as One Body*, §1.10-25.

24. *Working as One Body*, §1.25.



divine love as somehow descriptive of human relationships inside or outside the church. The reason for that is quite simple: such language fails to describe the church as it really is, and is little more than wishful thinking. Instead it seems far better to start by addressing the Church as existing under the conditions of sin. At one point this is even recognized in the Report on Synodical Government. There is an 'acknowledgement of the reality of sin which makes it necessary to have a set of checks and balances in the life of the Church, which will serve to prevent the abuse and power and to preserve the comprehensive nature of the Church'.<sup>25</sup> And yet this reveals an underlying misperception about the nature and function of the synod. Rather than making a decision, which may be divisive and express a momentary resolution to an underlying conflict without removing the conflict, a synod is given the task of preserving comprehensiveness. But comprehensiveness may be little more than an Anglican word for conflict. After all, in making a decision, it is often the case that one party is simply shown to be wrong, which no amount of pleading for comprehensiveness can conceal. Those who maintained the legitimacy of slavery were not tolerated as what would nowadays be called 'loyal Anglicans'.

Unity, then, is not always a unity in diversity: there will be limits to comprehensiveness. As was brought home in the women bishops' debate, synods and councils can be cruel things since making decisions always serves to exclude and alienate those on the losing side, even when they accept the decision, however unwillingly. The somewhat nonsensical language of squaring the circle is predicated on the idea that all truths are as good as all others and that somehow all we have to do is to make a decision that allows people not to accept that a decision was made. This may not always be the best strategy: there are times when mutual indwelling and comprehensiveness are impossible. If that is the case, it might be better to be more realistic and work out a different set of theological principles for the exercise of synodality.

This means that a theology of synodality might be far better rooted in an Augustinian understanding of the Church rather than in the doctrine of the Trinity. For Augustine, as he made clear in his anti-Donatist writings, the church is a mixed body, a *corpus permixtum*,<sup>26</sup>

25. *Synodical Government in the Church of England*, §2.8.

26. *brev.* 3.20; *c. Don.* 9.12; *doc. Chr.* 3.32; cf. *civ. Dei* 18.49. The Augustine references are cited according to the schedule in Allan D. Fitzgerald OSA, *Augustine through the Ages: An Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), pp. xxxv-l.



made up of saints and sinners, and because of that it is bound to be a body which is riddled with conflict; there will be competing clamours for authority and assertions of power as the heavenly clashes with the worldly. As an institution both human and divine the church needs to work out structures and mechanisms which might better express its identity as the body of Christ, but through all this it remains an institution composed of human beings in all their sinful complexity. So just because it is a human institution the Body of Christ needs government and constraints: it needs a political theology because it lives under the conditions of human sinfulness. It may be holy but its holiness is always compromised by the issues of power. As the theologian-sociologist David Martin, once wrote about Luther:

Once Luther tried to take monasticism out of the monastery into the world he found the whole enterprise vitiated by a gap, by a break, between the language of the heavenly city and the inherent character of the City of Man. This was hardly a new discovery ... The malignant worm constantly revisits.<sup>27</sup>

What we know about churches from their long history is that people do not always want to live with one another and sometimes they even want to exclude others from their fellowship. This should come as no surprise: it is something that has been there from the time of St Paul and the Acts of the Apostles. Indeed, I think it would be fair to say that the normal state of the church is to be in conflict, which is precisely why it needs structures of oversight and some means for institutionalizing conflict and decision-making. The networks of catholicity in the earliest days of the church emerged not because everybody was in agreement but from precisely the opposite.

### *Legitimacy and Authority*

In all this the question of authority became crucial and was tied up with securing and maintaining the tradition. Increasingly, the authenticity and legitimacy of the tradition were guaranteed by those whose office conferred an authority, but at the same time they were called to their ministry by the local churches and later the local rulers: it was an early truism in the church that equated the *vox populi* with the *vox dei*. When decisions were made, however, it was usually the case that the divisions continue: all councils and synods could do

27. 'The Christian, the Political and the Academic', *On Secularization: Towards a Revised General Theory* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), pp. 185-99 (191).

