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## Anglican Mission and the Via Media

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JOHN CORRIE

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# Anglican Mission and the *Via Media*

**Addressing the perennial problem of Anglican identity, John Corrie argues that by drawing on the Anglican tradition of *Via Media* and placing mission at the heart of Anglican identity, Anglicanism can hold in creative tension a number of polarities – word and deed, exclusivism and inclusivism, the power of the Spirit and the reality a suffering world – that regularly destroy the integrity of Christian mission.**

## Introduction

Anglicans were working at Third Way politics a long time before Tony Blair thought of it. It was intrinsic to the English way of doing things when the Magna Carta was drawn up,<sup>1</sup> and it has been seen by some historians as the principle which lay behind the Elizabethan Settlement of 1559, creating as it did a Church which was neither Catholic nor Reformed in the pure senses of either.<sup>2</sup> Traditionally this history has been viewed as resulting in a *Via Media* which balanced equally the competing claims of Catholicism and Protestantism and gave to the English Church a uniquely double identity as fully Catholic and fully Reformed. It can be argued that this interpretation was a construction of later history, and came into prominence only during the nineteenth-century Oxford Movement, when the notion of a *Via Media* was championed by John Henry Newman. Some think that it was then that 'Anglicanism' was 'invented'. It seems true that the reality of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was one of messy compromise, fierce conflict and debate, resulting in a predominantly Protestant church that looked much more to Geneva than to Rome.<sup>3</sup> As far as Catholics of the Elizabethan age were concerned, the balance was certainly not equal, and the concessions to tradition seemed few.

Nevertheless, the English Church that emerged after 1559 was not intended to be merely a compromise. The Settlement at least attempted to incorporate the insights of both traditions. So the English Church was to be Catholic in retaining

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1 S. Sykes et. al. (eds), *The Study of Anglicanism*, SPCK, London 1998 (rev. edn.), p 191.

2 'It may be justly claimed that a distinctive Anglican theology began with the Elizabethan Settlement and has continued to take shape ever since' (Elizabeth Culling, in I. Bunting (ed.), *Celebrating the Anglican Way*, Hodder and Stoughton, London 1996, p 79).

3 This revisionist view of history has been championed by (amongst others) Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*, Yale University Press, New Haven 1992, pp 565ff, and by Anthony Milton, *Catholic and Reformed*, CUP, Cambridge 1995.

many of the traditions and orthodox statements of the faith which had served the Catholic Church for centuries; at the same time it was to be Reformed, with the priority given to the authority of the Bible, and the principle of *semper reformanda* built into the life of the Church. Although it can be argued that there was never a true balance of both traditions, the English Church did find a way of holding together very different traditions which sometimes have seemed totally irreconcilable.<sup>4</sup> Based on that principle the genius of the Anglican way was set in motion. It is this that can be labelled a *Via Media*, however it came into being through the accidents and violence of history. In this article I want to suggest that there is a distinctive contribution that Anglicans can make to mission thinking and practice today based on the same *Via Media* principle, and I suggest that we call this way of doing mission the '*Via Missia*'.<sup>5</sup>

Why is this approach necessary? Quite simply because we see in many aspects of mission today a tendency to opt for one side or the other of certain polarities, both of which may have elements of truth, but which when treated in isolation represent a distortion of the *Missio Dei*. My claim is that we must always maintain the 'creative tensions' between these polarities for the integrity of mission.<sup>6</sup> I want to suggest three areas in which this polarization takes place, and to show in each case how an Anglican approach can help us move creatively beyond them.

## Word and Deed

The first polarity goes to the heart of how we do mission and it concerns the place of evangelism. This is not a new debate, of course, but it seems that each new generation of mission thinkers and practitioners has to work through it afresh. I'm sure we are familiar with the polarities. One end of the spectrum is represented by the view that the gospel speaks of the eternal salvation of the individual. It calls each individual to a personal response of repentance and faith which saves their soul from eternal judgment. Now all my evangelical instincts rise up to affirm that, and indeed there is essential truth there which goes to the heart of the gospel.

