Anglicanism and Social Theology

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Our Anglican heritage has deep roots in pre-Reformation English Christianity. In the following, I identify four major pre-Reformation contributions to this tradition of social theology. The first is the care for place evident in the liturgical advice of Gregory the Great to Augustine of Canterbury. The second is the concept of restitutive justice that is held up in the writings of Anselm as a model of good earthly justice. I then turn to an implicit critique of clerical privilege that can be derived from the Thomas Becket event. The fourth and final element is the church’s interest in and responsibility for good government, which is indicated in the Magna Carta of 1215. Our post-Reformation history yields three main questions concerning social theology: our theology of, for, and in society. I have proposed that these three questions are largely answered in order by Richard Hooker, Thomas Arnold, and William Temple together with Rowan Williams.

Introduction

Anglican theology predates the Reformation, and has always had a strong emphasis on the moral formation of individuals and communities. As early as the eighth century CE, the purpose of recording history—especially the history of the church—was understood by Bede to be the improvement of human behavior: “For if history records good things of good men, the thoughtful hearer is encouraged to imitate what is good; or if it records evil of wicked men, the devout, religious listener or reader is encouraged to avoid all that is sinful and perverse and to follow what he knows to be good and pleasing

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to God.”¹ Bede’s History is not, however, simply a record of “good things” done by individual “good men,” but more importantly, an ecclesiastical history: a history of the interaction between the institution of the church and the “secular” society, a history of the people in relationship with (what would eventually become) their church. There is a strong recognition that the church’s mission and influence could only prosper at the pleasure of earthly rulers.

For Anglican Christians, church and society can never be separated; they are integral to each other. Society, whether civil or ecclesial, is where persons are shaped and characters formed. Any foretaste of the kingdom is grounded in the social life of the world. Furthermore, society is not only the locus of salvation; it is also the object of salvation. William Temple famously said that “no object is sufficient for the love of God, short of the world itself. Christianity is not one more religion of individual salvation. . . . It is the one and only religion of world-redemption.”² But the world itself is in need of that redemption, and of divine guidance as to what it is meant to be and do. That is given in Jesus Christ and is the mission of the church; for Anglicans, this means the church is the soul of the nation, living through Christian action guided by the church’s ethical and spiritual teaching.

I have deliberately chosen the phrase “Anglican social theology” rather than “Anglican social ethics” for the title of this essay, as the former seems to do better justice to the complex issues involved than “social ethics,” which implies the articulation of particular positions on a range of isolated issues, as if there are opinions that cannot or should not be held by Anglicans. It is, therefore, a concept that divides. The term “Anglican social ethics” also minimizes the role of the institutional church as an actor in society, except perhaps as a source of teaching and moral formation that helps to make “good Christians” or good citizens (sometimes conflating the two).

“Social theology,” on the other hand, is a much more foundational category, and asks the questions that underlie social ethics, addressing three components. The first is a theology of society: what does God intend for a society to be? Second, there is the question of a theology

for society, which attempts to articulate the benefits of the Christian religion, particularly as mediated by the institutional church, for the secular society, and how the church either helped or hindered its mission to represent a foretaste of the peaceful reign of God. Finally, the third concern of social theology involves a theology of church in society: what is the place of the church in terms of influencing a culture that cannot be assumed to share its ideals? Although historically there seems to be a progression through these concerns, the earlier questions serve as background for later developments. The foundational questions of a theology of, for, and in society remain the same, but the way in which those questions are answered, and how those answers are embodied in concrete ways, look different over the course of generations. The shifting answers to core questions, and the ways in which those answers are given life, form the tradition of Anglican social theology.

There is an overriding trajectory through the history, however. It is best captured in what John Atherton and Duncan Forrester call “public theology.” The main concern is with “the good of the city,” as opposed to the privilege and prestige of the (institutional) church. This needs a bit of dismantling and reconstruction, however. “City,” in this usage, is code for all places where people meet, exchange goods, services, and ideas, where the skills and resources of many come together peaceably for the benefit of all. Furthermore, “city” is not just the place, but the inhabitants and visitors found there. Obviously, over the course of history, there has been a sharper separation between “city” and “church,” as the assumption that a particular society was exclusively or even predominantly Christian was no longer credible. This kind of “public theology” is the goal of social theology in the pluralistic societies of the early twenty-first century, and the type of moral theology to which Anglican thinkers have made significant contributions.