was to reach agreements at a particular moment of time. The same remains the case: such decisions may or may not be received and may or may not simply lead to further levels of conflict. Synods are unlikely to be structures to build consensus and sometimes their decisions are scarcely important; more frequently they are simply places with rules for engagement which can handle conflict more or less effectively. As Radner writes: 'Councils are not about reaching consensus. Instead, they are about forming a culture of traditions in which actual agreement, in Christian terms, may take place.'<sup>28</sup> Like a parliament, then, a synod will be characterized by a mechanism, or a series of practices, that provides an institutionalization and containment of conflict: obviously this may not always be the case: sometimes there will be schism, and of course occasionally there will be consensus and unity. But for the most part the theology of synods will be the study of 'eristology', the theology of divisions and the principles that allow people to live with such divisions without resorting to violence or schism. There is consequently no need to apologize for the fact that the General Synod of the Church of England is political and a place of frequent conflict. This side of the second coming of Christ every human institution is bound to be political, the church no less than the state.

Just as is the case with the politics of the state, so with any ecclesiastical polity the question of legitimacy is central. This is true for all church polities, Presbyterian, congregational or the hybrid bishop-in-synod that has eventually been adopted by the Church of England and most other provinces of the Anglican Communion. That means that for synods to work they need to be seen to be legitimate; their authority needs to be accepted by the churches they seek to govern. Any power they wield needs to be connected to those over whom they exercise it. Legitimate authority consequently requires a trust in those political institutions which embody the sorts of mechanisms that might serve to alleviate some of the worst conditions of human sin. When such a degree of trust exists, synods will become institutions which, while not necessarily removing divisions or resolving conflict, at least help churches learn to live with them.

### *The Dysfunctionality of Synodical Government in the Church of England*

What I think has happened over the past few years, and possibly even longer in the Church of England, however, is that synods have come

28. *A Brutal Unity*, p. 264.

to be regarded as bodies whose primary task is the promotion of consensus, rather than bodies that allow conflicts to be contained and even used creatively. Synods have become little more than places whose purpose is to support the initiatives of the House of Bishops who have tended to understand their role as a sort of managerial executive standing above the other two Houses in promoting unity in the church. This understanding of synods has resulted in a sense of dysfunctionality. There are some obvious examples which illustrate this approach to synodical government in the Church of England.

First is the rejection of the Anglican Communion Covenant by the majority of English dioceses, which obviously came as an enormous blow to the outgoing Archbishop of Canterbury who had put so much hope in its provisions. Without rehearsing the rights and wrongs of the Covenant, there were particular synodical reasons behind its rejections which had little to do with the matter under discussion: most importantly, the authority of the bishops of the Church of England was at a particularly low ebb in the summer of 2010. To some extent they had brought this upon themselves: their low standing was in part related to the passage of the women bishops' legislation through its earlier stages. The General Synod had appointed a highly qualified and representative group to draft a highly complex piece of legislation which sought to accommodate as many people as possible without losing the coherence of episcopacy. The Legislative Drafting Group carried with it the authority of the General Synod. However, the two Archbishops sought to amend the proposals by making far more concessions to opponents and consequently devaluing the careful legislation that had been prepared: for many, this amounted to an extraordinary breach of trust in the mechanism of the Synod raising serious questions about legitimacy of the archbishops' authority as bishops-in-synod. Church leadership was regarded by some as riding roughshod over the judicious institutionalization of conflict which had been impressively demonstrated by the Drafting Group and the Revision Committee. Such a loss of credibility by the House of Bishops – the archbishops were supported by 23 other bishops – among significant portions of the General Synod made it highly unlikely that the deeply unpopular Covenant proposals would be carried in the dioceses, whatever the bishops thought.

In the subsequent General Synod, in July 2012 the House of Bishops introduced a last-minute amendment to what was intended to be the final debate on the women bishops' measure, despite the express instructions from the February Synod not to introduce any substantial amendments. The insertion of the now notorious Clause 5.i(c) served

to alienate very many of the supporters of women bishops in General Synod and led to an adjournment of the debate.<sup>29</sup> In the discussion of the Covenant there was very little loyalty shown to many bishops by their own diocesan synods partly because the House of Bishops as a body had failed to respect the legitimate authority of the representative synodical structures.