But, if we say that that is the sum total of the meaning of the gospel, we would be indulging in a reductionism which has its roots in a Greek dualistic view of humanity: the soul is that part of us which relates to God, the body is merely the shell which we carry around with us and which we can dispense with once we die. Added to this is then a negative view of the world: we are 'just a passin' through' because 'this world is not our home'. So, the logic tells us that our faith has nothing to do with this world, it's all about securing our place in the next. Many who identify

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4 'Beneath the surface was the feeling for the *Via Media* which was not in its essence compromise or an intellectual expedient but a quality of thinking, an approach in which elements usually regarded as mutually exclusive were seen to be in fact complementary. These things were held in living tension, not in order to walk the tightrope of compromise, but because they were seen to be mutually illuminating and to fertilize each other' (H. R. McAdoo, quoted in Sykes (ed.), *Study*, p 469).

5 Strictly speaking this phrase does not work as authentic Latin. It would have to be *Via Missionis* (The way of mission) or *Via Missionaria* (The missionary way). This phrase is therefore my shorthand phrase, for which I take full responsibility, and it is coined to correspond to '*Via Media*'.

6 An extensive discussion of the place of 'creative tensions' in mission can be found in J. Corrie, 'Creative Tensions in the Mission of the Church: David Bosch Ten Years On', *Anvil* 18 (2001), pp 97-106.

themselves as evangelicals may already be objecting at this point, but I think they may be surprised to discover how prevalent this view is.

The other polarity is represented by those who say that the gospel is about the restoration of our humanity. It concerns life in all its fullness, relationships, the transformation of the world, justice and freedom, and all the other things that go with this set of values. Again, there is profound truth in this approach which has its roots in a creation theology that we have not often heard much of in evangelical circles, though it has been more prominent in recent years. But the danger is that mission is once again reduced, this time to working together for justice, or to a dialogue that avoids proclamation, or merely to being there where people are.

For all that has been said in recent years about 'holistic mission', and holding together word and deed,<sup>7</sup> there is always the tendency in practice for us to polarise into 'those who do evangelism' and 'those who do social justice'. The two then easily go their separate ways. Of course, there has been a huge growth in commitment to the need for a holistic approach, and many mission organisations are now making a conscious effort to put this into practice. But even so I see many examples of mission where the penny does not seem to have dropped that to be holistic means to integrate the dimensions of mission with a steadfast refusal to practise them in isolation. Like love and marriage which 'go together like a horse and carriage' (or used to!), when it comes to the relationship between Word and Deed, 'you can't have one with the other'. This has so often been pointed out now, that I hardly need labour the point.<sup>8</sup> The Latin Americans have got it right when they refer to holistic mission as 'mision integral' – an integrated approach to doing mission.

Where does Anglicanism come in? Surely in being committed advocates of holistic mission, which I regard as the first dimension of the '*Via Missia*', since this goes to the heart of the ethos of Anglicanism. Holistic mission was identified as the 'primary task of every bishop, diocese and congregation in the Anglican Communion' at the 1998 Lambeth Conference.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, the flexibility and openness to change that characterises us as Anglicans allows us to affirm that the relationship between word and deed is not a fixed, defined one, one that must be applied to each and every context. Rather, the '*Via Missia*' is a creative process that works with the context in which we find ourselves to develop an integration that is appropriate to that particular context. It must be stressed that this is not a compromise that attempts to work with word and deed while doing no true justice to either. However, because of its contextual nature, we may well be working out how word and deed relate as we go along. What is important is that we approach every context with a holistic intention and a refusal to allow ourselves to be polarised. Holistic mission is as much an attitude as a way of doing things. I believe that this must remain as a distinctive contribution that Anglicans can make to mission.

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7 An Anglican affirmation of holistic mission can be found in C. Craston (ed.), *By Word and Deed*, Church House Publishing, London 1992.

8 David Bosch gave eloquent expression to this ethos: 'The deed without the word is dumb; the word without the deed is empty'

(D.J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, Orbis, New York, p 420).

9 *The Official Report of the Lambeth Conference*, Morehouse Publishing, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania 1999; Resolution II.6(c), p 391.

