

## ANGLICANS AND THE INTERPRETATION OF SCRIPTURE

### INTRODUCTION – BIBLE, BELIEF AND WORSHIP

Original title: “The Anglican Understanding and Use of Scripture”  
I queried the use of “the” and the singular (in “understanding and use”).

I was always taught that Anglicans have no separate doctrine and belief – this is rather a commonly repeated tenet of Anglicans.

Archbishop Geoffrey Fisher: “We have no doctrine of our own – we only possess the Catholic doctrine of the Catholic Church enshrined in the Catholic creeds and those creeds we hold without addition or diminution.”<sup>1</sup>

Bishop Stephen Neil: “There are no special Anglican doctrines, there is no particular Anglican theology.”<sup>2</sup>

This view was challenged by Bishop Stephen Sykes in an essay originally written for the Lambeth Conference of 1988 and reprinted in his *Unashamed Anglicanism*, in which he argues at least for an Anglican understanding of the church, if not doctrine, which also includes a commitment to the public reading of scripture.<sup>3</sup>

I would be interested to know how Canon Jane Steen’s lecture handled this topic of Anglican Belief last week! (not yet on the website). But at the very least, even granting Bishop Sykes’ point about an Anglican understanding of the church, there is no one, single Anglican doctrine for the understanding and use of scripture.

Furthermore, the use of the singular “scripture” itself is somewhat problematic. After all, *ta biblia* in Greek, the word which gives us our singular word ‘Bible’, is actually plural, and means ‘the books’ so the phrase, “the scriptures” is a much better translation of *ta biblia* – and recognizes the essential plurality of the scriptures, namely that the Bible is a library containing some 66 books, written in several different languages, in a variety of literary genres and types (narrative, poetry, drama, prophetic oracles, biographies, letters and so forth) over a period

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<sup>1</sup> G.F. Fisher, speech on his return from tour of Australia and New Zealand, Westminster Central Hall, 30<sup>th</sup> Jan 1951, quoted in Church Times, 2<sup>nd</sup> Feb., 1951, p.1; see further on this topic, Colin Podmore, *Aspects of Anglican Identity* (Church House Publishing, 2005) pp. 38-39.

<sup>2</sup> S. Neill, *Anglicanism*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), p. 417.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Sykes, *Unashamed Anglicanism* (DLT, 1995), pp. 101-121.

of at least a thousand years. The use of the singular phrase ‘the Bible says’ imposes a singular uniformity upon the scriptures which is, I would argue, profoundly unbiblical! The canon of the holy scriptures themselves include plurality and diversity, within the overall unity of the word of God.

To look for what Anglicans really believe, it is customary to turn instead to our liturgy and worship – as the usual phrase puts it, *lex orandi, lex credendi* (which I might paraphrase as ‘how we pray is how we believe’)– so maybe Andrew Nunn’s lecture in this series (May 22<sup>nd</sup> 2008) might be more relevant here.

Certainly scripture is absolutely central in Anglican worship:

- There are always two readings OT/NT at Morning and Evening Prayer; three at Holy Communion, OT, Epistle and Gospel.
- Tradition of sermons to expound scripture readings. Parodies of vicars begin “My text today . . .” – again indicate the importance of the scriptures.
- Use of Psalms at the centre of worship, saying or singing them together in an ordered way, several psalms every morning and evening to go through the whole Psalter in a month in BCP.
- Yet perhaps even more important, our liturgy from Cranmer onwards has been thoroughly soaked in the scriptures – all the phrases drummed into us by constant use are often verses of scripture, or paraphrases of scripture.

So the first conclusion of this lecture must be that the use and interpretation of the scriptures is absolutely central to Anglican life, worship, teaching and belief.

Despite that I want to argue that, as there has been no singular Anglican doctrine or belief in general, so there has been no singular Anglican use and interpretation of the Bible. I want to suggest three things tonight:

- The use and interpretation of the scriptures has been central through our history.
- However, the approach to and understanding of the scriptures has always been pluriform both synchronically and diachronically – that is to say, different understandings and attitudes have been held by loyal Anglicans obviously at different times throughout history

- but also by different leaders and authorities at the same time in specific periods.
- And, thirdly, that the debates about these differences have been constant throughout history – accompanied by interesting and varying attitudes to authority, both of the Bible and of central church authorities.

## **HISTORICAL OVERVIEW**

It is inevitable that we will have to spend some of this lecture looking at history and our tradition.

### **Early Period**

Term Anglican is an odd one for Church of England – not in any of our official formularies or statements of identity. Just means ‘English’ – and therefore it is a mistake to think that ‘Anglicanism’ started in the Reformation. We must go back to the earliest period.

My experience as undergraduate, reading Classics at Oxford, when a fellow student was a competitor on Mastermind:

One of her opponents was asked the question, ‘who brought Christianity to England?’ – and the opponent’s answer ‘St Augustine’ was accepted – but plainly wrong. My protests to the BBC were ignored!

200 St Alban – Christians in Roman period, Lullingstone villa, Hadrian’s Wall, etc

314 Council of Arles – three bishops, London, York, and another, poor – collection to get home.

Missions of saints like Patrick and David to Wales and Ireland.

Roman Legions left c.410 – but Christianity in these isles – therefore Anglican expressions of Christian faith – did not.

Columba (c. 521-97), Cuthbert, Chad, etc – various missions, monasteries, etc tradition for Iona, Kells, Aidan established see on Lindisfarne (635).

