

## The Anglican Experience of Authority

Generalizations are always dangerous (including this one) because they suggest to us that we know more than in fact we do know. I want, however, to take the risk of a generalization about the present state of the Christian Church and about the present state of our particular community, the Episcopal Church, and say that it seems to me we are undergoing a crisis of authority. Other ages have had their own crises, because, of course, it is the vocation of Christian people and of the Christian Church to discover themselves always and over and over again in the condition of judgement as a call beyond themselves--and that is, after all, what a crisis is, a judgment and a call beyond oneself. Our particular crisis stems from many factors in our world, factors which have led to a particular questioning of the foundation of our faith as Christians. What is going on is not simply the questioning of a particular understanding of the ordained ministry; it is a questioning of the foundation itself. Although it is not my purpose to discuss them in this paper, the reasons for such a questioning are obvious: the development of scientific humanism, the critical examination of the origin of Christianity, atheistic philosophy, and, most important of all, a dominant cultural materialism. Within such a milieu it is becoming increasingly difficult for us to determine, much less state with any clarity, what is the source and ground of our belief about Christ and the Church. And beyond that, of course, is the even more difficult problem of the authority of belief in God himself. In our hearts, I believe, we know that is the real question facing us. For those who do not even believe in God (and there are many such), some of our questions and problems are rather trivial.



Here, however, we can avoid that question (although we must not forget it), for we have to deal with it as it manifests itself in the smaller, more easily handled forms which now preoccupy the Episcopal Church. The Episcopal Church seems to be in a crisis over the ordination of women to the presbyterate and episcopate, but I think we are all aware that that problem is only the tip of the iceberg. The next several General Conventions (assuming there are any) will in all probability face even more critical problems: the place of homosexuals in the Christian community, the physiological control of human life through abortion, euthanasia, and genetic control, and the radical consequences for us affluent people of racial and economic injustice. Those, I suggest, will make our present crisis look rather mild. Each, however, is only a particular manifestation of the much larger problem. Being a theologian, and hence one given by nature to abstractions, I want to avoid discussing those particular problems, or, to put it more charitably, I want to look behind them to the larger question of which they are, indeed, only immediate manifestations. The larger question is, how are we to determine what is authoritative for us in such matters, not just the authority of General Convention, nor the authority of a particular bishop, but the authority of Scripture and tradition, and ultimately the authority of Christ himself? There is certainly no simple answer to that question, but it can be helpful, I believe, if we can at least try to see what is going on. It helps us to do that in our ordinary lives, and it ought to help us in our ecclesial lives. It is about that 'trying to see what is going on' that I want to speak, first by some historical and theological analysis and then by making some very tentative suggestions about how we might look at ourselves, both as Christians and as Anglicans, in this and future crises.

For us who are Christians, the crisis of authority is two-fold. On the one hand, we are all well aware of secular, political authority as it manifests itself daily in our public lives: the authority of government, the authority of a particular



individual over us, whether by power of office or by power of particular ability or charisma. For the majority of us, who are middle class Episcopalians, we are able to live with those forms of authority without too much hassle, although I believe we are even in this area beginning to experience a crisis of authority which many, who are less privileged and secure than we, have always known. We are beginning to feel--along with the poor and oppressed who have always known it--that the traditional lines of authority are neither as clear nor as compelling as they once were, or as we thought they were. That there is a crisis of authority in other areas of our lives is something which we ought to keep in mind, for it effects the way in which the crisis in our ecclesial lives manifests itself.

The other area in which we are aware of authority is that of our lives as Christian people. We who are Christians claim or acknowledge an authority beyond all forms of secular authority, one by which all other forms of authority are judged. We acknowledge the authority of Christ as the One in whom God has shown us His nature and His eternal will for us and for all people. In that absolute and final authority all other forms of authority are, we believe, grounded. Thus, as Christians, we should always want to say that the authority which the Church has for us and the authority of particular institutional structures within the Church (the ordained ministry, Councils, General Conventions, and so forth) all derive their authority ultimately from our confession that Jesus is Lord. As the Agreed Statement of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission on Authority in the Church develops well and clearly, any form of authority in the Church rests both theologically and practically on the authority of God in Christ in-dwelling the Church through the Holy Spirit. Without that authority, all our particular institutional forms of authority would be somewhat silly. At the same time, however, we must recognize that for the Christian Church as a whole the way in which the authority of God in Christ is mediated in our ecclesial lives has,