Rule by executive dictat with the expectation of consent has not proved a successful episcopal strategy in the past few years. It might be suggested that the Church of England is still living with the consequences: the rare display of near unanimity in the House of Bishops in the November 2012 vote was far too late to persuade a highly divided House of Laity into a sense of obedience to the guardians of the faith. Indeed, through the course of this synod the House of Bishops has appeared to be exhibiting what Paul Valliere has recently called 'synodophobia', a word borrowed from the Danish theologian Hans Raun Iversen who developed the term in relation to Denmark's somewhat unusual form of 'churchless Christianity'.<sup>30</sup>

### *Listening*

All this related to the notions of 'listening' which have figured prominently in the Church of England and the wider Anglican Communion in recent years: the 'listening process' and continuing indaba have grown out of successive Lambeth Conferences. In particular, Rowan Williams' leadership of the Church of England and of the Anglican Communion has been characterized by a huge effort at listening across the theological divides. As he noted in his retreat addresses given to the Anglican Communion bishops assembled for the Lambeth Conference in 2008, 'the bishop is a linguist' who learns how to speak a language, obeying the rules so that communication occurs. This involves 'listening for the nuances, listening for the hidden music in what someone says or does, listening sometimes for what's beneath the surface as well as what is immediately in front of us. It's a tough experience, and it doesn't happen quickly.' While ultimately this act of listening requires us first to listen to the language that emanates from God's Word, at the same time it is heard in the context of listening to the other voices around

29. For a description of the complex passage of the women bishops' legislation see <http://www.churchofengland.org/our-views/women-bishops.aspx> (accessed 2 December 2012).

30. Cited in Paul Valliere, *Conciliarism: A History of Decision-Making in the Church* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 162.

us. This, he claimed, is modelled on Jesus, who listens to those around him by 'learning our language, listening to our needs, answering our hunger'. Episcopacy was consequently based on the example of Jesus Christ who said something like this: 'Tell me what your need is, and in giving my love to you I will be obeying my Father.' The vocation of the bishop was consequently to 'be a Christlike stranger', 'listening for the true need around us and to hold that together with our listening to God'. The bishop – and this is presumably equally true for all others involved in any form of Christian leadership – listens in a 'stereophonic capacity'. He 'listens with one ear to the word of God, and the other to the languages of those among whom he or she ministers. And somehow the messages come to the one centre of heart and brain, and we live under the law of Christ'.<sup>31</sup>

This approach to listening might have been all well and good for the Anglican Communion and the Lambeth Conference, which, after all, has very few institutionalized mechanisms for listening, but it seems a high-risk strategy for a church that has developed complex and carefully constructed mechanisms to ensure that listening happens. In fact, one of the most important characteristics of General Synod is that it has developed a form of representative government and committee structure that, like parliament, carry a legitimacy that has been conferred on them by the local churches who trust it to bear their many conflicts. While it might be in need of reform and the system of elections in the house of laity may not be ideal, it nevertheless carries with it a legitimacy which is conferred by a system of elections and representation. The idea that a bishop can circumvent synod and somehow listen 'directly', which resembles the role of the 'special adviser' in the governmental system, can be extremely damaging for the legitimacy of representative government. That, however, seems to be what is possibly implied by the somewhat cryptic statement: 'Tell me what your need is, and in giving my love to you I will be obeying my Father.' Obedience to the Father seems to imply obedience to the 'other' even when that other might be unreasonable, or simply wrong. Something like this, it seems to me, is what happened through the course of the debates over women bishops.

Indeed, through almost all his time as archbishop what Rowan Williams has consistently not done is to force his own views on

31. Archbishop's retreat addresses, July 2012 at: <http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/1739/the-archbishops-retreat-addresses-parts-iii-iv-v> (accessed 2 December 2012).