Importance of the scriptures for the Christians in these lands at this period is seen by development of illustrated gospels.

But please note that they used the Western tradition, using own Latin translation, Western order of gospels, which therefore affected evangelists’ symbols (John = Lion, Mark = Eagle).

596 St Augustine, lands at Kent, brings gospels book in Jerome’s Vulgate translation in the canonical order (*St Augustine’s Gospels*, Corpus Christi College Cambridge, MS 286).

The relationship between Augustine’s mission and the more indigenous Celtic church led to arguments over the Bible and central authority.

Resolved at Synod of Whitby (664) – imposes central authority of Rome, the date of Easter, Jerome’s translation, canonical order of gospels, etc. Followed by the Council of Hertford in 672 under the new Archbishop of Canterbury, Theodore of Tarsus, to agree a set of canons for the whole English church, together with the creation of the diocesan system (still the basis for the Church of England today).

*Book of Durrow* Trinity College, Dublin, MS A.4.5) may be seen as the last protest against centralising authority, with Mark still with the eagle, and being written around the same time AD 650-75?

So note use of the Bible is central, plus debates about central authority.

1066 invasion had papal blessing to get central authority sorted out.

### **Reformation and Elizabethan Settlement 1529-59**

Henry VIII reopens the old questions – Bible and central authority

Bible translations (Wycliffe, Tyndale, Coverdale, plus others)

Rome as central authority v Continent (*sola scriptura*, Bible as authority)

Henry VIII nationalises the church, replaces papal authority with his own, introduces Bible into every church (1538) and worship starts to move into the vernacular (English Litany in 1544), but keeps the rest of it between Rome and Geneva. He certainly did not go as far towards the centrality of the scriptures as many of his advisers, such as Cranmer, wanted.<sup>4</sup>

Swing of the pendulum between Edward VI (1547-53, under influence of continental reformers, Bible as sole authority, enacting the provision of the Great Bible and preaching from the scriptures, together with the 1549 and 1552 Prayer Books, see Cranmer’s Preface)<sup>5</sup> and Mary (1553-58, back under Pope’s authority, restoration of Latin Mass, etc).

So once again, back to my main theme – that the interpretation of the scriptures is central to the founding period of the Church of England – and yet also accompanied by debates about the nature of authority and relationship to central authorities.

Elizabethan Settlement as *via media* between the two, Act of Supremacy 1559, reintroduced 1552 BCP, followed by 39 Articles in 1571. This restored what Greer calls the “central place afforded scripture . . .

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<sup>4</sup> See Rowan A. Greer, *Anglican Approaches to Scripture: From the Reformation to the Present* (New York: Herder and Herder, 2006), pp. 2-6.

<sup>5</sup> See Rowan A. Greer, *Anglican Approaches to Scripture*, pp. 6-9.

scripture remains the prime authority”,<sup>6</sup> against both the pressures of Rome and the struggle with the Puritans.  
(See Colin Slee’s lecture on the Elizabethan Settlement May 29<sup>th</sup> 2008)

## **The 39 Articles**

The Articles are essentially Cranmer, and appeared under Edward VI in 1553, though minor revisions under Elizabeth in 1563 and 1571.<sup>7</sup>

First thing to note is that unlike many Statements of Faith or Confessions, the Articles do not start with a statement about the Bible – but about God as Holy Trinity (Article I), and especially about Jesus Christ (Articles II-IV) and the later 1571 insertion of Article V about the Holy Ghost. As Oliver O’Donovan notes, “It is Jesus who contains all things necessary to salvation, who is the locus of God’s self-giving and self revelation. God incarnate in a man, not a book.”<sup>8</sup>

Compare both Islam and Judaism, which both stress the eternity of God’s revealing word in the Koran and the Torah – but for Christians the revealing Word is a person, Jesus Christ, to whom the scriptures witness.

Article VI “Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation.” The rest of the Article lists the recognized books of the Old Testament, and refers to the undisputed books of the New Testament. Of the “other Books”, listed which we would call Deutero-Canonical or Aprocrypha, “the Church doth read for example of life and instruction of manners; but yet doth it not apply them to establish any doctrine” – again a classic mediating position between accepting these as holy scriptures (Rome), yet not rejecting them totally either (continental reformers)!

Notice carefully what this says about the purpose of the scriptures. As Rowan Greer notes, “The function of scripture to contain all things necessary to salvation must surely mean that its chief purpose is to form Christians and to guide them towards the destiny prepared for them by God and revealed to them through Christ. While it is probably

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<sup>6</sup> Rowan A. Greer, *Anglican Approaches to Scripture*, pp. 9-10.

<sup>7</sup> See Oliver O’Donovan, *On the 39 Articles: A Conversation with Tudor Christianity* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1986), pp. 10-11.

<sup>8</sup> See Oliver O’Donovan, *On the 39 Articles: A Conversation with Tudor Christianity* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1986), p. 50.

impossible to argue that scripture cannot be used to resolve religious controversy, this would not appear to be its chief purpose.’<sup>9</sup>

Article VII makes it clear that “the Old Testament is not contrary to the New: for both in the Old and New Testament everlasting life is offered to Mankind by Christ who is the only Mediator between God and Man, being both God and Man”. Note again the stress that it is Christ who is the revelation of God and the means of salvation – not the Bible. See again O’Donovan’s previous comment about Jesus as the centre of revelation. O’Donovan goes on to note “the Articles, at least, are not inclined to bibliolatry”.<sup>10</sup> It is significant that this Article does try to deal with the relationship of the Old to the New Testament, especially the question about the Mosaic Law by distinguishing between “Ceremonies and Rites” which “do not bind Christian men” and “the Commandments which are called Moral”. However, this distinction is not so easy to maintain in practice today – see for instance the debate about whether the verses about homosexuality in Leviticus 18 and 20 are ceremonial (which is the context in which they occur in scripture) and thus not binding today, or moral and still binding.<sup>11</sup>

Article VIII argues that the three creeds, Apostles’, Nicene and Athanasius’s Creeds “ought thoroughly to be received and believed: for they may be proved by most certain warrants of holy Scripture”. So here we have scripture being placed over the creeds in deciding which creeds to accept.

