Anglicanism: A Middle Way

Christianity came to Britain as early as the 1st century, brought by merchants and artisans from Rome. From its early beginnings, it would become a distinctive form of Christianity, shaped by the traditions and practices of those who were indigenous to the British Isles and less influenced by the Church of Rome than the Christianity that developed on the Continent. It would be marked by a spirit of independence that was to become as irritant to Rome and an enigma to Protestants.

Today there are more than 85 million people around the world that are part of national and regional Churches which are collectively known as the Anglican Communion. The word Anglican originates from *ecclesia anglicana*, meaning the English Church; however, Anglicans come from numerous countries, cultures and national backgrounds, the majority of whom do not speak English as their native language. Worldwide they constitute the third largest Christian communion after the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church.

But who are the Anglicans? and what distinguishes their beliefs from other Christians?

* Conversion of life

Becoming a Christian begins with an encounter with God through the risen Christ. It involves changing the direction of one’s life and orienting it toward Christ himself. But this is not a singular event; it is a lifelong endeavour to be transformed into the likeness of Christ. We learn to respond to divine grace through prayer and the sacraments, through the study of scripture, worship and the fellowship of other Christian believers. We are changed, even as we ourselves participate in God’s mission to bring all things under his just and merciful rule.

* Deeply rooted in the faith of the one catholic and apostolic Church

Anglicans have a strong sense of continuity with the past. Our faith is based on the Bible, the early writings of the Church Fathers and traditions that date back to the time of the Apostles. This is most clearly seen in our worship, where ancient prayers, creeds and practices are still very much alive. For instance, Anglicans have retained the three orders of ordained ministry of bishops (*episcopacy*), priests (*priesthood*) and deacons (*diaconate*). Bishops are ordained in the historic lineage of the ancient Church (*apostolic succession*). Ours is a liturgical and sacramental tradition which finds a clear resonance with most other Christians.

For some, the most important distinction between the Anglican Churches and the Roman Catholic Church is the question of authority. In Roman Catholicism, the Bishop of Rome, commonly known as the Pope, presides over a Church where authority is highly centralised. By contrast, the Archbishop of Canterbury is regarded as [*primus inter pares*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Primus_inter_pares#Anglican_Communion) (Latin for ‘first among equals’), the spiritual leader and symbol of unity for Anglicans worldwide.

At the same time, there are aspects of Anglicanism that resemble those of churches that have emerged from the time of the Reform: for example, worship in the language of the people, the importance of the Bible as a foundation for faith and doctrine, the option for clergy to marry and access of women to the ordained ministries of the Church.

It is because of these that Anglicanism has often been viewed as a Middle Way *(via media)* in Western Christianity between the Roman Catholic Church and Protestantism.

* Honouring Diversity

While the foundations of Anglicanism remain strong, we believe that many points of doctrine will be subject to ongoing discernment and discussion. Many people would say that this is Anglicanism’s greatest strength: the willingness to live with the wide variety of faith and practice that make up our Church. This is also what provokes the most debate among Anglicans. There have been strongly held views on many matters throughout our history, most recently in regard to questions on biblical authority, human sexuality and the ordination of women. With no one centralised authority, Anglicans have had to listen to one another more deeply and with mutual respect of our differences.

This has not always been an easy process. But Anglicans, like all Christians, are called to strive for the unity of the Church. It is here that the Eucharist, which is at the very heart of our worship, instructs us in what it means to be one Bread and one Cup for one another and for the life of the world. Of course, we can differ on any number of matters. What is important is our shared essential unity in Christ.

God is the Mystery beyond all knowing. Anything less is not the God of the Church. This means that no one religious or spiritual tradition can fully grasp all that there is to God. This conviction has helped Anglicans to readily engage with other churches, religions and belief systems in the pursuit of truth.

* Finding a Balance

Anglicans look to three sources of authority in formulating doctrine: scripture, tradition and reason. These three sources uphold and critique each other in a dynamic way. Scripture is a primary source for all Christian teaching and reflection. Tradition passes down from generation to generation the Church's ongoing experience of God's presence and activity. Reason is understood to include the human capacity to discern the truth in both rational and intuitive ways. It is not just logic. It also accounts for experience. Each of the three sources of authority must be perceived and interpreted in light of the other two.

The Anglican balance of authority has been characterized as a ‘three-legged stool’ which is unstable if any one of the legs is not upright. It can be distinguished from a tendency in Roman Catholicism to overemphasise tradition in respect to scripture and reason or in some Protestant churches which overemphasise scripture relative to tradition and reason. The Anglican balancing of the sources of authority has been criticised as clumsy and difficult to manage. Anglicans tend to avoid extremes by living the via media. It has also helped us to tolerate and comprehend opposing viewpoints instead of imposing tests of orthodoxy or accusing heresy.

Of course, none of these traits are exclusive to Anglicanism, but they do describe some of the Anglican spirit. The best way to understand our tradition has always been to ‘Come and see,’ as Jesus told his first followers, and to experience it for oneself.