

Scripture, Reason and Tradition.

The Rev'd Jonathan Clatworthy, November 2009



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Abstract: In this article, extracted from his recent book *Liberal Thought in a Divided Church*, Jonathan Clatworthy describes the classical account of Anglican authority. This is epitomised in an appeal to a balance between scripture, reason and tradition. Each area is briefly described in its historical context.

Scripture, Reason & Tradition

One of the movements which came out of the turbulent years following the Reformation was the Anglican attempt to establish a balance of authorities between Scripture, reason and tradition. It remained popular for a long time. Its greatest eighteenth century exponent was Joseph Butler, whose *Analogy of Religion* described reason as ‘the only faculty we have wherewith to judge concerning anything, even revelation itself’. Like the Cambridge Platonists he gave it a wide role: it properly judges not only the meaning of scripture but the evidence of revelation and moral norms, and can lead us from knowledge of earthly to spiritual things; but, at the same time, it still has limits.

H R McAdoo writes of a continuity in this tradition from Hooker to the 1890 collection of essays *Lux Mundi*. It was characterized by a ‘vivid sense of the present reality of continuity with the past’ and ‘the necessity of the freedom of reason to differentiate and to assess’. His classic work on it, *The Spirit of Anglicanism*, notes that what was distinctive about it was not a set of doctrines like those of Lutherans and Calvinists, but a method: ‘Anglicanism is not committed to believing anything because it is anglican but only because it is true’.

This is an extract from Chapter 5 of *Liberal Faith in a Divided Church*.¹

¹ Jonathan Clatworthy, *Liberal Thought in a Divided Church* (Winchester: O Books, 2008)
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This approach has long been recognized as the classical Anglican account of authority. There were differences between its exponents - Hales and Chillingworth, for example, agreed with Hooker in placing reason above tradition, while the high churchmen placed tradition above reason - but the threefold appeal became a distinctively Anglican contribution to Christian theology.

Here then is a tradition based on affirming not a particular set of doctrines but a way of searching for truth. Compared with the alternatives described in the preceding chapters, it neither rejects reason nor treats it as supreme. Instead it affirms it *together with* Scripture and tradition. The way it holds them together is by denying that any one of them provides complete truth or provides any truth with complete certainty. It is precisely because we cannot rely exclusively on any one of them that we need them all, to provide checks against each other.

Reason is understood widely. It does not simply compute; it provides information. Our minds have been created by a good God who has designed us to understand the world well enough to live good and fulfilling lives in it. In this account reason is given a wholesome function. On the one hand it provides us with the information we need to understand the world around us and the moral norms which apply to our circumstances; on the other, it has limits. The limits are of two types. Firstly we have freedom of will which enables us, if we so choose, to ignore information which does not suit our interests; and secondly we have no reason for supposing that we have, or can acquire, the ability to achieve any new goal which takes our fancy. It is to this extent a cautionary account of reason; it affirms our ability to perform the activities for which we have been designed and it permits us to explore beyond what we have so far understood and achieved, but it does not allow us to assume that our knowledge and

abilities are potentially unlimited. God has designed our reasoning powers for some purposes and not others. Doing the shopping for the next door neighbour is more in keeping with its capacities than altering our genes so that men can have babies.

This account of reason, because it requires belief in God - and in a particular type of God - is only available to those who so believe. Today it does not provide a neutral framework for rational debate because secular society counts all religious discourse as an optional extra, not part of a shared account of reality. It did not provide a neutral framework in the seventeenth century either, but for the different reason that many people held contrasting beliefs about God. That neutral framework was better provided by Locke's more restricted account of reason. Nevertheless, where classical Anglicanism was accepted its view of reason proved fruitful. It explained how our knowledge does, by and large, accurately express the nature of reality, while also allowing for errors and differences of opinion: we are not designed to know everything, our immoral desires lead us to ignore information and moral norms which we would otherwise have acknowledged, and no one person is free of error. Reason, so described, provided a fruitful basis for handling disagreements not only in religion but also in science and ethics. It is a theory of real but relative knowledge. It is no coincidence that the country which affirmed it most strongly also led the world in science.