Finally Article XX goes back to our other theme of tonight’s lecture – the authority of the church, which is recognized, “and yet it is not lawful for the Church to ordain any thing that is contrary to God’s Word written, neither may it so expound one place of Scripture, that it be repugnant to another.”

Several things stand out from this brief analysis of the Articles, particularly that the scriptures occupy a primary place as the witness to Jesus Christ, the living Word of God, but that they have as their main purpose a practical purpose to instruct us in the way of salvation; if they

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<sup>9</sup> Rowan A. Greer, *Anglican Approaches to Scripture: From the Reformation to the Present* (New York: Herder and Herder, 2006), see pp. x-xvi on ‘The Sufficiency of Scripture’, quotation from p. xi.

<sup>10</sup> Oliver O’Donovan, *On the 39 Articles: A Conversation with Tudor Christianity* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1986), p. 50; see his Chapter 4, pp. 49-64, for his discussion of the scriptures and the Articles. NB Prof O’Donovan’s book has been reprinted as a resource for the Lambeth Conference 2008.

<sup>11</sup> See Philip Groves (ed.) *The Anglican Communion and Homosexuality: A Resource to Listening and Dialogue* (London: SPCK, 2008 ), pp. 87-88.

are used to answer questions, they are about doctrines and morals, but not necessarily as the ultimate source for all human knowledge, science, technology or the way of life. As W.H. Griffith Thomas put it in his classic exposition of the 39 Articles, “We use it against an extreme Protestantism or Puritanism. In the sixteenth century men of this type taught that everything is in Scripture, and that nothing else was to be valued in Church life. But the Bible is a book of principles, not of rules, and presupposes natural law, social law, and civic law [referring to Hooker, *Eccl. Pol.* Bk I]. As spiritual life is varied it can and must express itself in various ways.”<sup>12</sup>

Also, this variety means that the articles were intended to be comprehensive: “they were so framed as to comprehend as many as possible within the Church of England”.<sup>13</sup>

Furthermore, they were not seen as innovations, as something new. Rather the Church of England saw its ‘re-formation’ as getting back to the earlier, purer faith of the primitive Church – hence the Anglican devotion to patristic studies<sup>14</sup> – and it did so understanding it as a mean between the extremes of Rome and Geneva.

As Oliver O’Donovan puts it, “the Anglican doctrinal tradition, born of an attempt . . . to achieve comprehensiveness within the limits of a Christianity both catholic and reformed, is not susceptible to the kind of textual definition which the Confessions (on the Protestant side) and the conciliar decrees (on the Catholic) afford. One might almost say that Anglicans have taken the authority of the Scriptures and the Catholic creeds too seriously to be comfortable with another single doctrinal norm.”<sup>15</sup>

So even in the Articles my two main points stand out again – the important place of scripture with the recognition of debates about authority.

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<sup>12</sup> W.H. Griffith Thomas, *The Principles of Theology: An Introduction to the Thirty Nine Articles* (London: Longmans, 1930), p. 133; see his Section II, pp. 101-152 for full discussion of these articles.

<sup>13</sup> Colin Podmore, *Aspects of Anglican Identity* (Church House Publishing, 2005), p. 4.

<sup>14</sup> See Arthur Middleton, *Fathers and Anglicans: The Limits of Orthodoxy* (Leominster: Gracewing, 2001) for further discussion of how devotion to study of the Fathers was crucial to the development of Anglican identity.

<sup>15</sup> Oliver O’Donovan, *On the 39 Articles: A Conversation with Tudor Christianity* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1986), p. 12.

## **Richard Hooker (c 1554-1600)**

Hooker was deputy professor of Hebrew at Oxford in 1579, master of the Temple Church (1585-91), then he left the Temple to produce his great *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* in eight books. It is clear from, for instance, his discussion of scripture in Bk. III (esp. III.8.13 and ff.) that scripture is absolutely central and authoritative for Hooker, though he does also refer both the importance of the church and of reason – the beginnings of what many refer to as the three-fold cord of scripture, tradition and reason. Nonetheless, Hooker’s thought is complex and as Greer points out, “not entirely systematic” with “a number of possible Hookers” emerging. However, Greer concludes thus: “No matter how we assess Hooker, scripture occupies the central position in his thought; and it is sufficient to reveal all things necessary to salvation. Thus, its primary function is to guide people to holiness and to the blessedness of salvation. This does not require it to reveal accessory matters and arrangements that are capable of change, such as ecclesiastical polity. Scripture overlaps in complicated ways with the law of reason and the law of nature. It does not always explain itself and so must be interpreted. Our interpretations can never exhaust the meaning of scripture, and they are fallible as it is not.”<sup>16</sup>

## **The Seventeenth Century – Civil War and Restoration**

Early 17<sup>th</sup> century: King James I/VI, 1604 Hampton Conference, debates with Puritans, leading to the KJV translation in 1611; note that the Preface to KJV expect objections from both sides, to “be traduced by popish persons” and “maligned by self-conceited brethren” – i.e. once again, a middle way between Rome and the Puritans. The important thing to note is that once again, all sides are appealing to the scriptures for their authority.<sup>17</sup>

Hence the Puritan Pilgrim Fathers going off to found a new way of living in America in 1620, and subsequent groups.

