

Some thoughts on Identity in Anglican Religious Life

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EVERY HISTORICAL CONTEXT colours the identity of movements that arise within it. The revival of formally constituted Religious communities within the Church of England in the 1840s, and then in other parts of the Anglican Communion in the following decades, is no exception. The timing of the revival can be associated with particular sociological and theological factors. So can the evolution of community identity. Communities were shaped by the challenges they faced in the initial decades of their development. Not only that, but their collective identity as Anglican communities became a blueprint for many others which followed in later periods. Even those founded initially with different parameters or ideals or structures found themselves pressured to conform to the existing patterns, especially as these appeared to deliver vocations, achievements—and a gradual acceptance both inside and outside the Church.

However, there was a decline in vocations in the second half of the twentieth century, parallel to which came a closing of corporate institutions as the state began to take over the educational, health and social services which communities had provided. The Church itself also saw a drop in membership and practice, requiring a radical reappraisal of its rôle. In a new era, the nineteenth-century model of Religious Life was no longer appropriate. The story of Anglican Religious in more recent decades then is one of emergence from the Victorian 'prototype'.

Reflecting on the historical identity of Anglican Religious Life can be an aid to understanding this complex process, and this essay suggests one way of doing that. Not all factors relate to every community, but an overview can be helpful in mapping the background to the contemporary challenges which Religious Life faces.

What did the re-emergence of Anglican Religious communities happen in the 1840s?

First comes the reason most frequently cited: that the Tractarians encouraged the establishment of communities as a part of their desire to reawaken the Church of England to its Catholic heritage.

In the early 1830s, the Tractarian leaders began their campaign against the spread of liberalism in the Church, both the political liberalism which was leading to state interference in ecclesiastical affairs, and the liberalism of the new theological ideas and methodology (mainly from Germany) which was gaining credibility in academic debate. In order to protect the Church from the perceived threat, these Churchmen had to do more than protest and be reactive: they had to provide an alternative. This they did by looking back to Patristic theology and the tradition of the Church. The theology of the Fathers was heavily influenced by monasticism and its insights, and the significance of Religious Life was clear to the Tractarians. From this perspective, the re-establishment of Religious communities was essential for the spiritual health of the Church.

The *second* reason was political. For generations, Roman Catholicism had been linked politically with Britain's enemies (primarily France and Spain) and therefore anything associated with 'Romanism' was suspect. The cry of 'No Popery' was a potent one. As Religious Life was intimately connected in the public mind with Roman Catholicism, hostility to the idea of communities within the Church of England was fierce.

But the period of the French Revolution raised an enemy far worse than Roman Catholicism. The radical leaders of France and their ideas were such a danger in the minds of the British ruling class that Roman Catholic priests and monks and nuns who fled from them were welcomed as refugees. The enemy's enemy became a friend. Ironically, the old cry of 'No Popery' would be revived at the time of the Tractarians, but the shift of opinion in parts of the Church of England had already happened. Religious Life was no longer shackled by the old taboos.

Third, the Romantic Movement had produced, both in academia and more generally in British culture, a rejection of the rationalism of the eighteenth century ('the Age of Reason') and in its wake came an admiration for the pre-Reformation era. Medieval gothic became fashionable; and monks and nuns became a part of the medieval imagery which appealed to a large section of Victorian opinion. Although the favour shown to the externals of Religious Life as a consequence was not particularly deep or comprehending of its purposes, it nevertheless helped to make the revival of real communities less threatening. The concept of monastic life may have remained eccentric to many, but it was no longer alien.

Finally, there was the social reason, and perhaps the most significant of all. The Industrial Revolution—and the accompanying increase in population—had produced by the 1840s an urban poverty on a scale previously unimagined. The visibility of the squalor and hardship that the new capitalist economy created was a grave challenge not just to governments but to the Church: for the Church had the pastoral responsibility for all those living in the new city slums, which had grown quickly and haphazardly. Calls for sisterhoods to help the clergy to respond to the pastoral crisis predated the Tractarian movement. With the other factors already mentioned, the need overcame the prejudices and the movement to found communities developed rapidly. In founding hospitals and schools and providing other services to the poor and destitute, Religious communities provided on behalf of the Church one powerful response to the harsh economic realities of contemporary society.

