

## Authentic Participation in the Great Tradition

*Tony Clark*

In consideration of our topic, let me pose the following question: What does it mean to inhabit the “Great Tradition” of Anglicanism *authentically*? To begin, it is important to acknowledge that the nature and development of the Great Tradition, and the broader tradition of the Christian church of which it is a part, has been conceived in a variety of ways. A recent and highly distinctive perspective is offered in Phyllis Tickle’s book, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why*. Published in 2008, it has reached a wide readership. The book deals with the way in which Christianity has emerged over time, with a particular emphasis upon the contemporary situation. Its purview is not limited to the Anglican tradition, although its author is a lay Eucharistic minister of the Episcopal Church in the United States of America. In the light of the book’s popularity, and the proximity of its subject matter to the theme of this conference, it seems timely to consider its claims.

## The Great Emergence

The basic thesis of the book is that the church in the Western world and beyond is going through an upheaval of monumental proportions as part of a broader transforming movement that is reconfiguring our culture. This process is the “Great Emergence,” and we find ourselves caught up in the middle of it.

This phenomenon of radical transformation, in which the church and society must re-establish their identities and authority structures, is something that happens every five hundred years, according to Tickle. As she puts it, every five hundred years the church has a “huge rummage sale.” We are now in the midst of the Great Emergence, which is the most recent and, in Tickle’s estimation, the most radical of such rummage sales. The previous events and processes she identifies are the “Great” Reformation (1517 CE); the Great Schism (1051 CE); the Council of Chalcedon (451 CE), along with the decline of the Roman Empire in the fifth century and the life of Gregory the Great (540–604 CE). Before that was The Great Transformation—which is the term she gives to the period in which Christianity was born (70 CE).<sup>1</sup>

Every five hundred years the church is propelled into one of these periods of tumult and transformation, and there is not a whole lot we can do about it. Tickle writes, “When Christians despair of the upheavals and re-formulations that have been the history of our faith—when the faithful resist, as so many do just now, the presence of another time of reconfiguration with its inevitable pain—we all would do well to remember that, not only are we in the hinge of a five-hundred-year period, but we are the direct product of one.”<sup>2</sup> The thought that we are caught up in a process over which we have no influence is expressed again towards the end of the book when Tickle asks, “Where is this thing going, even as it is carrying all of us along with it in its mad career?”<sup>3</sup>

In addition to propounding this dialectical schema, in which both church and society are caught up, the book describes some of the particular changes that have been brought about through these periods of “storm and stress.” In the Great Reformation, for example, *sola scriptura*—

1. See Tickle, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity Is Changing and Why* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008) 19–31.

2. *Ibid.*, 26–27.

3. *Ibid.*, 116.

scripture alone—was established as the principle of authority in what was the emergent church at that time.<sup>4</sup> One of the characteristics of the current upheaval is, according to Tickle, the demise of *sola scriptura* as a locus of authority, and the emergence of the Holy Spirit in its place.<sup>5</sup> Another feature of the emerging or emergent church is the rejection of Christian particularity and exclusivity. Such, it is claimed, are the discernable contours of the new church arising out of the Great Emergence. The book has much more to say, and offers some thoughtful insights. Nevertheless, it exhibits some serious deficiencies. I will consider a few of them.

First, I am skeptical about one of the basic premises of the book, which is that the church, and society at large, goes through a period of radical transformation every five hundred years. This is a crude characterization that serves as much to confuse as to clarify. What, for example, are we supposed to make of the Enlightenment, which bisects the Great Reformation and the Great Emergence? How is the Renaissance to be located in the scheme?