(See Colin Slee’s lecture)

Mid-17<sup>th</sup> century: Charles I, Civil war – again, Bible and authority central. Greer analyses three representatives from this period: Joseph Hall (1574-1656), William Chillingworth (1602-44) and Henry Hammond (1605-60), whom he suggests might be seen, anachronistically, as low-, broad- and high-church. They all agree on the

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<sup>16</sup> Rowan A. Greer, *Anglican Approaches to Scripture*, p. 30; see pp. 15-31 for his treatment of Hooker overall.

<sup>17</sup> Rowan A. Greer, *Anglican Approaches to Scripture*, pp. 32-34.

“central place for scripture” and that it is sufficient for its purpose in revealing what is necessary for salvation. Despite their disagreements on the role of reason and tradition, “all would insist upon the fallibility of our use of scripture” and agree that scripture is “what guides and forms the Christian life in the corporate setting of the church”.<sup>18</sup>

This is of course followed by the Restoration of the monarchy and the church under Charles II, which gives us the 1662 BCP. Greer sets this period against the backdrop of the development of the natural sciences; 1662 was, after all, also the date of the founding of the Royal Society. Writers of this period stress the importance of reason as revealed in nature – and see this “as an ally of scripture”.<sup>19</sup> One key theologian from this period was John Pearson, whose book *An Exposition of the Creed* (first edition 1659, fifth edition 1683) went on to be enormously influential (leading him to be commemorated as a key Anglican divine on the wall of KCL chapel!) – but it is clear that it is all based on the scriptures: “I have laid the foundation upon the written word of God”.<sup>20</sup>

## **The Glorious Revolution and the Eighteenth Century**

The conversion of the heir apparent, the Duke of York, to Roman Catholicism in 1669 and his later succession to the throne as James II in 1685 led to the next swing of the pendulum between Rome and continental Protestantism with the Glorious Revolution of 1688 and the succession of William of Orange. This brought about the Toleration Act of 1689 – which, while not giving full toleration of dissenters, did at least bring to end the attempts by various sides to enforce a narrow religious view on others.

Meanwhile, this period is also marked by another swing of the pendulum in our story of the relationship of the Bible and church authority as the Latitudinarians became a major force in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century. Building further upon the importance of reason as revealed in nature, they stressed how the complementary relationship between God’s revelation in the scriptures and his revelation in the natural world around understood through reason. The Cambridge Platonists went further, emphasising reason so much that they appeared to be departing from scriptural beliefs. Such approaches affected leading Anglicans like John Tillotson (Archbishop of Canterbury 1691-94) and Gilbert Burnet who became

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<sup>18</sup> Rowan A. Greer, *Anglican Approaches to Scripture*, pp. 34-61, quotations from p. 60.

<sup>19</sup> See Rowan A. Greer, *Anglican Approaches to Scripture*, pp. 62-69.

<sup>20</sup> John Pearson, *An Exposition of the Creed*, ed. E. Burton (Oxford University Press, 1833), in his note ‘To The Reader’, p. xx.

Bishop of Salisbury in 1689 and wrote his *Exposition of the Thirty Nine Articles* in 1699. Greer concludes, “they agree that reason must be an ally, a friend of scripture, even though this friend sometimes seems to be gaining the upper hand and so displacing scripture”.<sup>21</sup> It is not surprising therefore that this period into the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century quickly becomes dominated by Deism.

But by now you will be expecting the pendulum to swing back again, and the Evangelical Revival is the obvious reaction to such stress on natural philosophy, reason, Deism and the Latitudinarians. It was the concern of John Wesley (1703-91) for the methodical reading of the scriptures that got them the description of being ‘Methodists’. This important re-emphasis upon scripture leads to many positive things which came out of the Evangelical revival, which goes on to have great effect on the life of the country through the Wesleys’ preaching missions, the debates with Whitefield, the conversion of John Newton, and the work of William Wilberforce and the Clapham, all with a stress on biblical piety and purity. However, such movements not only revived the renewed the Church of England but led to schism and separation, with the formation of the Methodist Church, and other groups who came to hold views about biblical inerrancy which went well beyond traditional Anglican understandings of scripture. It is interesting to reflect upon some of the recent developments in our own day where the general evangelical revival of recent decades is once again leading to threats of schism arising out of a particularly conservative approach to biblical authority.

### **The Nineteenth Century – High Church and Scholarship**

But before we get to that, we must note more swings of the pendulum through the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with the inevitable reaction back towards the importance of the church and its tradition as seen in the Oxford movement. John Henry Newman published Tracts 83 and 85 in 1838 about ‘Holy Scripture in its Relation to the Catholic Creed’, seeking what he called “more adequate and explicit Scripture proof” to argue that “all those who try to form their Creed by Scripture only, fall away from the Church and her doctrine, and join one or other sect or party”.<sup>22</sup> What is significant for tonight’s concern however it that, if the Latitudinarian emphasis on reason displaced scripture one way, and the evangelical revival’s reaction to be more biblical led to ideas of inerrancy and splits

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<sup>21</sup> Rowan A. Greer, *Anglican Approaches to Scripture*, pp. 69-77, quotation from p. 71.