What corporate identity did Anglican Religious communities develop as a result?

There are many factors relevant to the development of any particular community, but, from the reasons given above, we can consider three consequences which broadly influenced most Anglican foundations.

1. Achievement and acceptance through works

The acceptance of Religious communities among Anglicans was bound up with the work they did. The heroic and self-sacrificial action of sisters, whether during the Crimean War or cholera epidemics or in slum parishes, overcame the suspicions evident in the earliest years of the revival. The initial failure of attempts to found men's communities was partly owing to the problems they had in emulating the nursing and educational services which sisters were providing. Men did not need to be Religious to do pastoral or teaching work as they could be parish priests and curates, whilst activities like nursing were seen as female occupations.

Not only was the social work seen as the justification for Religious Life, but the institutions which communities created—schools, hospitals, orphanages, refuges—were the source of their public achievement and recognition. The valuable services these institutions provided were the communities' first-line defence against criticism from both inside and

outside the Church. A fierce Evangelical might rage against the vows and traditions of Religious communities, but could not credibly attack the work they did. On an intellectual level, one of the strongest criticisms of the Religious Life was that monks and nuns were ‘parasites’ on society, an argument articulated by the philosopher David Hume in the eighteenth century. This was the kernel of much anti-Catholic rhetoric against communities, but it was hollow when pitted against the achievements of Anglican Religious in the nineteenth century.

Being ‘useful to society’ became then a deeply-embedded aspect of Anglican identity, and loyalty to the founder or foundress’s vision maintained it. It became an essential ingredient of new foundations. It was as true in other parts of the Anglican Communion as in England: for example, the communities founded in South Africa in the late nineteenth century (the Society of St John the Divine, the Community of the Resurrection of Our Lord, the Community of St Michael & All Angels).

The emergence of cloistered contemplative communities was hampered by this factor. Some, like the Servants of Christ or the Benedictine community now at Malling Abbey, evolved from ‘active’ communities. Others, like the Society of the Holy Trinity, had a group of ‘contemplatives’ in one house of the order whilst other sisters were engaged in social work. Those communities that did emerge in the twentieth century as enclosed did so because they remained relatively ‘hidden’ and unpublicised; they also had powerful protectors within the Church, often a male ‘active’ community, to shield them. As late as the 1940s, the Freeland Clares were founded as the Second Order of the Society of St Francis, and were therefore regarded by many as praying for the First Order brothers. Their prayer was a ‘work’ to support the social work of their brethren. The contemplative life for men waited even longer to be established. The Benedictine community at Pershore in the early 1920s, which was not intended as an order founded for social work, nevertheless felt obliged to send brothers to Africa to serve the Church’s missionary work when it was still numerically weak and its members young in the Religious Life.

The ‘achievements’ were however related to the historical context in which these communities were founded, both inside and outside the Church. The strength and success therefore of the revival of Religious Life became for many inextricably linked with those particular achievements. In doing so, Anglican Religious Life was given an identity, one held strongly both by members of communities and, equally importantly, by supporters in the Church.

2. A Gothic emphasis in piety and externals

The founding of communities in an age when the neo-Gothic fashion was at its height meant that most Anglican communities were associated with a Gothic piety. Many of their purpose-built convents were designed in this fashion, and these buildings were permanent features of their life. However many small branch houses a community might have, the ‘Mother house’ was usually a solid Victorian mansion of large proportion with pointed windows and turrets or castellations. Even those of a simpler design were like fortresses, the ‘walls’ of the popular view of convents, imposing and somewhat secretive. Some buildings were classics of their type, others were closer to medieval pastiches. But whether good or bad, they defined communities, and continued to place them in a particular time and context long after that era was gone.