A Few Words about Tradition

Before we turn to the contributions made by the Anglican tradition to social theology, a few words should be said about the

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3 See Wendy Dackson, “Archbishop William Temple and Public Theology in a Post-Christian Context,” *Journal of Anglican Studies* 4, no. 2 (December 2006): 239–52. Forrester is not an Anglican, but a Scottish Presbyterian; however, given Anglican leadership in ecumenical relations, this should not be a problem.
nature of that tradition itself. “Tradition,” as I will use the term, is not just a matter of things (texts, rituals, activities, ideas) that have been passed down from one generation to the next. I use the term “tradition” in a much more active sense, following the description of Alasdair MacIntyre. A tradition, for MacIntyre, is “a historically embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitutes that tradition. Within a tradition the pursuit of goods extends through generations, sometimes through many generations.”

The fact that MacIntyre calls a tradition an “embodied argument” should call attention to three further features. First, tradition is concerned with the way human beings in concrete situations go about living together and pursuing communal goals. Theologically, tradition is incarnational. Second, tradition implies close identification with an institution which bears it: the church doesn’t have traditions, but is itself the tradition. Finally, tradition involves some degree of tension and disagreement.

Some Pre-Reformation Influences on Anglican Social Theology

The earliest characteristic of Anglican social theology which I would like to highlight is a theology of place, honoring the “good things” associated with a location. This is emphasized in Gregory the Great’s liturgical advice to Augustine, concerning the (re)conversion of the English people. Of course, Augustine did not arrive in England to a completely un-Christian situation. However, because of the lack of adequate spiritual care for the British churches by the bishops most responsible, Bertha, Ethelbert’s Christian queen, and her chaplain, Bishop Luidhard, were eager for a revival of Christian religion in England. Gregory agreed, and Augustine’s mission to England commenced in 597. Augustine expressed some confusion about the difference between “the method of saying Mass” in the “Roman Church and in the Churches of Gaul.” Gregory’s reply is worth reading in full:

My brother, you are familiar with the usage of the Roman Church, in which you were brought up. But if you have found customs,
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whether in the Church of Rome or of Gaul or any other that may be more acceptable to God, I wish you to make a careful selection of them, and teach the Church of the English, which is still young in the Faith, whatever you have been able to learn with profit from the various Churches. For things should not be loved for the sake of places, but places for the sake of good things. Therefore select from each of the Churches whatever things are devout, religious, and right; and when you have bound them, as it were, into a sheaf, let the minds of the English grow accustomed to it.7

This lays a foundation for later Anglican principles of caring for and honoring places and the people and customs found there, and perhaps more importantly, for an openness to finding better, holier ways of conducting the life of the church.

Moving ahead a few centuries, there are three “moments” of the pre-Reformation English church that I believe to be particularly important to the development of an Anglican understanding of social theology. Following the MacIntyrean description of “tradition,” they are not all texts by major thinkers, but a series of contributions from three Archbishops of Canterbury from the eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth centuries. The first one does fall into that description, which is Anselm’s notion of proportional justice, as outlined in Cur Deus Homo. The second is a chain of events—the Thomas Becket phenomenon. Finally, there is the implication of the church’s responsibility for society as pointed out in the Magna Carta of 1215—a document which may have looked quite different had it not been for the influence of Archbishop Stephen Langton (d. 1228).

Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109)

Anselm’s great work, Cur Deus Homo (completed 1098), focuses on the notion of justice in relation to Christ’s saving work, especially whether God “might have done this, by means of some other being, angelic or human, or merely by his will.”8 The work delineates how, even without sin, humanity owed complete love, loyalty, and honor to God—in brief, men and women could not be considered their own. If sinless human beings gave God everything they owed to God, there

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7 Bede, Ecclesiastical History, I.27.
8 Anselm, Cur Deus Homo (Why God Became Man), Book 1, chap. 1. Quotations are from the Medieval Sourcebook version of the text, found at http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/anselm-curdeus.asp.
would be absolutely nothing left: “If in justice I owe God myself and all my powers, even when I do not sin, I have nothing left to render him for my sin.” Human disobedience to divine will and command created a situation of crushing debt to God that could never be repaid, even for the smallest sin. Anselm outlines how Jesus Christ alone, in his divine and human nature, is not only able to satisfy this debt (by virtue of his divinity), but eligible to do so justly (by virtue of his humanity).