more often than not, followed a pattern quite similar to political or secular authority. The fact that political authority is no longer as clear or compelling as it once was has a profound effect upon the operation of authority in our ecclesial lives. James I, reflecting his own troubled times, said, No Bishop, No King. Before much longer we may find ourselves saying, not quite so succinctly, No middle class morality and virtues, no Church--at least no Church in which we can be comfortable and at ease with ourselves.

For the moment, however, our problem is a more particular one, namely, how do we, as Anglicans, understand the way in which the authority of Christ is worked out in our community and in our individual lives? If we did not believe that we had a particular understanding of the way in which authority works itself out, we should, in all probability belong to some other ecclesial tradition and community. (And, indeed, that would seem to be what is happening to many individuals who are currently leaving the Episcopal Church or who understand themselves as 'pre-General Convention Episcopalians'.) I want to suggest that we are Anglicans and will, I hope, remain so, precisely because of our particular--even peculiar--way of understanding and appropriating the authority of Christ in our common life.

There is in Anglicanism as a whole, and in the Episcopal Church in particular, an almost unique tension or dialectic between authority and liberty, and it is a unique tension both in its theological foundation and in its way of working itself out. Sometimes in our history the tension has not held, and one side or another has broken off--always the danger in being a bridge Church. On the whole, and at least not yet, there has not been a major collapse. Perhaps by exploring the tension a bit more carefully we can hold it together a bit longer. What we have always liked to say about ourselves is that Anglicanism traditionally appeals to Scripture, tradition, and reason as a method for determining the grounds of authority in faith and polity. But, unless we have thoroughly examined the classical Anglican divines



of the 17th century--and that, alas, is not easy to do--or unless we have read the two splendid studies of classical Anglicanism by H. R. McAdoo, we are often somewhat vague about what such a method involves, how it is to be undertaken, and what ground of authority it may give. What is made clear by Bishop McAdoo is that the classical Anglican divines meant neither simple antiquarianism, nor biblical literalism, nor secular rationalism. Unfortunately, in some of the arguments which have been advanced recently from both sides of the vexed questions which now face us, the methodology of the Anglican divines has often been treated somewhat simplistically and even cavalierly. On the particular issue of homosexuality, for example, we hear it said by some that since Scripture condemns homosexual activity, so ought we; on the other hand, we hear it said by some that since secular society increasingly accepts homosexual activity, so ought we. Both arguments are, to say the least, somewhat simplistic. What the Anglican divines intended to do about the questions which faced them (and the questions were equally serious if not as interesting) was to hold a particular balance, a particular tension, in which the primary authority of Scripture could be recognized, but always as that was interpreted within the historical teaching and public practice of the ongoing Church. The function of reason is to determine how Scripture and the Catholic Fathers have authority for us, neither to use them as proof-texts nor to dismiss them altogether. Some things in Scripture and tradition have authority for us and some do not. How are we to determine the difference?

In the tradition of Anglican divinity, and most clearly in what is called the Catholic or high-church strain, there are many examples of how that method worked itself out in practice. Two examples are most obvious and, I believe, most pertinent for us today. The first is the way in which Richard Hooker and the Caroline divines distinguished between the authority of Scripture and tradition, on the one hand, and the contemporary reality and experience of the Church of England as that



was expressed in its polity. The second is the way in which the Anglican Catholics of the 19th century attempted to reconstruct the reasonable grounds of Christian belief in the light of biblical and scientific criticism.