Tradition. During the Reformation debates neither Catholics nor Protestants accepted that the true church should ever change; both claimed to uphold the original Christianity and accused their opponents of innovating. Tradition, both sides believed, ought to be an unchanging package. It was an ahistorical view. Equally ahistorical was the early Enlightenment view that knowledge could be established by reason alone without recourse to tradition. By the end

of the seventeenth century, however, the idea of historical progress had infiltrated every aspect of European thought. Especially in science, but also in law, international relations and elsewhere it was clear that significant changes were taking place and most of the intellectual classes considered them changes for the better. For theologians sympathetic to these developments it was natural to apply the same idea to the church. There was good reason for so doing. Contrary to earlier Protestant expectations, scholars had established that the early Christians had believed in relics, prayers for the dead, celibacy, fasting, holy oil, the sign of the cross, the veneration of images and consecrated bread and wine. Many English Protestants concluded that theology must have progressed since then.

In addition they were aware of recent developments. Non-partisan historical scholarship, committed to the search for truth for its own sake, began to flourish towards the end of the seventeenth century. Texts, linguistic apparatus and knowledge of antiquity had improved considerably since the Reformation. It seemed to follow that the people of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were in a position to understand the Bible more accurately than their sixteenth century predecessors. They could therefore reinterpret tradition dynamically. They could deny that it is a supreme authority which simply maintains ancient truths unchanged, without going to the other extreme of rejecting all tradition as a set of unjustifiable dogmas. Instead they could affirm it in a form which is both more modest and more creative. Tradition provides us with wisdom inherited from the past. While we cannot ignore it all and start from scratch, its insights are neither complete nor certain. Every generation has its opportunities to challenge some elements of inherited teaching and add its own insights, thus contributing to a

dynamic tradition which changes over time. Tradition, like reason, contributed to the church's understanding but was not infallible.

Scripture. The same trend also applied to the Bible, though it took longer. To describe every text in the Bible as both clear and authoritative had proved an impossible position. To treat its clear teachings as the only ones essential to salvation while allowing differences of opinion on the unclear ones was a tidy arrangement, successful for a time in limiting conflict, but was only credible because nobody established a comprehensive list of clear and unclear teachings.

The root of the problem was the ubiquitous notion of the Bible as a self-contained unity. While the *whole* Bible was either to be accepted as clear and authoritative, or interpreted by the Spirit's illumination of the individual, differences of interpretation were both inevitable and irreconcilable. As long as it was possible to argue that a person who questioned the truth of one biblical text was undermining the authority of the whole Bible, it could not be a source of creative insight; it was more like a mental prison, obliging people to believe what they were told. Gradually that perspective broke down. Some of the reasons were empirical: closer readings of the texts and increasing familiarity with Hebrew and Greek raised questions which the unitary theory could not answer. Other reasons were theoretical: reason was needed, first to understand what biblical texts meant, then to distinguish between the clear texts essential to salvation and the unclear ones, then to argue - as Locke did - for the truth of the Bible and Christianity. The rational arguments for Christianity, especially the debates over miracles and prophecies, demanded close attention to specific texts and at the same time raised questions about the presuppositions scholars brought to them. To treat every text as God's reason-transcending

revelation, worded exactly as God intended, proved an impossible position to maintain. To defend Christianity at all it was necessary to allow different judgements to be made of different biblical texts.

Scripture, therefore, came to be affirmed in a manner comparable to reason and tradition: it was an essential source of insights, but it did not provide a complete account of religious truth and no single text could be accepted as absolutely certain. It needed to be set in balance with reason and tradition. This conclusion opened the door to two developments, natural theology and critical biblical scholarship. Both resulted not only from increasing confidence in reason but also from closer attention to biblical texts.