Soteriological economics aside, the important thing to note for the purpose of social theology is that Anselm’s great concern is not punishment for human offense against God, but the restoration of a right relationship between God and humanity. This could only be accomplished by the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. However, Anselm’s assertion that “satisfaction ought to be proportionate to guilt” has important implications for justice between human beings. Anselm’s notion of divine justice is not retributive, but restitutive, and that model should, ideally, carry over to justice in social situations. One can, of course, elect to enforce the maximum biblical penalty of “an eye for an eye” (Exodus 21:23–25, 21:26–27; Leviticus 24:19–22), though the penalty is not required; a reciprocal justice is intended, perhaps to somehow compensate the originally injured party in a more helpful way (such as providing monetary payments, a home, or some sort of protection or service to the injured party). This notion of making things better after an injury, even if they cannot be restored to their former state, is consistent with Jesus’ injunction to “Do to others as you would have them do to you” (Luke 6:31). The church’s role in public advocacy for such justice was important in Anselm’s time, and should not be underestimated. However, the church has not always seen itself (institutionally, or in the persons of its individual representatives) as subject to secular authority, especially in the wake of the Gregorian Reforms (1049–1073), which Anselm promoted in England after 1100. The freeing of the clergy from “lay ascendancy,” most commonly in the form of a secular ruler, and the assertion of papal supremacy are at the heart of the question of the relationship between church and state that was begun with Anselm, and became far more problematic as time went on. This becomes the focal question.

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of the next pre-Reformation “moment” I wish to highlight, that of the events leading to and following the murder of Thomas Becket.

Thomas Becket (c. 1118–1170)

By the mid-eleventh century, kings and barons had the right to appoint the abbots, bishops, and parish priests within their geographical territories. They also had the right, if priests or those in minor orders committed certain crimes—primarily murder, theft, or treason—to insist that the offenders be stripped of their orders in the ecclesiastical courts, and remanded to secular courts for trial and punishment. Thomas Becket, as archbishop, believed that this was tantamount to trying a man twice for the same offense, and opposed Henry II’s insistence on secular penalties for such “criminous clerks.” After the issuance of the Councils of Clarendon, Becket went into exile on the Continent, mainly in France, from the autumn of 1164 until early November of 1170.

Whether Henry actually uttered the famous question attributed to him—“Who will rid me of this turbulent priest?”—is unlikely. However, not only did the protection of “criminous clerks” undermine the dignity of the church, it prevented the kind of justice Anselm wished for those who needed it most—the victims of the crimes committed by the priests in question. It was not until 1827 that “benefit of clergy” was abandoned in England.

Nonetheless, the aftermath of Becket’s murder, especially the public penances to which Henry II submitted himself, provides the seed of a positive element for Anglican social theology. People at all levels of society assumed that the archbishop had been assassinated at the king’s behest, and there was an outcry against the perceived abuse of secular power to control the church. It was widely assumed that Henry would be excommunicated, but instead, Pope Alexander II outlined

16 Knowles, *Thomas Becket*, 81.
a series of conditions under which the king could be rehabilitated and keep his throne. This took over three and a half years,17 culminating in Henry’s public penance so compellingly dramatized centuries later by Jean Anouilh. The church had called the secular ruler and his actions to account, at the demand of a dissatisfied populace, and provided a “public space” for bridging the gap between ordinary people and those in power. The people’s sense of justice was satisfied, and the monarch’s authority to rule was restored.

1215: Magna Carta and the Church

The third pre-Reformation “moment” to which I call attention in the development of an Anglican social theology is the signing of Magna Carta by King John at Runnymede in 1215. The Magna Carta stands mostly as an aspirational document: this is, it described what, for medieval England, good government under the king should be. From almost eight hundred years’ remove, it is easy to forget that this was also a document about the relationship between the church and the secular ruler. England had been under papal interdict from 1208 to 1214. King John personally had been excommunicated since 1209, and a series of plots which threatened his reign served to reinforce the notion that an excommunicated king was particularly vulnerable to rebellion.18

The Magna Carta can be seen as an attempt to reconcile with the pope, and to at least give the appearance that good government is answerable to divine law. Indeed, the Preamble names the document’s purpose as pertaining to “the honor of God and the advancement of his holy Church and for the rectifying of our realm.”19

The first article of the Magna Carta assures that the “English Church shall be free, and shall have her rights entire, and her liberties inviolate,” particularly in regard to elections of abbots and bishops. This was a major advance, as kings and barons had customary rights to name their preferred candidates for such positions as came vacant in their territories. When vacancies occurred, kings and barons often refused to name someone to fill them, as they would receive the income from the lands held by vacant sees and monasteries.