Richard Hooker is recognized as the theologian who formally shaped and developed the Anglican method out of his double conflict with the Puritans and the Romans. In that situation it became necessary to mediate between the conflicting authority of Holy Scripture and the magisterium of the Roman Church in order to defend and justify the historical reality of the Elizabethan settlement. The Puritans, on the one hand, criticised the Church of England because it did not give to Scripture an absolute and supreme authority in all matters, including that of Church polity. They argued that any form of polity not specifically authorized in Holy Scripture could not be allowed in the Church. For them the Church of England had clearly become an institution which had abandoned God's will for the Church and had become apostate because it had, among other things, bishops. On the other hand, the Roman apologists attacked the Church of England with equal vigor because it had rejected the authority of Catholic tradition as that was expressed in the development of Roman Catholic practice and the supreme authority of the Roman Pontiff. Indeed, Mr. Hooker faced a problem not unlike ours today: if we believe that Jesus is Lord, how is that to be worked out in the contemporary situation? Can we allow for developments over the course of time or must we, as the Puritans said, judge everything by the explicit words of Scripture?

The solution which Hooker developed at very great length was to distinguish, but not to divide, between God's eternal will as that is expressed in Jesus Christ and the historical and political development of an ecclesial community as it attempts to live out its faith in that event. The Church, for Hooker, is both a supernatural body, founded upon Gospel of Christ, and a visible, historical, and political body



which must work out its affairs as best it can in the light of past and present experience. That distinction without division always leaves the Church in tension. Christian faith can be absolutely certain about the saving event which is Christ--and to deviate from that is apostasy--but in matters of polity and discipline (such as the wisdom of having Bishops) the Church must always live in the realm of probability. What makes that tension possible is what Hooker calls reason, namely, that process by means of which we attempt to determine what is finally authoritative and what is only probable. Only through that difficult process of discovering the truth and appropriating it for ourselves can we finally know and accept the truth in its full authority. It is clear in Hooker, and in those who continued in his tradition, that there can be no self-authenticating authority except Christ himself--no authoritative voice, book, or institution which can claim infallibly to know the mind of Christ. As Bishop McAdoo so well puts it, this tension is not compromise or intellectual expedient but

a quality of thinking, an approach in which elements usually regarded as mutually exclusive were seen to be in fact complimentary. These things were held in a living tension...because they were seen to be mutually illuminating...There was the centrality of Scripture and the freedom of reason, the relation of revelation to reason and that of reason and faith, credal orthodoxy and liberty in non-essentials, the appeal to antiquity and the welcome to new knowledge, the historic continuity of the Church and the freedom of the national Churches. Behind it all lies the healthy tension of freedom and authority, accepting neither authoritarianism nor uncontrolled liberty. (H.F. McAdoo, The Spirit of Anglicanism, pp. 312-313.)



That quality of thinking is what we ought to mean when we say that Anglicanism is a via media. A via media is not a fixed and solid bridge between two points, but an ongoing experience of God's eternal will as it is made known in our history.

In more recent times that same methodology and quality of thinking has enabled Anglicanism to live with equally pressing problems. In the 19th century, for example, the Church was faced with the fundamental crisis provoked by the historical criticism of Scripture and the development of a scientific, evolutionary world view, both of which seemed to undercut the authority of Scripture and, even more radically, to do away with the authority of theistic belief itself. If we think our present crisis is a difficult one, then we ought to read again in the literature of the 19th century! In the theological work of F.D. Maurice and then in the Lux Mundi school, Anglican theologians once again attempted to discover the reasonable grounds of authority in matters of faith and to distinguish that from inherited prejudice and uncritical opinion. They could not, on the one hand, give way to the obscurantism of biblical literalism, nor, on the other hand, to the emptiness of secular rationalism. They sought to find a way in which the authority of divine revelation could be held in a healthy tension with historical and scientific discoveries. What emerged from that struggle was, I believe, expressed simply and well in the volume which carried on the work of the Lux Mundi school, Essays Catholic and Critical, first published of 1926. In the Preface to that first edition, E.G. Selwyn wrote:

The two terms Catholic and critical represent principles, habits, and tempers of the religious mind which only reach their maturity in combination. To the first belongs everything in us that acknowledges and adores the one abiding, transcendent, and supremely given Reality, God that believes in Jesus Christ, as the unique revelation



in true personal form of His Mystery; and recognized His Spirit embodied in the Church as the authoritative and ever-living witness of His will, word, and work. To the second belongs the exercise of that divinely implanted gift of reason by which we measure, sift, examine, and judge whatever is proposed for our belief, whether it be a theological doctrine or a statement of historical fact, and so establish, deepen, and purify our understanding of the truth of the Gospel. The proportion in which these two activities are blended will vary in different individuals and in relation to different parts of our subject matter: but there is no point at which they do not interact, and we are convinced that this interaction is necessary to any presentment of Christianity which is to claim the allegiance of the world today. (Essays Catholic and Critical, ed.3, p. xxviii.)

