

# Lambeth, from a distance

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This summer, along with running Beach Drive, playing tennis and drinking litres of cappuccino at sun-drenched marinas, I have been reading St. Augustine's "City of God" in concert with a friend in Edmonton, who has provided me with a fine and needed study partner: fine, because of his own fierce determination to understand what the author was getting at, and needed because "City of God" is a dense and complex book. Written in Latin between 412 and 427, with a less than scintillating English translation by Marcus Dods, the book is Augustine's attempt to analyze and give reasons for the fall of Rome to Alaric and the Goths in 410.

First, Augustine defends the Christians, whom some had blamed for the military, political and social disaster which was the fall of this noblest city and its glorious empire, worldly systems that once knew Christian leadership under Constantine and Theodosius. Then he mounts his own critique, blaming the fall of the earthly city on the populace who had deserted the true City of God to run after their own false gods. In simple summary, Rome fell because the Romans entrusted themselves to the care of false gods, gods whom they characterized in immodesty and immorality, through lewd theatre performances and wicked worship.

Then I began a planned reading of the book of Jeremiah, and was struck by the confluence of theme and imagery in him and Augustine. Jeremiah is analyzing the disasters that were befalling the nation of Israel/Judah as he anticipates the fall of Jerusalem in 587/6 bce. Never one to mince words, Jeremiah decries the ways in which the people of Judah have lusted after false gods like a rutting she-camel in heat (2:23/4). In Jerusalem, as in Rome, the people — and especially their leaders — have deserted and abandoned the true God and true religion in favor of false gods and false religions, the consequences of which have been a massive deterioration in morals and morale, and the subsequent conquering by an enemy.

My Albertan friend and I read both these texts against the backdrop of our own nation, and wondered together whether any nation state whose primary virtues were tolerance, inclusivity and individualism, could hope for permanence. I also read these texts against the backdrop of the current state of affairs in the Anglican Church of Canada, and in the worldwide Anglican Communion. Hence, to Lambeth.

**To cut to the Augustinian quick, are we now witnessing the fall of Canterbury, the fall of the Anglican Communion, the fall of the Anglican Church of Canada because we — and especially our leaders — have run after false gods?** What fall, you might ask. Lambeth, admittedly from a distance, seems to me to be something of a persuasive witness that things Anglican, at the national and international organizational level, things seen previously as coherent and unified, are indeed coming to an end. With all respect to Archbishop Rowan Williams and the 600 plus bishops in attendance — respect for a good man in an impossible role, respect for bishops in similarly near impossible roles — what Lambeth has clearly revealed is that the whole cannot stand any longer. In Yeats's words, "Things fall apart: the centre cannot hold".

The Communion is broken: the theological gaps between Global South and North America are impossible to traverse. The gestalt is crumbled into its separate parts. Now here is where an Augustinian critique comes in and why an Augustinian analysis might work. The false gods of the Roman Empire are many, and in trusting them Rome has fallen. The false gods of Anglicanism are many also, and in trusting them Anglicanism has fallen. In "City of God", Augustine borrows heavily from Marcus Varro and the latter's threefold analysis of the gods: namely, the fabulous gods (gods of fable and myth and story), the natural gods (gods of the mind, of thought, of the philosophers), and the civil gods (gods as used by people and priests in worship and sacrifice). Of course we do not have false gods in those formal particular ways in contemporary Anglicanism, but in our post-Lambeth unease and distress I do believe we can apply a similar imagery to our argument concerning the fall of Anglicanism as a worldwide institution.

**What, then, are the false gods, in trust of whom the Anglican empire has disintegrated? First, the false god of table conversation.** One might think that to advertise the triumph of a particular false god would be unfortunate and injurious to one's reputation, but time and time again, endlessly, spokespeople have declared Lambeth to be a triumph because "We have brought everyone to the table...we have listened to every voice...we have told our stories...we have listened." Yet it is hard to see this as the hallmark of a gospel-driven church. Where in the Pauline or Petrine epistles would we see that triumphing in inclusive, indeterminate and eventually undiscerning conversation is a gift of the "true god", a genuine virtue of the faith community, a biblical calling for the people whose lives are rooted in Christ? Where do we ever read in the whole of scripture of 'bringing people to the table' as being a genuine ambition of the people of God? Courteous conversations around tables, especially if they be dinner tables, are a nicety, undoubtedly; but those endless conversations are unproductive of effect and outcome, and never go anywhere. A Windsor Continuation Group? Let's talk about it. A Pastoral Forum? Let's talk more. An Anglican Covenant Design Group? Let's bring all the voices to the table and talk even more.