<sup>22</sup> John Henry Newman, *Discussions and Arguments on Various Subjects* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1911; first published 1872, 1.1, p. 110; see Rowan A. Greer, *Anglican Approaches to Scripture*, p. 97.

off into Methodism and other more conservative groups, Newman's restored emphasis upon the church and the tradition of course led him inevitably to leave the Church of England for Rome.

Yet the 19<sup>th</sup> century is also an important period for the development of biblical scholarship. Benjamin Jowett's famous essay 'On the Interpretation of Scripture' notes that "It is a strange, though familiar fact, that great differences of opinion exist respecting the Interpretation of Scripture".<sup>23</sup> Here Jowett rejects any suggestion that belief in biblical inspiration must lead to verbal inerrancy, but rather argues for what becomes our standard historical-critical method of studying the Bible with his basic principle, "interpret the Scripture like any other book".<sup>24</sup> This led to the great tradition of Anglican biblical scholarship under people like Lightfoot (1828-89, 1875 Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity at Cambridge, then Bishop of Durham from 1879), Westcott (1825-1901, Regius Professor of Divinity at Cambridge 1870, then Bishop of Durham 1890-1901), Hort (1828-92), and so on.

### **The Twentieth Century – yet more swings!**

These swings of the pendulum continues through the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the catholic emphasis of the later 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries probably beginning to decline gently after the 1928 Prayer Book debates, the shorter liberal ascendancy of the 1960s to Robert Runcie's time as Archbishop of Canterbury in the 1980s, with yet another evangelical revival with the charismatic movement from 1970s through to today. Once again the issues of the interpretation of the Bible and its relationship authority in relation to the church, tradition, reason and experience are all central in today's debates – and of course, have led to further divisions. The arguments over women, gays, the relationship to other faiths and increasing secularisation, have split not just the church but even the various groupings within the church e.g. traditional v affirming catholics, conservative v open evangelicals,

So I hope it is not an over-simplification to conclude from this brief survey that the Bible and the authority of the church, and their relationship to tradition, reason and experience, have remained as key issues throughout the whole of the history of the Church of England, with

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<sup>23</sup> Benjamin Jowett, 'On the Interpretation of Scripture' in *Essays and Reviews* (London: John W. Parker and Son, 1860), p. 330; see Rowan A. Greer, *Anglican Approaches to Scripture*, pp. 109-115.

<sup>24</sup> Benjamin Jowett, 'On the Interpretation of Scripture', p. 377.

the pendulum swinging backwards and forwards between the two, or even combining the two (and other aspects as well).

Colin Podmore concludes his *Aspects of Anglican Identity* with some reflections in which he notes that three themes have run through his study: catholicity, continuity and change.<sup>25</sup> Catholicity reminds us of the Church of England's claim to be 'part of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church, worshipping the one true God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit' in relationship to the rest of the wider church throughout history and across the world. We have continuity with all that history and tradition – which is why I began with the earliest church in these islands and the historical survey – yet also that same history and tradition is marked by constant change, which comes through argument and debate. And always at the heart of this has been the interpretation of the holy scriptures.

## **ANGLICAN IDENTITY AND COHERENCE**

This history of debate and various groupings has raised all sorts of issues about the coherence of the Church of England – yet it goes on being one Body (most of the time – and even those who leave have a habit of coming back, e.g. many clergy who left over the ordination of women and went to Rome have returned). Meanwhile, the Anglican Communion has just grown up organically out of the Church of England in the colonies – and this colonial history and post-colonial experience lies at the heart of many of our current debates. There have been several important attempts at defining the Communion and the Church of England:

### **Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral 1888**

Tried to define four features of the church to bring the early Anglican Communion into clearer focus:

- Holy Scriptures of Old and New Testaments, as 'containing all things necessary to salvation' and as being the rule and ultimate standard of faith.
- Apostles' and Nicene Creeds
- Two Sacraments of Baptism and Lord's Supper
- The Historic Episcopate, 'locally adapted'

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<sup>25</sup> Colin Podmore, *Aspects of Anglican Identity* (Church House Publishing, 2005), pp. 160-63.

Note the reference to Article VI in the first, plus the scriptures as the ‘rule and standard of faith’.

Thus once again, the scriptures are seen as the primary source and authority for faith, but also in the context of the creeds, sacraments and authority seen in the bishops ‘locally adapted’.

These four aspects were reaffirmed in Resolution 18 of the Lambeth Conference 1988.<sup>26</sup>

In response, the Inter-Anglican Theological and Doctrinal Commission began their attempt to define the Anglican way with:

“Anglicans affirm the sovereign authority of the Holy Scriptures as the medium through which God by the Spirit communicates his word in the Church and thus enables people to respond with understanding and faith. The Scriptures are ‘uniquely inspired witness to divine revelation’, and ‘the primary norm for Christian faith and life’.”<sup>27</sup>

### **The Declaration of Assent**

Canon C 15 of the Church of England came into force 1<sup>st</sup> Sept 1975, requiring all those being ordained, or licensed to any kind of ministry (including lay ministry such as Readers) to make this declaration of Assent. It is now placed at the front of *Common Worship* (p. xi), while Amending Canon (2005) requires it to be made publicly before the congregation at the earliest opportunity on a Sunday.