There is also a strange Hegelian tinge to Tickle's description of the cycles of upheaval, transformation, and consolidation. The suggestion is that we are "carried along" by these processes that bring us to new and higher levels of consciousness. It is interesting that the Reformation's emphasis upon the authority of Scripture, or *sola scriptura*, yields to the authority of the Holy Spirit in the believer's life in the Great Emergence. The reason offered for this is that since the Reformation there have been a variety of issues in which the authority of the Bible's teaching has been called into question. In matters such as slavery, divorce, and the ordination of women, among others, the church has established the way forward, in Tickle's view, in opposition to the *sola scriptura* principle. She asserts that the final issue, which will settle the matter once and for all, is the gay issue. She writes, "When it [the gay issue] is all resolved—and it most surely will be—the Reformation's understanding of Scripture as it had been taught by Protestantism for almost five centuries will be dead . . .

4. This was a slogan of the Protestant Reformation whereby it sought to locate the church's authority in Holy Scripture rather than ecclesial tradition and papal pronouncement. See Tickle, *Great Emergence*, 45–46.

5. Over against the implication in Tickle's comment, it should be noted that the Reformers would scarcely have regarded the *sola scriptura* principle and the Holy Spirit of God as alternative sources of authority!

Of all the fights, the gay one must be—has to be—the bitterest, because once it is lost, there are no more fights to be had. It is finished.”<sup>6</sup>

If Tickle’s broad theory is correct, the outcome of the current debate about human sexuality was decided before it began. The real significance of the debate is that its conclusion will signal the death knell for the *sola scriptura* principle. This being the case, the current discussion of the gay issue is entirely spurious, because the new paradigm of the Great Emergence will inevitably sweep away the very scriptural basis upon which many orthodox Christians are seeking to address the matter.<sup>7</sup> In sum, the book claims to have identified the pattern of history’s ineluctable march to enlightenment, at least in as far as this is manifest in the church.

It is not difficult to see the attraction of the book’s thesis to a wide audience as it touches on two ideas to which many are drawn. We like to think that we possess the key that unlocks the secrets of history—and, perhaps, even the mind and purposes of God. Moreover, we are fond of imagining that we live in historic times; that the particular moment in which we live is charged with significance. The book offers generous helpings of both ideas and, I would submit, this is why its proposals are attracting attention.

### Returning to the Question

Returning to the question posed at the outset, “What does it mean to inhabit the “Great Tradition” of Anglicans *authentically*? *The Great Emergence* was

6. Tickle, *Great Emergence*, 101.

7. An excellent example of a study that attempts to address the theme of homosexuality from a broadly Reformed perspective is Oliver O’Donovan’s *Church in Crisis: The Gay Controversy and the Anglican Communion* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2008). This is a thoughtful and nuanced study that acknowledges that the gay controversy, as a relatively new controversy, raises critical questions for the Reformed tradition. O’Donovan criticizes both conservative approaches that are prone to using biblical texts to bolster pre-established negative attitudes to gay relationships, and liberal approaches that presuppose the authenticity of gay relationships and sweep aside any aspect of the biblical tradition that might call that authenticity into question. While for Tickle the gay issue sounds the death knell for the Reformed tradition (or the *sola scriptura* principle), for O’Donovan the controversy calls those of the Reformed tradition to a period of reflection through which they seek to discern more of what is implied in their tradition about the issue of human sexuality.

not written to answer this question and, obviously, there was no obligation for it to do so. Nevertheless, there is something disturbing about some of the knowledge-claims made in the book. Let me explain.

The book contends that it has identified the dynamic process—one might call it “the grand historical scheme”—by which the church emerges through successive periods of struggle. But from whence comes the knowledge of this grand scheme by which church’s history is to be interpreted and evaluated? No explicit answer to this question is offered. The author simply presumes that she occupies a perspective from which all the events and struggles her book portrays can be surveyed. It is not from an *attachment* to any particular epoch of the church’s evolution, but from a perspective *detached* from them all—even the period of the Great Emergence into which we have now supposedly entered. One might say it presumes to offer, to borrow a phrase from Thomas Nagel, a “view from nowhere.”

