Re-inventing Anglicanism
A vision of confidence, community and engagement in Anglican Christianity
Bruce Kaye
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Reviewer: Cathy Thomson

Reinventing Anglicanism is a fascinating new book by Bruce Kaye which undertakes the highly laudable task of developing an Anglican ecclesiology appropriate to contemporary Australian culture. The work that emerges is as expansive in its scope as it is complex in its methodology.

It begins by commenting on the internal conflicts within the Anglican Communion which nowadays almost seem to characterise it. Kaye suggests that the causes of these conflicts lie in changed global realities, which have resulted in the transformation of what was essentially a uniform national church into a diverse worldwide communion, as well as in certain inherent features of Anglicanism. He claims that the future of Anglicanism depends on its ability to respond effectively to these causes.

Kaye outlines his methodology at the outset. He will use a ‘tradition-critical’ approach which he will confine to discursive elements within contemporary Anglican rhetoric, namely those emerging from a study of the New Testament (here, specifically, of Paul’s engagement with the church in Corinth), the English Reformation (preferably Hooker’s interpretation of it), and the theological tradition, which he narrows down to two main elements: the incarnational and the trinitarian.

Through these ‘windows’ of the Anglican tradition the reader is invited to engage with three crucial issues for the contemporary age: the issues of confidence, community and engagement with the world. The proposed methodology is complex and results in a tension discernible throughout the work as it struggles to be at once a contextualised theology and a historical exercise of ‘traditioning’. If this approach at first presents as being improbable in its scope, it is proven justified by the scholarly integrity of the work which emerges clearly for the reader as (s)he enters into the disciplined structure of the inquiry. Indeed, one is quickly convinced that any presentation of Anglicanism that is true to its essential character requires a strong analysis of its history as well as its biblical and theological emphases. And it seems clear to Kaye that the integrity of such an approach has not always been evident.

Kaye traces the journey of Anglicanism, maintaining that it is unsatisfactory to claim it originated in the English Reformation of the sixteenth century. He identifies a number of critical ‘moments’ within the history of the English church, spanning the Saxon-Celtic tensions and the Augustinian ‘invasion’, the domestic national imperialism of the Elizabethan Settlement, and the colonial imperialism of later centuries. Kaye is intent upon relativising the Reformation-based historical presentations of Anglicanism which are discernible in the work of Paul Avis and Stephen Sykes and which he views as inadequate for a tradition-critical approach. He seems also concerned to relativise the influence of the Reformation documents which gradually have accrued the status of ‘classic texts’, namely the Book of Common Prayer, the Thirty-nine Articles and the Ordinal, which he coins ‘Reformation
monuments’. He claims these documents should be read with some suspicion of their legal and imperial intent and regarded with circumspection prior to any attempt being made to apply them to contemporary cultural and ecclesiological realities.

Kaye next presents a short social history of Australia. He begins by identifying the central elements of the Australian Settlement (as defined by Paul Kelly) namely, White Australia policy, tariff protection, centralised arbitration of the labour markets, state paternalism and imperial benevolence. He identifies the main discursive tension emerging in the 1980s not as one between Labour and Liberal but between ‘internationalist rationalists’, who wished to unseat the principles of Settlement, and ‘sentimentalist traditionalists’, who wished to preserve them (p 49).

He then examines historically the continuities and discontinuities that have characterised the relationship between Anglicanism and Australian social institutions, by examining public policy with respect to education and the separation of church and state, as well as evaluating the church’s connection with public culture.

However, it is Hugh Mackay’s analysis that leads Kaye to assert that the contemporary tension both socially and politically for Australia is that of managing diversity and ascertaining within the context of diversity the personal values and aspirations of Australian society. In the midst of such a culture of diversity Kaye identifies two challenges for the Anglican Church. For individuals there is the question of how ‘to live Christianly in this society’ as citizens, members of social institutions and people in relationship with others. For the church the challenge is to ‘reinvent community’ in a society which is not at all sure what community is (p 87).

Chapter three is an exercise in suggesting how attending to a tradition-critical analysis of their faith can provide Anglicans with confidence to reinvent themselves and engage with contemporary Australian society. Kaye begins characteristically with an examination of the confidence to be found in the church in Corinth and of the ways in which Paul encouraged that confidence. Such a reading suggests the strength of the Christian moral tradition, which is based on seeking after the wisdom of God and prioritising love as the main tenet of Christianity. Interestingly, Kaye also suggests that the texts on the diversity of gifts within the Corinthian community point to the possibility that diversity is actually a mark of God’s providence. He ends this section with the cautionary question for Anglican communities: ‘Would a stranger know that God is present here?’ (p 100).

