

The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity: In Praise of Moderation

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"Methodists are Baptists who have been taught to read" is a quote often attributed to the American humorist and writer Mark Twain. It is a wry remark, and often makes Presbyterians chuckle. Methodists retort that a Presbyterian is someone who finds Methodism too racy by half. Anglicans stand aloof from trading such quips. They have been serving the world with a pronounced air of superiority since 597AD. Why bother with non-conformists, they ask, when it is obvious that your faith already effortlessly conforms to all the God requires. As the old Episcopalian joke goes, we don't need to bother with the Decade of Evangelism, as anyone who deserves to be Anglican will already be saved.

Once upon a time, denominational names mattered a great deal, although their origin is often forgotten. It remains the case that very few denominations chose their own name – Christened themselves, so to speak. 'Anglicanism' is a term that was popularised by James VI of Scotland and contains a degree of mocking irony. Similarly, 'Anabaptists' had their family name bestowed upon them by their detractors. Likewise, Lutherans and Calvinists. Equally, 'Methodist' is can also be read as a dubious compliment – another mildly derogatory 'nick name'. 'Roman Catholic' is arguably an attempt to meekly particularise the universal.

Yet now, in the twenty-first century, the Ecumenical movement has not yet sighted the promised land of Unity. If anything many churches seem to be specialising in fragmentation and exacerbating their differences. Arguments over gender, sexuality and other issues seem to mock the prayer of Jesus, 'that they may all be one' (John 17: 21). So, does the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity have anything to say to this? I think it does. For Christians have been quietly and determinedly working away for unity for several decades. We don't accept our divisions as normal or desired. We work very hard and pray for them to be overcome.

To some, this Week of Prayer for Christian Unity might seem normal – an opportunity, even. Capitalist culture and churchgoing embraced the free market long ago. The rejection of any religious establishment opened the way for competition between individual churches and then produced the extraordinary organisational and theological creativity that distinguished the US from all previous Christian societies. The price of this exuberance was doctrinal incoherence. If there is a bespoke Christian faith for everyone, the faith will mean almost anything, and therefore almost nothing.

And this has effects that ripple out far beyond believers. A religion that is responsive to the pressures of the market becomes profoundly fractured. In the end, a market-driven religion gives rise to a market-driven approach to truth. There were churches on both sides of the American Civil War, the slavery debate in Britain, and churches on both sides of the Civil Rights struggle. As Martin Luther King observed (and whose day we also marked at this time of year), America is never more segregated than on a Sunday morning.

So, what of Christian unity? Specifically in Anglican terms, it is perhaps worth pointing out that Anglican polity is, first and foremost, a social vision that has ecclesial consequences. It is not an ecclesial polity with (accidental) social consequences. The Elizabethan Settlement was a social vision for breadth, inclusiveness, charity, generosity and diversity – it produced the *Prayer Book*. The *Prayer Book* did not produce that society. The *Prayer Book* is not the cause of settlement: it is just one result of that settlement.

Settlement is a tiny seed, to be sure. But Anglicanism is not alone in being a social vision first, and a church second. I think of Methodists, and in particular, a word used of their polity in governance: the word is ‘Moderator’. It is not the only church to be governed by a Moderator. But the word implies that ‘moderation’ - the practice and virtue of being intentionally and dispositionally ‘moderate’ - might be incredibly important for social and ecclesial life.

The word was originally used of weather and other physical conditions. But the one who moderates is the one who works within peaceable bounds, and practices restraint. The Moderator ‘regulates, mitigates, restrains, tempers...’; one who ‘abates excessiveness’ and gently but firmly ‘presides’ over a potentially divisive debates’. In his book, *Faces of Moderation*, Aurelian Craiutu argues that moderation is not an ideology, but rather a disposition. It is a composite of character and virtues that does not divide the world into light and dark, true and false, good or bad. At the same time, moderation does not accept everything as equal and valid.

It does not, for example, split the difference between racism and inclusion, or homophobia and tolerance. It accepts that some opinions and ideologies are irredeemable, and should be rejected. Rather, moderation works at unity and harmony. And it accepts that on our own, we cannot be entirely right or good. We need each other, and we need to value and cherish our differences - and sometimes our disagreements - if we are to progress.

In an earlier book, Craiutu argued that moderation was a virtue for courageous minds. Tacitus mourned the lost virtue of moderation - calling moderation 'the most difficult lesson of wisdom'. Being a moderate, a bit like being ecumenical, is not weak-willed or sloppily liberal: it is about being charitable, generous and tough-minded. In other words, a difficult blend. But this is the calling of all denominations in the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity: to live as generous moderators and peace-builders.

We are taught that perfect love casts out fear; but perfect fear casts out love. Inclusivity was, and is, a deep *value* rooted in nothing less than the gospel. Incorporation is on the heart of God. It drives the vision of the early church - a place where there is neither Jew nor gentile, slave nor free, male or female - but all are one in Jesus Christ.

God knows we need moderation in our world right now – lots of it. Moderation may seem like a tiny seed. But we have witnessed many divisive things of late, not just in the church, but also in the wider world. So in the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, we do well to remember that what Jesus inaugurated was eternal: "the just and gentle rule of the Kingdom of God" – inclusive, prophetic, pastoral, kind, wise and foolish. And to live and practice this most taxing of blends: we need to become seeds of moderation, and God's most generous moderators, to settle and establish his kingdom.

The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity incites us to be a people of fervent faith and calm temperament; a people of moderation and passionate commitment; and we are invited to be agents of this in the world. The diversity within the wider church has always been one of its most glorious treasures, and a true 'sign' that no denomination ever fully reflects the mystery of God. Ecumenism celebrates this and has created a variety of possibilities: staying within a faith yet changing, and moving between traditions without abandoning our faith. Lord knows this needs our humility.

Though we are many, we are one body, because we all share in one bread. It is bread for the world. And ecumenical endeavour is something of a leaven for churches and denominations as they seek a unity that might feed and nourish the wider world. In this, Christians need to pray only one prayer: 'may we all be one' (*John 17 20-21*). But we still thank God that we have been created as distinct and different, each of us in the image of the one who fashioned us. The ecumenical endeavour witnesses to that simple truth: we are better together than apart. Unity, not uniformity, remains our truest calling.