Similarly, some communities evolved elaborate and voluminous habits, which bathed their wearers in an aura of mystery. Some sisters even had ‘trains’ to the skirts of their habits, justified by saying that a sister would not then show the back of her shoes when she had to lean over a bed in a hospital ward. Even amongst communities for men, a similar concern for Gothic externals could appear—one needs only to look at photographs of the Caldey Island monks to

recognise this. Not that these accoutrements were of themselves injurious to Religious Life, but again they were a factor in placing Anglican Religious Life in a particular context. As secular clothing developed, particularly for women, along different lines, the fuss of Gothic details linked Religious with a bygone age.

Then in worship too, the ‘fight’ for the introduction of ceremonial and what were termed ‘full Catholic privileges’, which raged in the Church of England, also involved communities. Many convent chapels adopted—sometimes even secretly—practices and ornaments which were controversial in the context of the Victorian Church. The very taking of vows was a source of dissension with the local bishop in some dioceses well into the twentieth century. Worship in some communities became elaborate with many ‘frills’ (as they were known), and the resulting liturgical splendour was as much a part of the Gothic revival as the architectural flourishes of the new convent buildings. The struggle for Catholic worship made those liturgical forms a significant element in corporate identity.

Many Anglican communities therefore found both their way of life, and their image to those outside it, defined by all these Gothic trappings. It became difficult to escape the expectations they imposed. Potential recruits arrived—even in Victorian times—with a fantasy idea of the life in community, based on a psychological projection of the lives and practices of medieval monks and nuns. Outside the convents, the caricatures of what being a Religious meant were hard to dispel. Religious found themselves saddled in the public mind with an identity which ran counter to their evolving work and ethos. Even if the Religious changed, the expectations of both their supporters and critics frequently did not.

3. *Rebellion & struggle*

The other factor in defining identity for Anglican Religious was the result of the very struggle for acceptance in the early days. The title of Donald Allchin’s well-known book about the early years of the revival sums this up: *The Silent Rebellion*. For many of those who pioneered these communities saw themselves as essentially counter-cultural. They were defying the lack of sympathy for Religious Life within society as a whole, and also defying the prevailing attitude amongst bishops and the authorities of the Church. Religious Life was not regulated systematically by the Church (as it was among Roman Catholics for example)—indeed the mechanisms of consultation between communities and bishops were not ordered until well into the twentieth century. So the founders were in practice able to develop communities under their own personal vision. For many individuals, their vocation had also led them into defiance of the wishes of their families. The Religious who pioneered Anglican foundations were therefore courageous individuals, unafraid of criticism, strong enough to resist social and personal pressure. The faint-hearted soon gave up: those who persevered were self-sufficient and single-minded.

The consequence of this was that many Anglican foundations were vigorously independent in spirit, and not easy to influence from outside. They had little to do with each other and there was little open co-operation between communities, even where there might be sympathy. The spirit that animated communities, and united the members as a group, was one of determined resistance to outside interference. Standing up to opposition was part of the attractive adventure of the life. Criticism could be dismissed as partisan propaganda. As a result, superiors could become very powerful, and ‘personal rule’ was not uncommon. All this held the danger of making communities inward-looking and reliant on particular individuals, creators of their own tradition rather than seeing themselves as a part of a centuries-old tradition stretching back to the earliest years of the Church as a whole.

The crisis of this identity

We have identified three factors then in the corporate identity of Anglican Religious: a strong emphasis on ‘works’; an attachment to the neo-Gothic in worship and externals; a spirit of independence and resistance to change from outside. None of these aspects of identity were in themselves wrong. Indeed, they were the bedrock of the ‘success’ of the revival of Religious Life. They anchored the early communities and helped them grow rapidly, even in a hostile cultural climate. They were therefore commendable and appropriate to the times in which they were forged.

However, it was the very significance and value of these identity factors which made them difficult to modify or build upon in a later era. Whatever is deeply ingrained as the basis of ‘success’ and growth in one era is hard to dislodge in the next, when perhaps a different approach may be more appropriate.