## One and Many

The second area where polarisation is still all too common is in relation to how God reveals himself and how he works in the world to fulfil his purposes. In one corner we have those who would be as exclusivist as possible: there is only one true revelation of God and that is through Jesus Christ, uniquely witnessed to in the Scriptures. The Kingdom of God is in the hearts and lives of those who confess Christ as Lord, and the Holy Spirit can only be present where Jesus is honoured and proclaimed. In the opposite corner are those who want to be as inclusivist as possible: God reveals himself in a multitude of ways, and each religion has a measure of that revelation, with none claiming priority. In every place, God has 'not left Himself without witness'. Jesus is only one manifestation of the 'Cosmic Christ', whose Spirit permeates the whole of reality and who is seen and experienced in a multitude of spiritualities.<sup>10</sup>

As with holistic mission, there is a growing recognition that neither of these positions represents the whole truth and that it is not as simple as being either exclusivist or inclusivist. Indeed, once again, the one needs the other. The exclusivist needs to recognise that God is sovereign in how he chooses to reveal himself and work in the world. Revelation is first of all an act of pure grace, and none of us can circumscribe or control it. God's Spirit is free to bring the presence of God into what may seem to us to be the most unlikely places and to reveal himself to the most unlikely people. But, conversely, the inclusivist needs to recognise that there is a uniqueness in the revelation of God in Christ that sets the benchmark for how God chooses to relate to the world. The Spirit may be free, but he is also in relation with the Father and with the Son, and therefore moves and acts in a way which is consistent with this Trinitarian relationship.

So, once again, the '*Via Missia*' comes to our rescue by recognising and affirming the truth that is expressed in these polarities. It does this by not collapsing them into generalities, but working creatively to find a way of integrating them as we relate to others and to the world. The exclusivist position leads us to be closed to the world, to set the boundaries as clearly as possible, to claim a monopoly of the truth. The inclusivist position leads us to be vague and uncommitted, to deny the confrontational nature of the gospel, to blur the truth so that it means nothing.<sup>11</sup> The '*Via Missia*' is not a compromise. It wrestles with the tension, striving to relate to people with all the openness of inclusivism, while – at some appropriate point in that relationship – confronting them with the boundaries which Jesus himself sets. The Anglican preference for an incarnational approach – following Jesus' path of identifying fully with us in our humanity while at the same time maintaining a divine identity that enables him to challenge us with complete integrity to repent and change our lives in conformity to him – comes into its own here.<sup>12</sup>

10 A helpful summary of these positions can be found in C. Wright, *Thinking Clearly about the Uniqueness of Jesus*, Monarch, Crowborough 1997, pp 37-67.

11 Those seeking a liberal evangelical way through the extremes could look at the recent work of Clark Pinnock (for example, C.H. Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy: The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of*

*Religions*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids 1992) although he spoils his case by some extreme and speculative theology.

12 The theme of the Incarnation may be seen as one of the emphases of the Thirty-Nine Articles (see Bunting (ed.), *Celebrating*, p 46), and was certainly one of the distinctive contributions of Anglo-Catholicism and the *Lux Mundi* movement (see Bunting, p 115ff).

## Spirit and Reality

The third area in which the '*Via Missia*' has relevance today is in relation to the gifts and ministry of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Mission, but the Spirit who has been so often hijacked by one interest group or another. Once again we are familiar enough with the polarities. There is the 'charismatic' approach which seeks to locate the work of the Spirit in the experience of the believer: God is known as we open our hearts to receive the Spirit in the complete surrender of intimacy with him, allowing him to take control of our whole being so that gifts flow freely, the prophetic voice is heard and miracles of grace can be experienced. Sometimes the polarity says even more: that this is the *only* way by which God can be known, and the only effective way to be involved in mission. Mission therefore becomes mainly, or even exclusively, about power healing, power evangelism, and spiritual warfare. The implication seems to be that anyone practising any other way to do mission is just not where the action is, or not 'moving in the flow', and therefore cannot be blessed by God.

The 'reformed' polarity that rejects this is extremely suspicious of experience and the subjectivity of what is seen as a need-centred and self-indulgent faith. For one thing, God is known through his Word, and Christian faith is about faithful obedience to that Word, however we feel. Therefore mission will not always, or even often, be a blessed experience. It will involve hard work, suffering, the spirit of servanthood, the reality of life in which God seems sometimes absent. If charismatic mission puts its hands in the air, this mission puts its hands to the plough.

One of my great encouragements in recent years has been to see how Anglican churches that have embraced the charismatic movement have, for the most part, seen the need to integrate spiritual vitality and openness with a reality that keeps its feet firmly on the ground. Once again, this is our instinct as Anglicans and it requires a lot of creative imagination. But where there is a genuine freedom within a framework, spiritual gifts with sound teaching, and healing with a sober recognition of suffering, then the mission potential for such a church is tremendous.