But the idea of a detached, “tradition-less” perspective, with its pretensions to value-free objectivity, has been subjected to fierce critiques in recent years. Alasdair MacIntyre’s *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* is just one contribution—although a particularly articulate and influential one—to a substantial movement that calls into question such modernist, objectivist pretensions.<sup>8</sup> One of the emphatic assertions of this movement is that all knowledge is perspectival. Or, to put it another way, we cannot have a view of things apart from the tradition, or traditions, we inhabit. The view from nowhere is a view that is simply not available to us.

We might think of an analogy here.<sup>9</sup> To communicate effectively with one another we must use a particular language. We must know this language at least well enough to be able to focus on the meaning we wish to convey rather than the grammar and vocabulary we will, inevitably, use to express it. The language we use is not an absolute expression of our meaning. Although we can enrich our use of language in various ways, there is always a sense in which any language places constraints on our communication. And yet the very language that limits our communication is utterly indispensable if we are to say anything at all. To cease to use

8. Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988).

9. Much of the following analysis draws on the thought of the scientist-philosopher Michael Polanyi. See, in particular, Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1958). Cf. 59.

this language would be to cease communication, unless we learn a new language. And another language could only provide an additional “linguistic perspective,” not a “linguistic absolute.” If our use of language may be regarded as an analogy for our participation in a tradition, it becomes clear that we will unavoidably view the world from the perspective of the tradition in which we stand or, to use a word I prefer, we “indwell.”<sup>10</sup>

This view of tradition does not commit us to relativism, though some have seen things in this way. However, it certainly does suggest that any interpretation of the history of the church that fails to recognize its own rootedness in a tradition necessarily lacks an essential self-awareness. One of the striking aspects of Tickle’s account is its apparent detachment from any part in the developments it portrays. The proposed grand historical process by which the church emerges over the centuries is a concept that arises not from a perspective engendered by committed participation within a particular tradition; it presumes to be the “view from nowhere.” It is curious, if not ironic, that an author so enamored with postmodernist narratives as is Phyllis Tickle should utilize a method that appears to be deeply indebted to a modernist outlook in general, and to a form of Hegelian idealism in particular.

If it is the case that we *necessarily* understand things from within a tradition, and that our various ways of knowing arise out of our participation within that tradition, it follows that this insight needs to be taken into account in interpreting the tradition and the ways in which it has evolved.

### The View from Somewhere

If the idea of “the view from nowhere” is a deceptive myth, it is evident that we ought more properly to think in terms of “a view from somewhere.” As I have said, the “somewhere” is the tradition (or traditions) in which we participate and to which we give our allegiance. I am, of course, thinking of the Christian tradition and this can be appropriately narrowed to the particular Christian tradition to which we are committed and which we “indwell.”

Let me say a little about the nature of this “indwelling.” I have suggested that knowledge of our own tradition, along with an understanding

10. “Indwelling” is a term extensively utilized by Michael Polanyi.

of its development, is necessarily perspectival and facilitated by our committed participation within it. But what does participation within that tradition look like? What constitutes it?

We are accustomed to describing Christian traditions or denominations in terms of theological statements or propositions. Here we will obviously think of the ancient creeds, confessions, and the kinds of doctrinal statements that are issued by the leadership of a given denomination from time to time. It is not surprising, therefore, that we tend to compare and contrast denominations on the basis of the particular articulate statements to which they claim to adhere. Indeed, it is typically on the basis of such statements that one group of Christians will determine if, and to what degree, they are willing to associate and co-operate with others. While I do not wish to deny the importance of creeds, confessions, and doctrinal statements, I want to challenge the commonly held belief that such articulate statements characterize what it means to inhabit the ecclesial traditions that espouse them.

There are at least two reasons why this might be so. First, there may be committed members of a Christian denomination who have reservations—and perhaps substantial reservations—about elements of the church's confessions. For example, how many contemporary Anglicans would be able to affirm, without reserve, all thirty-nine Articles of the 1662 Book of Common Prayer?<sup>11</sup> This is one sense in which the theological statements of the church might not adequately characterize what it means to indwell that denomination's tradition, although I do not want to pursue the point here.