It would be possible to cite many other examples of the Anglican method and of the Anglican understanding of authority to which it leads. But these two examples, drawn, I believe, from the most creative periods of Anglican divinity, show us something of considerable importance for our present concerns. They show us, first of all, what is the theological foundation behind that quality of thinking which is Anglicanism and what, consequently, keeps it from being simply the peculiarity of the Anglo-Saxon temperament--a rather important task these days since not all Anglicans are Anglo-Saxon! In the second place, they can give us a clearer picture of



what the underlying problem is for us today.

The foundation of the Anglican way of understanding authority in the Church is not a doctrine about authority, because, as far as I can determine, we have none. It is rather the result of the historical experience of Anglicanism itself as it has attempted to live out an incarnational faith. In the Caroline divines and in the theologians of the 19th and 20th centuries who carried out the Lux Mundi tradition, we can see a particular emphasis upon the doctrine of the Incarnation and a particular emphasis upon its place in the life of worship and prayer. For this strain in Anglican theology, the doctrine of the Incarnation was the center around which everything else revolved, not simply as a doctrine about the nature of Jesus Christ, but, much more importantly, as a way of understanding the fundamental relationship of time and history to the eternal God and of understanding human beings as those who have been redeemed in Christ through their participation in the Divine Life itself. What the Chalcedonian definition attempted, you will remember, was a compromise, a via media, between conflicting interpretations of the union of the human and divine natures in Christ. As we should want to put it today, what the definition established as a theological foundation was that history, historical process, and our human nature in all of its limitedness and fullness is God's way of being present with us. History, historical process, and human reason are not denied or negated in the incarnation; they are not swept aside as unimportant; they are rather the place and the activity where God makes himself personally known to us.

Because the doctrine of the Incarnation was understood to emphasize our redeemed and exalted humanity, Hooker and other Caroline divines were able to have an exalted view of the nature and function of human reason and to say that reason, as a human activity which is grounded in God, is the key which opens to us the meaning of Holy Scripture. In the Laws, for example, he could write:



. . . [the question is], whether the light of reason be so pernicious, that in devising laws for the Church men ought not by it to search what may be fit and convenient. For this cause therefore, we have endeavoured to make it appear, how in the nature of reason itself there is no impediment, but that the selfsame Spirit, which revealeth the things that God hath set down in His law, may also be thought to aid and direct men in finding out by the light of reason what laws are expedient to be made for the guiding of His Church, over and besides them that are in Scripture. (Laws, III, viii, 18.)

Unlike the Puritans, the Caroline divines could hold together, in a fruitful tension, Reason, Scripture, and tradition because they were able to see human reasonableness and the process of thinking things through as reflecting and participating in the rationality of God himself. God does not speak to us exclusively in one form nor simply by supernatural decree, nor does he give us in Holy Scripture a blue print for the future. His Word has authority for us as we are able to appropriate it in the course of our rational interpretation of it; and we are able to do that (in spite of our limitedness) because of the redemption of our humanity in the full huamnity of Jesus Christ.

That same understanding of the Incarnation enabled Bishop Gore to speak of the Church as the extension of the Incarnation, Archbishop Temple to speak of the sacramentality of the whole creation, and F.D.Maurice to speak of the world as the Kingdom of Christ. What lay behind that way of thinking about the Church and the world was the notion, expressed dogmatically at Chalcedon, that human history and



the created order as a whole can be the locus of divine presence, that God is present to us not by negating what we are but through the long process of perfecting and completing what we are. That theological truth is reflected over and over again in our history in the way in which it has meant a willingness--not without disastrous results at times--to live with the world in its various cultural and social developments and to believe that the rational and scientific investigation of reality, even when it is done by those who are not explicitly Christian, may have something to say to us that enables us to understand the Christian faith more profoundly and in its wider implications.