people, or usually even to give a steer – it is as if the task of the bishop forces personal opinions to go ‘on hold’, and he has to make himself vulnerable to listen to the voice of the other party. Williams has seen his role more as a non-executive chairman of the board than as ‘managing director’. His main concern has consistently been to listen to those with whom he most disagrees and to find ways of holding them in the traditionally big tent of Anglicanism, even at the risk of losing the confidence of those with whom he agrees. It may be a laudable quality to listen to those of all views and to ensure that there is a sense of openness around the table, but it is usually the loud voices who get to sit at the table in the first place. For a church that has embraced a system of synodical government this seems to be a profoundly misguided mechanism: there needs to be trust in that government by all parties, including the bishops. After all, those loud voices, together with many other often quieter voices, are represented – perhaps over-represented – in Synod, and it is through the mechanisms of institutionalized conflict which Synods are established to contain, that those voices are best heard. Consequently, one cannot blame the rejection of the women bishops’ legislation on six members of the House of Laity. Instead it seems far more likely that it was the rejection of synodical systems by the leadership of the church in the summer of 2010, and again in the summer of 2012, that sowed the seeds for the November 2012 vote.

#### *Synodophobia and the Representation of the Laity*

The ‘synodophobia’ of the House of Bishops might indicate a second reason for the rejection of the Anglican Covenant. Because of the vagaries of history and the ways in which the Anglican Communion has developed, the concept of Episcopacy that has emerged has frequently failed to give due weight to the role of synods. At a global level Episcopal leadership has often been mistaken for Episcopal authoritarianism or control. Three of the four instruments of unity have no formal place for laity and the ACC remains a body dominated by bishops and clergy (50 out of 76 members). It is probably for this reason, as Valliere writes, that the view of conciliar or synodical authority ‘as inherently antithetical to freedom ... remains powerful in Anglicanism to this day’.<sup>32</sup> The principle of synodality is scarcely developed in the Anglican Communion structures. This means that for those churches, like the Church of England, which are governed by

32. Valliere, *Conciliarism*, pp. 192–93.

synods there can be little sense of what might be called 'conciliar legitimacy' for the Instruments of Communion. The laity, who after all pay for the church, will dislike being told by bishops what they should be doing, whether those bishops are at home or abroad, when they have little or no formal representation. What seems to be required as a necessary precursor to a functioning Covenant is some sort of Pan-Anglican Synod. As Valliere writes, 'the faltering Anglican Communion needs a worldwide council more than ever'.<sup>33</sup> A Council or synod 'would change Anglicanism'<sup>34</sup> by introducing for the first time the principle of lay synodality into the Lambeth Quadrilateral, which, I would suggest, is one of the most misleading documents in Anglican history.<sup>35</sup>

Similarly, within the Church of England, the hard-won rights of the laity cannot be taken for granted. As Archbishop Lang noted in a sermon preached shortly after the creation of the Church Assembly in 1919: 'every man or woman who professes allegiance to the Church is now invested with a personal responsibility for its welfare, for the success or failure of its Divine Mission'. He went on, however, to note that 'all depends upon the spirit, the motive, the purpose, the outlook with which churchpeople enter the new era, upon the character which is impressed upon it at its start'.<sup>36</sup> This I think is equally true for the present day in relation to the General Synod as well as the creation of pan-Anglican structures. What seems to be needed is a reinvigoration of an inclusive conciliarism, which bears 'positive witness to the church as a fellowship transcending office, status and power'.<sup>37</sup> Here I think it is important to note that there are some commentators who have deliberately stressed the continuity of the Church of England through the Reformation as if somehow the office of bishop stayed much the same: Colin Podmore, the outgoing Clerk of Synod, for instance, suggested that very little changed in church polity.<sup>38</sup> And yet this needs to be questioned: the submission of the Clergy to the Crown, as well as the need for Royal Assent for all new Canons effectively created a lay veto over all church legislation. The Royal

33. *Conciliarism*, p. 209.

34. *Conciliarism*, p. 235.

35. See my essay, 'American Catholicity and the National Church: The Legacy of William Reed Huntington', *Sewanee Theological Review* (forthcoming, 2013).

36. Cited in F.A. Iremonger, *William Temple* (London: Oxford University Press, 1948), p. 275.

37. *Conciliarism*, p. 112.

