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The Islamic State and the Anglican Communion

By Justin K.H. Tse

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When Canon Andrew White, popularly known as the ‘Vicar of Baghdad,’ reported that Islamic State had cut a five-year-old child he baptized in half, the Church of England got behind the #WeAreN Twitter hashtag and Facebook profile picture campaign. The Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, has changed his Facebook page’s picture to the Arabic letter ‘N’ in solidarity with Christians whose Mosul homes were marked with the letter in orders to either convert to IS’s version of Islam or face the sword.

I want to argue that whatever one might believe about the incoherence of Anglican theology, the Vicar of Baghdad and the Archbishop of Canterbury resist the Islamic State through a coherent Anglican political theology. I want to argue, moreover, that that vision can be found in the Venerable Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*.

This is a strange text to recommend. Hasty readers will think that, simply because I am an Anglican blogging for an Anglican blog, that this is a poor time for Anglophilia; indeed, those who have never read the book might challenge me on the grounds that, of all times, texts that promote nationalism should be suppressed. Bede’s more careful readers might wonder about this odd choice as well, for what about Bede’s obsession with the Easter dates, the power of relics, and the celebration of austerity might actually be helpful here?

What I’m after is Bede’s theological sensibility. Bede is *Anglican* in the sense that he writes about the *ecclesia Anglicanorum*. I’m going to argue that his sensibility highlights the *communion* part of the Anglican Communion, which is what an Anglican response to the Islamic State has to entail.

At first blush, Bede’s theological sensibility is merely Constantinian. Bede’s narrative reads like a struggle to convert Northumbrian, Pict, Irish, Angle, and Saxon kings, with letters from the pope included. Both King Edwin and King Oswald recapture their kingdoms with the sign of the cross; both have bishops like Paulinus and Aidan advising them; both are eventually cut down in battle. True to form, the Vicar of Baghdad’s call to the British Government has not been pacifistic – it has been downright Constantinian in its appeal not only for food and prayers, but for military action. So too, the Rt. Rev. Nicholas Baines, Bishop of Leeds, with the support of Justin Cantuar and a quote from the Bishop of Coventry, has sent a letter to Prime Minister David Cameron demanding the government’s articulation of a coherent strategy against the Islamic State that includes the church in its political planning. The former Archbishop of Canterbury, George Carey, took to the *Telegraph* to blame British multiculturalism for the British citizens who have gone over to fight for the Islamic State, calling for a Constantinian re-entrenchment of Christian values to recover British identity.

It would be fair to say that these Constantinian declarations are fair performances of Bede’s sensibilities. But they are also very modern. After all, there is a point to the papal letters, episcopal advisors, clerical missionaries, and conciliar synods that Bede records: he is chronicling the English church’s journey toward full Christian catholicity. If Constantinian alliances are one theme in Bede, the contest over the Easter date is another.

Reading, say, Bede’s account on how to calculate the Easter date may seem like religious nitpicking to modern eyes. But they are key to understanding the heresy against which Bede struggled: Pelagianism. For Bede, the one indigenous heretic to the British isles is Pelagius, the ‘Briton who spread far and wide his noxious and abominable teaching that man had no need of God’s grace’ (I.10). Bede never explicitly

makes the link between Pelagianism and the Easter date. Yet in Pope John IV's letter to the Irish church in A.D. 634, the two problems on which the Pontiff calls them out are the Easter date and Pelagianism:

We learn also that the pernicious Pelagian heresy has once again revived among you, and we strongly urge you to expel the venom of this wicked superstition from your minds. You cannot be unaware that this detestable heresy has already been condemned, for not only has it been suppressed these two hundred years, but it is daily laid under the ban of our perpetual anathema. We therefore beg you not to rake up the ashes of controversies long since burned out. For who can do other than condemn the insolent and impious assertion that man can live without sin of his own free will and not of God's grace? (II.19)

At the Synod of Whitby, Wilfrid presents the same logic against the Irish, Britons, and Picts who calculate Easter by a different calendar from the catholic one. Excusing their ignorance because the Irish bishops had for long had equal primacy with those appointed by Rome, he says,

So I do not deny that they are true servants of God and dear to Him, and that they loved Him in primitive simplicity but in devout sincerity. Nor do I think that their ways of keeping Easter were seriously harmful, so long as no one came to show them a more perfect way to follow. Indeed, I feel certain that, if any Catholic reckoner had come to them, they would have readily accepted his guidance, as we know that they readily observed such of God's ordinances as they already knew. But you and your colleagues are most certainly guilty of sin if you reject the decrees of the Apostolical See, indeed of the universal Church, which are confirmed by Holy Writ. For, although your Fathers were holy men, do you imagine that they, a few men in a corner of a remote island, are to be preferred before the universal Church of Christ throughout the world? And even if your Columba – or may I say, ours also if he was the Servant of Christ – was a Saint potent in miracles, can he take precedence before the most blessed Prince of the Apostles...? (III.25).

For Bede, what's at stake in the Easter date is catholicity because the church receives the grace of the risen life together. To practice the self-determination of Easter apart from the church would be a Pelagian practice, for it would cut the church off from the perfection of sacramental togetherness. The climax of the *History* has nothing to do with the state, then: it's the English Bishop Egbert going to Iona, the Irish monastery that long held out with its own Easter date, and bringing them into the catholic calendar (V.22). We always receive grace together.

This *communion* emphasis resists the Islamic State by contrasting the caliphate that al-Baghdadi envisions with the catholicity of the Anglican Communion. Al-Baghdadi envisions a state with religious minorities purified out of it, a sort of self-determination that enacts a lot of violence in the process. But Bede envisions sacramental encounter, a resistance to the Pelagianism of the pure state because coercion is displaced by the reality of the supernatural. It is through that catholicity that we speak truth to the secular power of any state that uses violence to purify its territory, revealing that even militants who claim to be an Islamic State are more secular than even they know.

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