A further reason for distinguishing between the articulate theological expressions of a church and the experience of indwelling its tradition may be regarded as obvious, and yet it is often overlooked. Our commitment to any tradition is manifest in our participation in the practices that constitute it. So, for example, what it means to indwell or inhabit the Anglican tradition is participation in the common liturgical forms of the church: the saying or chanting of psalms, listening to the public reading of Scripture, the singing of hymns, the praying of many different types of prayers (collects, confessions, intercessions, etc.), the celebration of the Eucharist, and all this in the very particular liturgical space of the church building that both facilitates and shapes these activities as corporate,

11. For example, not all would agree with article XVII, on the theme of predestination and election, as it is expressed in the 1662 Book of Common Prayer.

congregational practices. A great deal more could be said about public worship, and, beyond that, one could explore many other dimensions of the church's life: its ecclesial structures, its various pastoral ministries, its role in education, its care for the poor, its civic responsibilities, its prophetic witness to the wider society, etc.

To participate in the Anglican tradition—and there are, of course, direct parallels in other ecclesial traditions—is to engage in these kinds of things; to seek God and to serve God in and through them, and to be shaped as human beings in communion with God and with others, by participating in them.

### Two Ways of Knowing

What we “know” through our involvement in regular corporate worship, or through our engagement in other aspects of the church's ministry, simply cannot be reduced to statements and propositions. It is, of course, possible to describe those things in which we are involved, at least to some degree. We can offer a description of Sunday worship, for example, but that is not to distill the essence of what it is to come before God in an act of corporate worship. The kind of knowledge contained within a description of worship is quite distinct from the kind of knowledge that attaches to our participation in it. We are dealing with two forms of knowing and, while they are evidently related, the nature of the relationship between one and the other may not be as clear and unproblematic as we might be inclined to think.

Let me illustrate the point with an example somewhat remote from the concerns of church and theology. Think of cycling. If you claim that you “know” how to ride a bicycle you are probably claiming that you could, at a moment's notice, hop on a bike and ride off without fear of failing or falling. But do you know the formula for balancing on a bicycle? Perhaps you don't because it is, as it turns out, a fiendishly complicated one. But, if you don't know this formula, how seriously can I take your claim to “know” how to ride a bicycle? After all, you don't even “know” how to balance on the thing! If we put things in this way it is clear enough that we are talking about two different (although related) kinds of knowledge. The first type of knowledge is manifest, in this case, in the form of an embodied skill: you can ride your bicycle. And, of course, you can ride your bicycle whether or not you know the formula for balancing. You can

even ride your bicycle if you *think* you know the formula but, in fact, possess a mistaken formula! In these circumstances one might be tempted to say, “The formula is quite beside the point; what matters is whether one can cycle or not.” This may be satisfactory up to a point, but it is a perfectly legitimate thing to try to *explain* a phenomenon, such as a person’s ability to ride a bicycle. Is it not the case that a good explanation—a sound theory—is “knowledge”? Indeed, more generally, isn’t the desire to explain an indispensable part of science and scientific discovery?

It is obvious that these two types of knowledge can and need to be distinguished. But we also need to be mindful that descriptive or articulate knowledge (the formula for balancing on a bicycle in this case) arises because there are people who have cycling skills (physicists do not typically devote their time to explaining phenomena that don’t exist!). It is important to make this last point, because we are often inclined to think that it is our articulate knowledge—our explanations, formulae, statements, propositions, etc.—that are the *primary* truth-bearers. Or, to put it in another way, we habitually regard a good theory as the *basis* of good practice. What I want to say is that good theory often arises because there is good practice—or at least some level of practical know-how—which may become the theme of reflective theoretical endeavor. This is so because our articulate, or theoretical knowledge, is typically sourced by embodied or practical forms of knowledge.

Riding bicycles and living out one’s faith in the context of the church are, I will acknowledge, very different sorts of phenomena. However, the parallels are not insignificant. If we are to talk about “the knowledge of faith” we must be aware of the relationship between articulate forms of faith—expressed in creeds, confessions, doctrinal statements, etc.—and the kinds of knowledge that arise through participation in the many and varied practices that comprise the life of the church.