#### *Preface:*

The Church of England is part of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church, worshipping the one true God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It professes the faith uniquely revealed in the Holy Scriptures and set forth in the catholic creeds, which faith the Church is called upon to proclaim afresh in each generation. Led by the Holy Spirit, it has borne witness to Christian truth in its historic formularies, the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion, *The Book of Common Prayer* and the Ordering of Bishops Priests and Deacons. In the declaration you are about to make, will you affirm your loyalty to this inheritance of faith as your inspiration and

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<sup>26</sup> See Sykes, *Unashamed Anglicanism*, p. xvii.

<sup>27</sup> The Virginia Report, para. 3.6; Phil Groves, p. 83 – get full reference..

guidance under God in bringing the grace and truth of Christ to this generation and making him known to those in your care?

*Declaration of Assent:*

I, A B, do so affirm, and accordingly declare my belief in the faith which is revealed in the Holy Scriptures and set forth in the catholic creeds and to which the historic formularies of the Church of England bear witness; and in public prayer and administration of the sacraments, I will use only the forms of service which are authorized or allowed by Canon.

Fascinating story related by Colin Podmore about how it came into being, drafted initially in February 1968 by John Austin Baker, (later Bishop of Salisbury), and amended by ordinary Synod members including a parish priest (Fr Raymond Avent) and a lay man, (Mr Bernard Stanley, a solicitor) and by the Revision Committee, to be almost unanimously accepted by Synod (only one priest and two lay people voted against). Significant that people from both catholic and evangelical traditions played key roles in the process of emendation through what Colin Podmore calls ‘the much-maligned Synodical process’.<sup>28</sup>

A number of things are significant for this lecture’s concern. Firstly note there is no mention of the word ‘Anglican’ – merely a geographical definition of ‘the Church of England’ which is described as ‘part of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church, worshipping the one true God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit’, all of which goes back to my basic point that there is no specific Anglican doctrine or belief in general, nor about the Bible in particular.

Furthermore, the Declaration makes clear an important hierarchy: as ministers, we have to declare our

- belief in the faith
- which is revealed in the Holy Scriptures
- and set forth in the catholic creeds
- and to which the historic formularies of the Church of England bear witness

We declare our belief in the Christian faith first and foremost, which is not further defined or clarified by any list of doctrines or propositions,

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<sup>28</sup> For an excellent explanation and discussion of its production, see Colin Podmore, *Aspects of Anglican Identity* (Church House Publishing, 2005), Chapter 4, pp. 42-57; quote from p. 57.

which is the common approach in continental reformed confessions or evangelical bases of faith.

This faith is then ‘uniquely revealed in the Holy Scriptures’ – which gives the Bible a primacy of position, but it is described in the plurality of the ‘Holy Scriptures’. The faith revealed in the Holy Scriptures is then further described as ‘set forth in the catholic creeds’, i.e. something we share with the rest of the wider church of God – and only then finally do we note how ‘the historic formularies of the Church of England bear witness’ to it. I do think this sequence is extremely important both for tonight – for Anglican approaches to the scriptures – and for our understanding of the Church and our ministry more generally.

It is also significant that it is this faith which ‘the Church is called upon to proclaim afresh in each generation’ and the new minister must declare their ‘loyalty to this inheritance of faith as your inspiration and guidance under God in bringing the grace and truth of Christ to this generation and making him known to those in your care’. To be an Anglican is to stand in that tradition, believing in the Christian faith, uniquely revealed in the Holy Scriptures, and set forth in the catholic creeds, and to accept the history by which the historic formularies of the Church of England bear witness to that faith and work within that tradition in declaring the gospel today. Finally, of course, the commitment made is to use only the forms of worship, ‘public prayer and administration of the sacraments’, authorized or allowed by canon – which takes us back to my opening point about *lex orandi, lex credendi*, or ‘how we pray is how we believe’, all under that unique revelation in the scriptures, but worked out in our history and tradition.

### **Scripture, Tradition, Reason – and Experience**

The issue at the heart of all of this is, of course, the interpretation of the scriptures in the light of the variety of readings we find. As Greer puts it, “But we obviously encounter quite differing construals of scripture. . . Careful interpreters will respect the text, including those passages that present difficulties to them. And they will beware of hearing in scripture no more than the echo of their own voices.”<sup>29</sup>

We saw from our historical survey how the idea of ‘a three-fold cord’ of scripture, tradition and reason begins to emerge with Hooker, and how the relationship between these three ebbed and flowed through the

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<sup>29</sup> Rowan A. Greer, *Anglican Approaches to Scripture*, pp. xi-xii.

various swings of the pendulum. This ‘three-fold cord’ is often overstressed in accounts of Anglican approaches to scripture, something Greer is rightly cautious about – even if it can be found in many of our key figures. Similarly McAdoo comments:

“Having listened to these voices from our past I venture to think that it is a fair assessment to judge that seventeenth century Anglican theologians did not use the threefold appeal like the Stamp Act of 1765 to guarantee by a cursory reference to origins the authenticity of this or that article of belief or doctrinal formulation. Rather, within the given limitations of the scholarship and the knowledge of their times, did they apply the criteria with sensitivity, honesty, and freedom, and in some cases, with a surprising modernity. No review of how they went about it could fairly describe their procedure as simplistic. Is it possible for us in our situation to do the same, given a changed perspective in society and in scholarship?”<sup>30</sup>

The continuing attraction of the three-fold appeal can be seen in comments such as that found in the Virginia Report: “The Scriptures, however, must be translated, read, and understood, and their meaning grasped through a continuing process of interpretation. Since the seventeenth century Anglicans have held that Scripture is to be understood and read in the light afforded by the contexts of ‘tradition’ and ‘reason’.”<sup>31</sup>

### **Different groupings**

Our brief survey of history has to conclude that it is a very mixed picture in which two things stand out:

- The centrality of the scriptures in some form
- Debates and arguments about authority

But also a third element has become apparent, namely how this has all been played out in the interaction between the various groups or parties in the church.