The crisis for Anglican Religious communities began around the First World War. The effects of that conflict on social attitudes and expectations were enormous. Many trends that had already begun were accelerated, such as the emancipation of women and the decline in Church attendance. The gradual incursion of the state into areas of education and health provision was also confirmed. For example, 1919 saw the establishment of State Registered Nurses. Nursing had been established as a profession by the work of Religious communities—indeed, much of its structure and nomenclature still echo today the traditions of Religious Life. Even pioneers who were not Religious, such as Florence Nightingale, had learned much of their practice from communities like the Nursing Sisters of St John the Divine (founded 1848). Sister Henrietta Stockdale CSM&AA founded professional nursing in South Africa. Yet, after 1919, women who wished to follow this vocation could do so easily and respectably without joining a Religious community.

Such developments began the decline in Religious vocations to ‘active’ communities, and, as the decades past, communities found it increasingly difficult to staff their institutions. First, they coped by employing ‘seculars’, but eventually most of their schools and hospitals had either to close or else be handed over to the state or another authority. The plethora of new government regulations demanding a range of standards in buildings, methods and the training of personnel added to the pressures. By the 1960s, most communities could no longer sustain the running of institutions.

This was also the product of new social attitudes. Corporate achievement was no longer the most significant goal. The first half of the twentieth century had been a time for organisations and uniforms and being part of a team. Not just Religious communities, but organisations such as the Boy Scouts and the Mothers’ Union flourished. Joining a group and wearing a uniform were encouraged. Political parties were not immune, but the results were catastrophic: fascists and communists between them were instrumental in destroying democracy throughout much of Europe. Even on the edge of the continent, Britain had its black shirts and ‘reds’ and fighting in the streets. Overwhelming group identities in politics led to rivalry and aggression, and ultimately into world war.

In contrast, the post-1945 era would turn its back on such identities and instead encourage individualism. Aided by the new insights of psychology, it was personal fulfilment and achievement that were emphasized. The effect on communities was wide-ranging. Many brothers and sisters became aware of the need for personal achievement. It led to some fragmentation in community life. Individual ministries, Religious living alone on ‘detached service’, and less attachment to the symbols of common identity such as the habit became common.

In such a world, the corporate worship which had defined the communities as much as their institutions also became a matter of controversy. As the Church embraced liturgical

reform in the 1960s, many communities found it hard to adapt. Some of the disagreements might seem unimportant when looking back, but if the issue of identity is fully appreciated, the anguish of some Religious can be understood. Much of what was abandoned had been at the heart of what they had been taught, sometimes by those who had struggled so valiantly to establish the rituals in the first place. What to some might seem like ‘extras’ were to others the symbol of all that they believed and had sacrificed so much to follow. It might be an outmoded identity for some, but to those who cherished these traditions, they were *their* identity, and irreplaceable components of Religious Life. Equally, changing or abandoning habits and/or moving from much-loved buildings were bewildering and disheartening decisions. The changes split communities and some Religious left the life because of too much change or else too little. Some leaders were left drained and despairing trying to reach a consensus amidst the confusion.

Finally, we must consider what happened to the spirit of rebellion. As the Catholic movement became increasingly strong amongst Anglicans, reaching its greatest influence between the two world wars, Religious Life seemed less and less like a protest. Ironically, the very ‘success’ of Religious, which brought increased respect, meant that they were more and more identified with authority. Some Religious became bishops, others began running parishes. The identification of the nun’s habit with the headmistress, hospital matron, Sunday school instructor or other authority figure became commonplace. This authority of Religious was regularly exercised over children, so that even those who ceased to be church-goers as adults retained this image in their minds. The leaders of communities were shown a reverence, even held in awe, sometimes bowed and curtsied to like monarchs. The very terms, like ‘Father Superior’ or ‘Mother General’, had a resonance way beyond the communities they served. By the middle of the twentieth century, Religious were no longer at the margins, mavericks or eccentrics, but, willingly or not, they had become associated with the structures of power in the Church. No longer at odds with bishops and clergy, as so often in mid-Victorian times, it could be argued that they had become ‘clericalised’ in popular culture.