I want to make one further substantial point about the relationship between the two types of knowledge. It relates to what I have already said through the example of cycling, but it identifies a very particular, important, and largely ignored aspect of the dynamic relationship between the two distinct forms of knowledge. In order to do this I want to approach again the example of language, although from a slightly different angle.

In using a familiar language we do not typically pay a great deal of conscious attention to its grammar and vocabulary. Rather, we are concerned with the meaning we intend to convey in the use of it. Our

familiarity with the language instills within us the confident expectation that, as we seek to express ourselves, the words that we need will simply come to mind. We can do this because we “indwell” the language we are using. We might say we have “mastered it,” or that we have “internalized it.” The point is that we don’t think *about* the language; we think *with* it. Indeed, to start thinking about vocabulary and grammar in the midst of the process of speaking or writing is likely to be debilitating and to actually inhibit communication. If we start thinking about vocabulary and grammar our mind is distracted from a proper focus on the meaning, which is our primary concern.

This is not to deny that studying grammar provides us with a means of reflecting upon the way in which we ordinarily use language and can help us gain precision and avoid error. Working on vocabulary may enhance the effectiveness of our language usage. But there is a curious sense in which studying grammar represents a kind of “time-out” from our ordinary uses of language. Through such study we seek to add breadth and attain greater accuracy in the forms of speech that we adopt. But this goal is only achieved when we can appropriate the lessons we have learned without needing to think about them. As I have said, the ordinary way of using language is not to think *about* it, but to think *with* it.

We are all very effective language-users long before we become aware of grammar as a discipline. No four-year-old child has studied grammar in this way and so, in one sense of the word, we might say that such a child knows nothing of grammar. However articulate she or he may be, the child does not know the grammatical apparatus by which language is analyzed and represented, but the child *does* know grammar—and a great deal of it—because she or he has learned to participate in the linguistic practices of those by whom she or he has been nurtured. The child comes to indwell “language practices”—typically those of the parental household. At four years a child’s language skills will not be fully developed but they will be very advanced, despite the absence of any formal grammatical knowledge.

### Indwelling the Great Tradition

It is my hope that this discussion of language and grammar will be helpful in illuminating the points I now want to make about the Great Tradition of Anglicanism in this final section.

What does it mean to participate in, or to indwell, the Great Tradition? I want to say that, *primarily*, it means that one places oneself in the midst of those practices that constitute the tradition. It means that one participates in corporate worship; that one engages in prayers of adoration, confession, and intercession, etc.; that one says the psalms and sings hymns and songs to the praise of God in the congregation of worshippers; that one grows in awareness of the narrative of the Christian story through the ministry of the Word—and especially the public reading of Scripture and preaching—as it arises out of the richly textured liturgical year; that one is baptized and shares in the bread and wine of the Eucharist; that one seeks to care for one’s neighbors and to share the Good News of Gospel; and that one opens oneself to the transforming work of the Holy Spirit in and through such things.

What we “know” through our participation in all of these practices is not something that can be reduced to descriptions, nor can the meaning of what we know be captured in doctrinal statements. In saying this I emphasize again that I do not wish to disparage creedal and doctrinal statements, or suggest that we dispense with them. To the contrary, I affirm that they must have an honored place within the tradition, guiding the faithful and guarding them against error. The church has typically come to such statements and affirmations after careful theological thought, prayerful reflection, and maybe a good deal of heated debate (and perhaps even a little beard tugging!). Nevertheless, these articulate expressions of faith can be no more than highly abbreviated summaries of the deep knowledge established through participation in the practices which constitute the tradition. The issue is not that the creeds and confessions are irrelevant or misleading, but that they cannot convey the kind of knowledge which arises through a full-orbed participation within the tradition. Creeds and confession cannot function as a substitute for committed participation in the practices that constitute the Great Tradition—or any other tradition of the church. Nor could they have arisen apart from the kind of knowledge established through such participation.