Which leads me to the next false god. Two, the false god of indecision. The nearest I ever got to military service was a stint in the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve (the Wavy Navy) before I emigrated to Canada. But I think it is true that in military situations, as surely in business, professions, and sport, indecision is a killer. While Rome may dither and wonder which gods to placate, which voice to follow, single minded and decisive Alaric storms the walls and takes the Forum. Lambeth 2008 was set up in a way to make decisions impossible, its daily indabas being open-ended conversation pieces, its non-synodical and unparliamentary formats being refusals to even consider the possibility of making decisions. Yet it is not stretching the imagery too far to argue that we are in some degree of warfare all round this Communion, ecclesiastical skirmishes by day and outright spiritual warfare by night.

Meanwhile we plebeian soldiers wait patiently for our instructions, for our orders: we wait patiently for someone — anyone! — to make a decision. And if no decision comes down from on high, then we will be forced to make our own decisions, because life must go on: the sabbath ceremonies must continue: our theologies must be re-embraced: some actions denied and others refused. Which leads me to the next false god.

Three, the false god of refusal to exercise authority. The glory of Anglicanism, some would say, is its lack of a central curia, the replacement of il papa with a primus inter pares. All this sounds delightful, especially to liberal-minded ecclesiastical individualists, but it makes it impossible to exercise authority at any level other than the local diocesan level, where bishops are indeed empowered with authority. But at the global level? One could argue, perhaps, that this false god is not necessarily the refusal to exercise authority but the very impossibility of exercising authority because the structures of Anglican Communion have voided all mechanisms of authority. And that is true. But again, as with bringing people to the conversation table, there is a pride and a conceit in this refusal to exercise authority, as if the false god gives god-given freedom - as if this false god is the divine affirmation of self-authenticating faith. All that happens, though, is that in the face of a refusal to exercise authority at the level of Lambeth or anywhere internationally, authority slides down the scales on to the local national church, the local diocese and the local parish, and Anglicanism is invaded by a creeping congregationalism. Each Anglican parish ends up doing its own thing.

Four, the false god of conceit (yet we are so irrelevant). Six hundred robed bishops marching through London to demonstrate in favor of the Millennial Goals is a glorious sight, a feast for the eyes, pretty in red. That this march for poverty should end up in a tea party at Buckingham Palace, that the annual salaries of those bishops probably exceeds the gross national product of a small African country, that the march was not even a March for Jesus, should open our eyes to the awfulness of pretense married to conceit, and their useless offspring, irrelevance. In the great scheme of things, Anglicans do not matter very much:

we do not count for very much: and, as dying churches, we count for much less than we used to. Yet we are so proud of ourselves, and usually that pride is expressed apophatically, in the negative: ah, we say, we're not like those crazy pentecostals or those over-zealous baptists or those right wing fundamentalists.

P.D.James, the author of famous detective stories featuring Commander Adam Dalgleish, has this commentary on one of her characters. "His former Sunday attendance at church with Helen had been a weekly affirmation of his Englishness and of acceptable behaviour, a mildly agreeable obligation devoid of religious fervor. His parents had distrusted religious enthusiasm, and any wild clerical innovations which threatened their comfortable orthodoxy had been summed up by his mother. 'We're C of E, darling, we don't do that sort of thing.'" But we pulled off a very nice Lambeth, didn't we: cultured and refined. All rather splendid.

**The false god of unity at any price.** Cynics have long remarked that Jesus's prayer in John 17, that his followers "may be one", remains the classically unanswered prayer of the New Testament. But that's not completely true, and those of us who have had the privilege of travel, of ministry and fellowship across denominational boundaries with Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant and the myriad of little gospel chapels around the world have experienced the unitive joy of the Great Church Militant, the unitive joy that comes from genuine fellowship at the foot of the cross, the unity of sacrifice and self-denial and obedience. In stark and terrible contrast is the desperate ambition to keep the Anglican Communion together at any cost, at any price, and then to present to the world the apparently successful realisation of that dream. Yet the indomitable reality is that such a unity of face can only be sustained at the expense of truth: we may happily drown our differences and submerge our separations, but the so-called unity achieved at such a devastating price is no Christian unity at all. It is merely a unity of superficiality, not a unity of substance.

I suppose I have long now been embarrassed to be an Anglican, or, more pointedly, when I have travelled overseas and engaged in missionary work with churches, been embarrassed to be a member of the Anglican Church of Canada, seeking to explain and justify myself against charges of my church's infidelity, abandonment and desertion. From Plato to Marx, intellectuals have suggested the inevitability of stagist evolution that societies move unstoppably from democracy to tyranny (Plato) from capitalism to communism (Marx). I fear that the next stage of my Anglican evolutionary journey might be from embarrassment to shame.

*Posted both on Anglican Mainstream ([www.anglican-mainstream.net/2008/09/09/lambeth-from-a-distance/](http://www.anglican-mainstream.net/2008/09/09/lambeth-from-a-distance/)) and in the Diocese of BC's Diocesan Post, Sept 2008 ([www.bc.anglican.ca/content/DPSeptember2008WEB.pdf](http://www.bc.anglican.ca/content/DPSeptember2008WEB.pdf))*