Charles Gore, in his Bampton Lectures, well summed up the significance of this strain in Anglicanism for our understanding of authority in the Church. He says that what the Church of England has striven for, albeit not always successfully, is the authority which Christ himself shows us in Holy Scripture. The authority of Christ is not that he speaks ex cathedra or infallibly; it is rather a paternal authority 'which exists to develop sonship'. (Incarnation, p. 196) To develop sonship means that Christ enables those who hear him to use the gift of reason and free judgment in order that they may not give way to credulity but that they may respond to the best kind of authority, namely, that which 'refuses to do too much for men, refuses to be too explicit, too complete, too clear, lest it should dwarf instead of stimulating their higher faculties.' (p. 198)

Now there is, of course, in this strain of Anglicanism which we have been examining, a kind of optimism of which, it is hoped, we have learned to be somewhat wary. But nonetheless, it says something of great importance about who we are as Anglican Christians and what 'quality of thinking' we must have as we approach the vexed questions of our own time. We have no clear-cut and easily defined doctrine of authority, I suspect, because we have no clear-cut and easily defined doctrine of what it is to be an Anglican Christian. Unlike Christians of many other traditions,



we have never been able to define ourselves as a Church in terms of any self-authenticating authority; we have no infallible book and no infallible magisterium; we do not even have a founder to whom we can appeal for the standards of theological and moral orthodoxy. This fact has oftentimes made us appear very ambiguous to other Christian traditions. But, I want to suggest, it is precisely our ambiguity which may enable us to discover once again our particular vocation as Anglicans in these troubled times. (For indeed, we should remember that ours is not the only ecclesial community which is threatened with schism or which may be required to live with an anomaly!)

The problem with which the Caroline divines in the 17th century and the Catholics in the 19th century were concerned is the same problem, in different guise, which faces us today and which ought always to face Christians in every future time. The problem is now and has always been, and always will be: How do we, historical, finite, temporal, limited and sinful human beings understand and appropriate in our lives the Mystery of the eternal, unknowable, and absolutely transcendent God who has become Man? How, in other words, do we know God's will in our limitedness? Only I believe, as that problem is faced squarely and honestly can we then accept squarely and honestly that the Mystery of God and His will for us and for His Church is something that we shall never grasp fully and which we shall never express adequately. That mystery is shown to us through the many different, often conflicting ways in which the Church and Christian people have witnessed to it in every generation and in every time and place both in their doctrinal formulations and in their lives. I believe we do know this truth in our personal lives as we try to live out the life in Christ. We know, for example, in the ambiguity in which we must live and act most of the time that our decisions are frequently wrong, our motives are always mixed, that what we hope for is confused, that our love for one another is never pure, and even that our faith is rarely perfect. But yet we also know from our



personal experience that it is precisely in that pilgrimage of faith, in which we rarely know where we are coming from and where we are going, that God's will becomes clear to us. In the midst of all our ambiguity we know that there is only one thing certain, to which we must hold lest we die, and that is, that in Christ God has redeemed us and that He will accomplish His purpose in us. All of our theological systems, all of our ecclesiastical polity, and even all of our moral principles represent only our very feeble attempt to express and witness to the Mystery of God in Christ. Most of what we do and say as human beings is either a sin or mistake, but it is in those sins and mistakes that the truth of our salvation is made clear to us. As I say, we know that in our personal lives if we are at all honest with ourselves--or if we have a good confessor. Can we, however, accept the proposition that it is also true for the Church? Can we believe that the Church itself, as it lives out the Mystery of God become Man, is called into a pilgrimage of faith and not into the security offered by a book a theological system, a moral code, or any other infallible voice? That is very hard to do--both for us as individuals and as a Church--and there would appear to be some who will not be able to follow that particular path. But if we look at our history as Anglicans, as I have attempted to do briefly in this paper, perhaps we can see more clearly why it may be our vocation at this time, as it has been at other times, to be a witness to just that--to be a community which will not claim the authority of certainty in any matter except one: that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself; and that in everything else we must be willing to live in the authority of ambiguity as we strive to learn the mind of Christ.

James E. Griffiss  
Professor of Theology  
Nashotah House