Of course, none of this should surprise us if we have paid attention to the Gospel accounts of how Jesus called and nurtured his first disciples. Jesus’ apprenticing of the Twelve was not devoid of elements of didactic teaching, but the fundamental command of Jesus to each of his disciples was: “Follow me.” Or, if I might be permitted to expand, “Come along with me, see what I’m doing, and learn what it means to have a part in it.”

## Conclusion

At the outset I posed the question, “What does it mean to inhabit the “Great Tradition” of Anglicanism *authentically*?” To the accusation that I have scarcely started to answer this question I can only reply that I am guilty as charged. Nevertheless, what I hope to have done is to show that if we are going to interpret the Great Tradition authentically we must do so from the perspective afforded to us *through* a deep, committed indwelling of the practices that constitute that tradition. While it is important to acknowledge the significance of creedal and confessional formulations, we must be mindful of the very general truth that our knowledge of the tradition will always transcend what we are able to articulate of it. We know more than we can tell.

I hope that I have also demonstrated something of the problematic nature of a project such as the one undertaken by Phyllis Tickle in her book, *The Great Emergence*. The claim that the Christian tradition is radically reconstituted every five hundred years is questionable in a number of ways, a few of which I have noted. In closing I would like to ask a couple of questions that might provide the basis for further discussion of the book’s claims. Firstly, if Tickle is correct in her assertion that we are being carried along by dynamic forces that are beyond our influence, we must ask whether it is meaningful to talk about “inhabiting the tradition authentically,” at least in a transitional moment such as we find ourselves in at the moment? One can scarcely “inhabit” a tradition characterized by such fundamental discontinuity.

The second question is closely related to the first: if the periods of turmoil and transformation are as radical as Tickle suggests, might it be more appropriate to think of such developments in Christianity in terms of *successive* stages within traditions, given that the emergent tradition is always substantially incommensurate with the tradition out of which it has arisen?<sup>12</sup> If this is so, the kind of analysis I have offered is evidently redundant. But I think this is the point at which Tickle has strayed furthest from the heart of Christianity. Tickle characterizes the Great Emergence as the dissolution of exclusive Christian claims along with

12. The influence of Thomas Kuhn’s ideas of scientific revolutions may be at work, consciously or unconsciously, in this aspect of Tickle’s thinking. See Kuhn, “The Structure of Scientific Revolutions,” in the *International Encyclopedia of Unified Science*, eds. Otto Neurath, Rudolf Carnap, and Charles Morris, Vol. 2, No. 2 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

the Reformation's *sola scriptura* principle. I would answer that two of the *abiding* characteristics of the Christian tradition are, firstly, its insistence upon the uniqueness of Christ and, secondly, its conviction that it must always return to Holy Scripture as its primary authority in its witness to God's revelatory self-disclosure in Christ. What we do *not* have in the Christian tradition is the emergence, through some dialectical process, of an all-encompassing, undifferentiated religious consciousness.<sup>13</sup>

It is my conviction that the Christian tradition is characterized by a far greater degree of continuity than Tickle allows. The church is dynamic: its practices, and the theological convictions it endeavors to articulate, are not static.<sup>14</sup> The church must continue to listen to the call and command of God by the faithful indwelling of the traditions that it has inherited. As participants in the Great Tradition of Anglicanism we may rest assured that there will always be room within it for growth and diversity, just as there will always be a need for reform. As a dynamic tradition its well-being will be best served by a healthy capacity for self-critique and a disciplined, faithful imagination. We will never exhaust the possibilities embedded within this tradition if, as participants within it, we place our trust in the God who called it into being. In this way the Great Tradition of Anglicanism will be preserved even as it is constantly called to renewal in the power of the Holy Spirit.

13. I take it that this would be a fair characterization of Tickle's position.

14. Due to limitations of space, I have been unable to pursue the question of authentic transformation or evolution.