The Church of England has always been a mixture of various parties: High v Low, Church/tradition v Bible, Catholics v Evangelicals – with latitudinarians or liberals in the middle appealing to reason and experience?

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<sup>30</sup> H. R. McAdoo, *Anglican Heritage: Theology and Spirituality* (Canterbury Press, Norwich, 1991), pp. 101-2.

<sup>31</sup> The Virginia Report, para. 3.7; Phil Groves, p. 84 – get full reference..

Woolf and Booty have brought these groups together with the three-fold cord idea in their observation:

“Anglicanism may be defined as a way of being Christian that involves a *pastorally and liturgically oriented dialogue between four partners: catholics, evangelicals, and advocates of reason and experience.*”<sup>32</sup>

Greer comments on this that “presumably the ‘catholics’ speak for tradition; the ‘evangelicals’ for scripture. We now have a quadruple cord or four-legged stool. But is the implication that all Anglicans will choose one of the four appeals, or that the appeals are to the same sort of authorities?”<sup>33</sup>

Of course, actually all three – or four – are needed but great debate about their relationship. Some suggest that this means that the scriptures are to be interpreted in the light of tradition and reason (but which can lead to putting these other two above the scriptures as an authority in the way that the Oxford movement stressed the church and the Latitudinarians the role of natural reason), while others rightly point out that the Anglican tradition has usually stressed the primacy of scripture over tradition and reason. Equally the questions arise of whose tradition and whose experience or reason should be taken into account.<sup>34</sup> Nor should it be assumed that tradition is the sole preserve of catholics, or scripture is safe with the evangelicals. Each group has its own traditions, and each group uses the scriptures in some way – and reason and experience or common to everyone.

### **Interplay and Dialogue – an Anglican method?**

Perhaps none of the above authorities or approaches is especially or distinctively Anglican, but the interplay and dialogue between them is distinctive and crucial.

In his early essay ‘What is Anglican Theology?’ in 1945, Michael Ramsey argued that “there is such a thing as Anglican theology” but that “it is neither a system nor a confession . . . but a method, a use and a direction”.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> William J. Woolf and John E. Booty, (eds.), *The Spirit of Anglicanism* (Wilton, Conn.: Morehouse-Barlow, 1982), p. 165.

<sup>33</sup> Rowan A. Greer, *Anglican Approaches to Scripture*, p. xviii.

<sup>34</sup> See Rowan A. Greer, *Anglican Approaches to Scripture*, pp. xvi-xxv.

<sup>35</sup> A. M. Ramsey, ‘What is Anglican Theology?’, *Theology* 48 (1945), pp. 2-6; quote from p. 6.

Bishop Stephen Sykes' important essay on 'The Genius of Anglicanism' which concludes his collection, *Unashamed Anglicanism*, argues that "it belongs inherently to Anglican practice that the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments should be publicly read to the whole Church in the native language of the hearers, as part of the Church's normal worship". This is, in part, because of the role played by the whole church in decision making and authority, under the bishops in Synod, but this results in what he calls a "both-and at the heart of . . . the ecclesiology I have been sketching. Its natural mode is to allow debate, disagreement, and conflict as a normal part of its life." He concludes by suggesting that this "consequential untidiness" is "in itself an authentic twentieth-century version of Richard Hooker's 'harmonious dissimilitude of those ways, whereby his Church upon earth is guided from age to age, throughout all the generations of men'." <sup>36</sup>

Greer quotes Sir Thomas Browne's dictum that scripture "is a Worke too hard for the teeth of time" and concludes: "This suggest to me that the Bible has a way of resisting all human attempts to tame it and make it serve human purposes and prejudices. Or, to put the point another way, we cannot suppose that our interpretations of scripture are easily identified with scripture itself and, still more, that they are in any sense infallible. For this reason, scripture functions primarily to guide Christians toward God through Christ and only secondarily as a rule designed to resolve religious controversies."<sup>37</sup>

## **MODERN EXAMPLES AND THE LAMBETH CONFERENCE**

### **Previous Lambeth Conferences**

Lambeth Conference first called in 1868 to debate Colenso – interpretation of the scriptures and relationship to authority – and relationship of Africa and the wider church.

However, other debates throughout development of Anglican Communion have also affected other Lambeth conferences – eg contraception (1908, 1920, 1930, 1958, 1968),<sup>38</sup> divorce (1968), women

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<sup>36</sup> Stephen Sykes, *Unashamed Anglicanism* (DLT, 1995), pp. 211-226, quotations from pp. 220 and 224-25, quoting Hooker, *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, III, xi, 8.

<sup>37</sup> Rowan A. Greer, *Anglican Approaches to Scripture*, pp. 14-15.

<sup>38</sup> For an account of the different resolutions showing "how the Conference moved from total opposition to qualified acceptance and then full acceptance", see Richard Harries, 'The Anglican Acceptance of Contraception' in his collection, *Questioning Belief* (SPCK 1995) and reprinted in

(1978, 1988), gays (1998) and relationships to other faiths especially Islam and secular society (2008?).  
Role of the scriptures in all these debates.