38. Colin Podmore, *Aspects of Anglican Identity*, p. 103.



Supremacy was rapidly assumed by the Sovereign-in-Parliament, which conferred a second level of legitimacy on the Church of England which derived not from the offices of its episcopal leaders, but from the authority stemming from the episcopally led under a divinely anointed monarch (who appointed the bishops in the first place). With the proroguing of Convocation in 1717 it was Parliament, a predominantly lay body, that gained control of the church, and obviously through various transitions this authority is now expressed chiefly through the House of Laity in General Synod. Although it would be unwise to make too much of this, it remains true that the authority of General Synod, especially the House of Laity, still derives ultimately from the anointing of a laywoman.<sup>39</sup>

The hard-won freedom of the laity to express its views and opinions was summarized clearly in a letter to Henry Hoare, one of the nineteenth-century pioneers of the lay representation. When Synods had spoken, the writer claimed, 'I think that by that time a sufficient substratum of public opinion (in the best sense) will have been established, without which no body can act, and against which even Convocation itself ... would be comparatively powerless'.<sup>40</sup> Moving beyond the British Constitution, it is important to note that the authority and legitimacy of the House of Laity is theologically dependent first and foremost on the notion of the primary vocation of all Christians deriving from their baptismal covenant which is expressed in such an understanding of 'public opinion'. Such an approach is not without its critics: Colin Podmore, for instance, has been highly critical of the idea of a Baptismal Covenant as rather liberal and very American.<sup>41</sup> Such a questioning of baptismal theology has implications for the perception of the legitimacy of the House of Laity in the General Synod in relation to the other Houses (even though it is principally the House of Laity that is the heir of Parliamentary Sovereignty rather than the Upper and Lower Houses of Convocation). It would counter the theological direction of the Synod from its beginning. The 1916 report on Church and State, which

39. Kemp, *Counsel and Consent*, pp. 176-231.

40. Letter from an unnamed correspondent to Hoare, 23 October 1851, in J. B. Sweet, *A Memoir of the late Henry Hoare Esq. MA, with a narrative of the church movements with which he was concerned from 1848 to 1865 and more particularly the revival of Convocation* (London: Rivington's, 1865), p. 308.

41. Colin Podmore, 'The Baptismal Revolution in the American Episcopal Church: Baptismal Ecclesiology and the Baptismal Covenant', *Ecclesiology*, 6 (2010), pp. 8-38.

led to the setting up of the Church Assembly, for instance, was very clear about the role of the laity: 'It is of great importance to make it plain that when we are pleading for the restoration of autonomy to the Church, we mean the Church and not only the clergy.'<sup>42</sup> It seems to me that the baptismal vocation expressed through representative synods needs to be at the centre of all synods from the PCC to the 'instruments of unity' of the Anglican Communion. This is challenged, however, by the elevation of the 'historic episcopate' above the principle of synodality in the Lambeth Quadrilateral. Historically, at least, it is clearly the case that the Church of England's model of authority was based on the predominantly lay veto of parliament and later the General Synod rather than the authority of the historic episcopate.<sup>43</sup> A theological justification rests in a shared baptism and seems urgently required for the future of the Anglican Communion as it develops into a synodical and representative church from a loose federation united – or disunited – around the 'historic episcopate'.

### *Conclusion*

What emerges from this discussion is a theology of General Synod that locates it in a political theology of institutionalized conflict which finds its origins in St Augustine. General Synod, like other Synods, is a political body established to bear the divisions and conflicts which are an inherent part of the human condition, and is not some imaginary sub-Trinitarian love-fest which aims at consensus-building or expressing Anglican comprehensiveness, whatever that means.<sup>44</sup> If we have a theologically grounded mechanism of institutionalized conflict, which is representative of the church, it is to that body alone that we should entrust our decision-making. The bishops – like the Government – have an honoured place in the process, but their respect and their trust has to be won through cooperation and engagement with the representative body. Autocracy, however divinely established, is not a good way of gaining friends and influencing people, especially when they are the ones who are paying their dues. Synods may not be ideal but that is how the Church of England manages its conflicts this side of eternity.

42. The Archbishops' Committee on Church and State, *Report* (London: SPCK, 1916), p. 31. It drew extensively on the earlier 1902 report on the laity in the church.

43. Mark Chapman, *Bishops, Saints and Politics: Anglican Essays* (London: T & T Clark, 2007), pp. 9–32.

44. See Mark Chapman, *Anglican Theology* (London: Continuum, 2012), ch. 1.