The '*Via Missia*' affirms both ends of the spectrum while pointing out at the same time their limitations. We can engage in spiritual warfare, so long as we also immerse ourselves in the mystery of a suffering that remains stubbornly resistant to whatever prayer is thrown at it. We need spiritual gifts in mission, so long as we also direct those gifts towards others and steadfastly refuse to keep them to ourselves. We may affirm that God desires richly to bless us, so long as we do not decide for him what form that blessing should take.

## Via Missionaria Anglicana

So what is distinctive about Anglican mission? In one sense nothing. All I have said need not be exclusively Anglican. But Anglicanism has never claimed to define itself according to a distinctive doctrinal position. That – like so much else in Anglicanism – is both a strength and a weakness. But the '*Via Missia*', as I have

called it, is an approach which is as much needed as ever for mission today. Anglicans ought to be at the forefront of defending it since it resonates so closely with what we have traditionally stood for.

Alister McGrath has suggested that the key to the renewal of Anglicanism lies in a reconstruction of the *Via Media*.<sup>13</sup> This begins with the recognition of the centrality of mission. It then moves to a 'postliberal' approach to doing theology that affirms orthodoxy as it is expressed in the apostolic tradition, but at the same time is creatively open to how that is expressed and worked out in each context of the church's witness. It is theology done within a living community, not done in a vacuum in which human experience has no contribution.<sup>14</sup>

The '*Via Missia*' brings together the mission dimension with what McGrath says about theology. We certainly cannot be stuck with our traditional ways; but neither can we simply let go of the apostolic commission in the interests of relevance or tolerance. But nor is this ivory tower mission thinking because the creative process has to be worked out in context, wherever we find ourselves serving in the *Missio Dei*. This finds resonance with the provisionality of which Tim Dakin writes in looking for a way of re-ordering the Anglican Church so that it is rooted in God's call to mission. We need to become 'global-local' people who have a 'radical orthodoxy' that sets us free from an old order that was territorial, institutional and uncontextual.<sup>15</sup> The '*Via Missia*' is thus truly the 'mission on the road', which David Bosch was so passionate about,<sup>16</sup> and the '*Ecclesia Missia*' becomes the way of being the church that makes that possible.<sup>17</sup>

The conclusion to all this is clear: there is a consensus around the adoption of a critical contextualisation which acknowledges inherent tensions in mission and seeks to make them creative of a new way forward.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, this is something that has long been recognised as distinctively Anglican. As A.R. Vidler noted nearly 50 years ago

Anglican theology is true to its genius when it is seeking to reconcile opposing systems, rejecting them as exclusive systems, but showing that the principle for which each stands has its place within the total orbit of Christian truth, and in the long run is secure only within that orbit...when it is held in tension with other, apparently opposed, but really complementary, principles.<sup>19</sup>

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13 What is said of the *Via Media* can be equally said of the '*Via Missia*': 'While honouring the cultural experiences of peoples, *via media* is not complete relativism or moral chaos. It is a kind of disciplined reasoning, seasoned with humility, and sustained by compassion and empathy for oneself and others', Kwok Pui-Lan in I.T. Douglas and K. Pui-Lan, *Beyond Colonial Anglicanism*, Church Publishing Inc., New York 2001, p 66.

14 A. McGrath, *The Renewal of Anglicanism*, SPCK, London 1993, chapter five suggests that the postliberal approach is 'especially attractive to Anglicanism, with its long-standing emphasis upon the importance of operating within a living tradition with deep

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roots in history' (p 133). He quotes Hans Kung approvingly when he says that the church 'must find a way between a modernism without foundations and a fundamentalism without modernity' (p 129).

15 T. Dakin, 'Mission Out of Order', *CMS Newsletter* No. 551, (April 2001), p 12.

16 D. J. Bosch, *A Spirituality of the Road*, Herald Press, Scottsdale, Pennsylvania 1979.

17 See R. Warren, *Being Human, Being Church*, Marshall Pickering, London 1995, especially chapter six, 'Marks of the Emerging Church'.

18 See also Corrie, 'Creative Tensions', pp 97ff.

19 A. R. Vidler, *Essays in Liberality*, SCM, London 1957, p 166.

If Tony Blair could redefine Labour, then God can redefine Anglicanism: a 'new Anglicanism' in which mission is at the heart of our identity, and the things that are at the heart of our identity drive our mission. This is at least a starting point in today's search for a coherent and contemporary Anglican identity. And it is a relief to know that God – and not Tony Blair – is in charge, building His Church so that the gates of hell will not prevail against it!

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