In Resolution 1.10 of the 1998 Lambeth Conference (which is often quoted in these debates for its statement that homosexual practice is ‘incompatible with scripture’), the bishops also committed themselves ‘to listen to the experience of homosexual persons. As a result, the Listening Process was set up under the guidance of Canon Phil Groves which has now been published as a very helpful book in preparation for Lambeth 2008.<sup>39</sup> In the introduction, it quotes Francis Bridger:

“The theological method of the Evangelical centre is marked by a faithfulness to Scripture and the historic creeds on the one hand and an openness to the breadth of Christian traditions on the other. . . . It does demand that we listen with respect to voices other than our own. . . . If the Trinity is central to all theology, then it follows that relationality lies at the heart of a Trinitarian theological method and that this in turn demands a willingness to enter into, and a desire to sustain, relationships with others who name the name of Christ and are seekers after truth even if we profoundly disagree with them. The Evangelical centre, therefore, finds itself committed, as a matter of fundamental principle, to encouraging dialogue even across heated differences. Moreover, it believes that the discernment of truth and the mind of God is more likely to arise out of a process of mutual respect and charitable assumptions than out of polarization and demonization. However, wrong-headed we think Christian brothers or sisters, they are not Amelekites to be smitten hip and thigh.”<sup>40</sup>

### **My own work on Biblical Interpretation**

My work on the interpretation of the scriptures seems to have picked up this theme of plurality and diversity within unity in the scriptures – *What are Gospels?, Four Gospels One Jesus?*

*Imitating Jesus* builds on this genre approach<sup>41</sup>,

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*Anglican Life and Witness: A Reader for the Lambeth Conference of Anglican Bishops 1998*, (eds). Chris Sugden and Vinay Samuel (SPCK 1997), pp. 214-17, quotation from p. 215.

<sup>39</sup> Philip Groves (ed.) *The Anglican Communion and Homosexuality: A Resource to Listening and Dialogue* (London: SPCK, 2008 ).

<sup>40</sup> Francis Bridger, ‘Revisioning the Evangelical Centre’ Fulcrum Newsletter, February 2006; quoted in Philip Groves (ed.) *The Anglican Communion and Homosexuality: A Resource to Listening and Dialogue*, p. 7

<sup>41</sup> Richard A. Burrige, *Imitating Jesus: An Inclusive Approach to New Testament Ethics* (Eerdmans, 2007).

- study of NT, different approaches and content to ethics in different books, yet finds unity in the mixture of deeds and words, holding together strict and rigorous biblical teaching with acceptance of an inclusive community of disciples
- apartheid as test case
- conclusions about the inclusive community of interpretation.

### **Southwark Theological Issues Group**

As a good example; explain – called by Bishop of Southwark, as a group to advise him, with me as Chair (in the Diocese, but not of it, i.e. holding Bishop Tom’s Permission to Officiate, but not employed by Diocese, meeting in KCL buildings south of the river in the Diocese!).

Mixed group, invited membership male/female, black/white, catholic/evangelical, conservative/liberal, gay/straight, ranging over whole Diocese etc – meet for a couple of hours every couple of months over the last three or four years (CHECK?). Prepared and read papers to each other, studied the scriptures together, worked our way through lots of church reports and documents together, especially most recently all the stuff about the Covenant – and of course, we have prayed together and for one another. We have not agreed on everything – or even on anything much, except that we have all agreed that scripture is important, and that we recognize that other people who interpret the scriptures differently from ourselves may also believe honestly that they are being scriptural and biblical. Really important work – even if I am not sure how best to communicate the importance of it to the rest of the Diocese.

### **Golf as another example**

At this risk of apparently lowering the tone for a moment, let me also tell you about what I was doing at Frilford in Oxfordshire yesterday. Over half the dioceses of the Church of England (including Southwark) sent a team of four clergy golfers for inter-Diocesan tournament sponsored by Ecclesiastical Insurance – and I know that many teams included clergy who disagree about many things, yet they played together. Similarly, the Cranmer Cup (the ecclesiastical equivalent of the Ryder Cup) in Ireland after Easter where the Anglican churches of Great Britain and Ireland took on the Episcopal Church of the USA. The American team included conservatives and liberals, some backing Gene Robinson and others going to Nigeria – yet they played as one team with great spirit.

This may seem a very silly thing to include, but I was really struck by the friendship between golfing clergy who disagreed about the various

current debates facing the church. It is perhaps a poor thing if we can find fellowship, and a bridge across our divides, through hitting a little white ball – yet we cannot find it in our shared life together in Christ!

### **2008 Lambeth Conference:**

All of this suggests that we need to find a way of relating together in the church which is centred around the scriptures as our common activity (more spiritually uplifting than golf?!).

Basic structure of the Lambeth Conference:

- John advance reading: using my BRF PBC and reading plan from February to July (finishes next week).
- Bible studies, discussions and Indaba groups in the mornings
- Self-selecting workshops in the afternoons
- Evening lectures, dinners, fringe events

If any one group or view (whether that is high, low or middle, African or American, conservative or liberal) seeks to impose its authority and its understanding of scripture on everyone else, it will fail – and not be true to our shared history as Anglicans. It will cause Lambeth to fail and plunge the communion into further crisis.

If all of this allows for interplay, exchange of views, reading of scripture together, prayer and debate, fellowship and communion within a variety of views and different approaches to the scriptures and to authority, then Lambeth will be a success – and authentically Anglican.

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