In this context to join a Religious community was hardly to rebel. On the contrary, a vocation could be seen in the opposite light, as an act of conformity to tradition. It came to appear counter to the increasingly popular notions of ‘freedom’ and ‘individuality’. If you wished to rebel, you ‘did your own thing’, not join a group with a uniform. The true freedom of the vows was hence obscured by the popular connection of Religious Life with the past. To wear a habit and live in a large Victorian building under a set of ‘old-fashioned’ rules appeared to a post-war generation as ‘living in the past’. The truth of Religious Life was far removed from such ideas, but this was the identification that clung.

The historical pillars of the identity of many Anglican Religious that this essay has considered therefore collapsed. The process began slowly after 1918 and then accelerated in the post-1945 period. Corporate identity through institutional works and achievements, through a Gothic style piety and worship, and the spirit of rebellion was no longer possible. Vocations declined, and communities shrank in numbers. Some ceased to exist altogether. For, with no corporate identity, there was the question of why stay in a Religious community? Why join in the first place? Individual achievement could be just as easily pursued outside. The result was that some for whom the heart of their vocation was a desire for prayer felt called to the hermit life—there was an upsurge in such vocations from the 1960s. Others whose concern was primarily social witness left the Religious Life to become parish priests, teachers, health or social workers. Those who stayed, and the smaller number who now joined, were left pondering on this question of identity.

This crisis of identity has taken a generation to work through. It has taken time to shake off the weight of the past. It is not a matter of inventing a new identity. It is about entering deeper into the full tradition of Religious Life to *renew* identity. At the heart of this

understanding is that Religious Life is not primarily about creating institutions or achieving results in social projects, although if these things happen they are commendable. The heart of the life is in relationships. Religious Life is about a set of relationships: with God, with one another, with the community and with society as a whole. It is the commitment to these relationships, not particular works or achievements, which are the witness. Religious Life is prophetic when it reveals to society the exploration of these relationships, the fruits of the commitment. These relationships are the task of all the baptised, but Religious live them in a particular and intense way because they take vows. The vows—in the form of obedience, stability and conversion of life, or of poverty, chastity and obedience—are the means by which the greater intensity is attained.

The essays in this book are contributions from Anglican Religious, from a variety of communities, which reflect on this quest for renewal of identity. From an historical viewpoint, this introduction would suggest three areas in which this quest is taking place.

The first is the task of integrating individual experience into community life. With the strong emphasis on corporate identity from running institutions now gone, and the tendency to individualism that succeeded it proving insufficient to hold communities together, the challenge is to recreate corporate mission without losing the insights of individual ministry. Finding the balance between pursuing a personal ministry and contributing to a shared identity is crucial.

Second comes the adjustment to being numerically smaller. The fading away of large-scale public works has left a legacy of anxiety, for some even a sense of failure and decline. This has brought doubt and a crisis of confidence. However, the achievements of the past brought communities power and visibility, which has had its dangers. Smaller communities have a flexibility and opportunity, which larger groups may not have. Smallness may be seen as limiting options, but it can also be regarded as liberating. Anglican communities in the 1850s were small, but their commitment flourished in the possibilities this gave them. They had more freedom then to change location, adapt the Rule, pioneer new ministries, than they had fifty years later when they were numerically far stronger.

Linked to this is the understanding that the values of Religious Life are witnessed within society by a network of oblates, Third Order members, associates and other friends of communities. These groups have grown in recent years, even as First Order numbers have declined. Within the Church, Religious are therefore at the heart of a sharing of values that goes way beyond monasteries and convents. If relationships are the heart of the vocation to Religious Life, then the vowed life is not primarily about social achievements but about witnessing to values. The influence and insights and wisdom of Religious are significant and communities have a theological contribution to make. The study of history would suggest that statement is as true in the twenty-first century as it was in the nineteenth.

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