Kaye maintains that an examination of the Reformation can give Anglicans confidence to understand uniformity in its historical context. It is clear that the political and legal intentions of the Reformation documents were conformity with the royal supremacy and with the episcopal system of church government which legitimised it. However, this does not diminish the reality of the presence of subversive religious and theological impulses in the interpretations of these documents by writers such as Hooker. Kaye is not explicit in encouraging subversive interpretation or appraisal of contemporary church government or authority structures. The suggestion does, however, seem to hover under the surface of the text and is to some extent clarified in the final chapter when references are made to the growing influence of primatial conferences within the global communion to the detriment of the representational councils, such as the Anglican Consultative Council.

Kaye closes this section by insisting also that the Trinity is not to be understood as a model for application but as a heuristic tool which helps us explain or interpret our
experience of God. One wonders if here too there is an implied resistance of the
author to any suggestion of employing the doctrine of the Trinity to legitimise
particular conceptions of hierarchical government within the Anglican Church.

Kaye attempts next to grapple with the question of community and refers to a range of
social commentators from Aristotle through the nineteenth-century writer Ferdinand
Tonies to John Kingdom, who critiqued the social implications of Thatcherism, to
Robert Nisbet, who Kaye claims has written the classic twentieth-century commentary
on community, to Adrian Hastings, who wrote in the last two decades about
nationhood. Kaye’s scholarship is clearly wide-ranging, not only in the fields of
history and theology but also in the areas of sociology and political science.

His reading of these various scholars leads Kaye to assert that the task of reinventing
the church requires an examination of four key characteristics of contemporary
society—difference, connection, direction and institutions—and he turns to another
expansive range of scholars to provide commentary on these areas of exploration.
This leads him to affirm the existence of diversity and difference and to support
intentional pluralistic models for society, while recognising that a sense of belonging
is difficult to achieve within such social configurations. Kaye speaks of
the importance of cultivating strong leadership to address and manage such pluralism but
insists with Alastair Mant that this leadership should relate to its constituents within
the terms of a tertiary relationship. This is a form of relationship which ‘exists within
a framework shaped by the presupposing agreed values, whereby one person serving
those values leads and influences another also committed to these same values’ (p
145). Some important implications of this conception of leadership and its existence
within a framework of shared moral values are that leadership should be persuasive
rather than coercive, and that social institutions should be conceived as ‘patterns of
sustained relationships between people and/or things which exist through time’ and
which ‘imply moral values’ and ‘foster those moral values’ (p 149).

Again through a dialogue between these social models and elements within the church
at Corinth and the Reformation and trinitarian theology, several practical suggestions
for the future of the Anglican Church are suggested. These are that there should be
devolution of power within church structures, the exercise of individual conscience
should be encouraged and respected, the conciliar movement within the church should
be strengthened, and the principle of representation should be upheld. Leadership
should be visionary, and the apostolic succession should be interpreted as the ministry
of the whole church and not simply of its ordained members.

Kaye concludes by suggesting that Anglicans generally should see themselves as
visionaries and should have the confidence to be so, but to also be aware of the
importance of real engagement with others by means of respectful dialogue. Several
principles of godly interaction are once again deduced from the Corinthian church.
These are having a sense of one’s Christian community as having a proud and distinct
moral identity, based on its self-understanding of belonging to Christ, while offering
hospitality to the community through full engagement with it.

Kaye states plainly that the imperial impulses within the Anglican heritage are
unhelpful for today’s church and that they need to be radically ‘reinterpreted and
reconceptualised’ (p 215). However, he never succumbs to the temptation of replacing
imperial authority with ‘multiple authorities’, preferring instead to see within
Anglicanism a model of authority that is both ‘moderated and community-supported’
Kaye also makes the interesting assertion that the Reformation had little impetus towards evangelism and mission, and that these are important for connection between church and society today.

There follow two interesting discussions. The first concerns God’s providence and the nature of contingency. This is not satisfactorily resolved by Kaye with reference to Oliver O’Donnovan’s work, the discussion of which becomes bogged down in the tension between providence and the contingent nature of political power. The second is a discussion of Stanley Hauerwas’s concept of conflict resolution, pertinent in a divided world. The latter is most interesting, as it posits an understanding of conflict as residing within an epistemological crisis, which will not be resolved by referring to a universal ethic but by working the issues through within what Kaye calls a traditions-based rationality (p 228).

I found *Reinventing Anglicanism* to be an utterly compelling book, but I must question its accessibility to non-Anglicans and to those who could easily be daunted by the sheer scope of its subject matter, the intricacy of its argumentation, and the complexity of its methodology.

For Anglicans this work has the potential of freeing up those of us who may have sensed the stultifying tendencies within our tradition but who are less equipped than Bruce Kaye to articulate these in terms of imperial impulses. I would highly recommend it to those who are keen to develop for themselves an interpretation of the Anglican tradition which has inherent integrity and who are serious about the interface between Anglicanism and Australian society at the beginning of the twenty-first century.