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17 Knowles, Thomas Becket, 153.
18 Gillingham, “The Early Middle Ages,” 150.
19 The Magna Carta (The Great Charter) can be found at http://www.constitution.org/eng/magnacar.htm.
Ecclesial freedom was not without responsibilities. Much of this is implied throughout the *Magna Carta*. For example, Archbishop Stephen Langton (d. 1228), in Clause 55, is specifically named as having a judiciary function along with “five and twenty barons” who have judgment in matters of unjust fines. The church also has a distinct responsibility to act as a probate court in the event of a freeman dying intestate. The church will supervise the distribution of “chattels” to the dead freeman’s family. This shows two things. First, the secular authorities could not always be trusted to deal fairly with widows and orphans. Second, it was believed that the church was adequately sound to be charged with this responsibility. Overall, the *Magna Carta* confirms the tradition of Anglican social theology: the church has an interest in good government. The *Magna Carta* has no concerns in doctrinal definitions; rather, it has a strong interest in securing a just temporal government.

While not exhaustive, these “moments” illustrate four main points that form an important underground stream that feeds the tradition. The first is the proportional and restitutive nature of justice. Second, in secular matters, clergy must be held to the same legal standards as laity. The third consideration is that the church can provide an appropriate forum to help in the process of reconciliation between the majority of people and those who hold secular power. Finally, the church has an interest in good government, for the benefit of all members of society.

**Classical Anglicanism and Social Theology**

**Richard Hooker**

Richard Hooker (1554?–1600) is the figure most commonly identified with the start of what most scholars consider proper Anglican theology. Hooker’s most enduring work, *The Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, holds pride of place as the first systematic exploration of how the young Church of England understood its relationship to the society in which it was set.

In the late sixteenth century, Hooker could confidently assume that church and society were essentially identical. The church was a universal and eternal society, but on earth, a “society politic.”20 He was not particularly concerned with the church as any kind of exclusive

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community of the elect. The *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* remains important because of its concern with the visible church on earth, its members, and the relations between that church and the society within which it is situated.

There are two main strands in Hooker’s thought which provide a resource for contemporary social theology. The first is his conception of law. This is apparent in Hooker’s works, and here I am concerned more with the concept of law as it governs human relations, and the relations between persons and God. The second is what we would call today *plurality*. Although Hooker does not use the word, there are many instances of the concept throughout his work.

a. Law

At the heart of law, for Hooker, is *God*. Indeed, “God [therefore] is a law both to himself, and to all other things besides.” This indicates purpose: “God worketh nothing without cause.”\(^{21}\) The purpose for which God follows divine law is “for his own sake,” but not for God’s benefit—“but all things for him to show beneficence and grace.”\(^{22}\) It is not about obeying arbitrary orders; it is about following a direction which “proceeding in the knowledge of truth and by growing in the exercise of virtue, man amongst the creatures of this inferior world, aspireth to the greatest conformity with God.”\(^{23}\) So, laws have to be purposeful, bringing humanity into greater conformity with divinity; they also have to be *reasonable*.\(^{24}\) It must also be possible to follow a law, not just to *want* to follow it: “The will notwithstanding doth not incline to have or do that which reason teacheth to be good, unless the same do also teach it to be possible.”\(^{25}\)

It is important to note that, for Hooker, orders issued by one person or a select few are not true laws, for to “live by one man’s will, became the cause of all men’s misery. This constrained them to come unto laws wherein all men might see their duties beforehand, and to know the penalties of transgressing them.”\(^{26}\) Two things should be noted here. First, there is some grounding in the idea of law (both

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\(^{21}\) Hooker, *Laws*, I.2.3.

\(^{22}\) Hooker, *Laws*, I.2.4.

\(^{23}\) Hooker, *Laws*, I.5.3.

\(^{24}\) “For the laws of well-doing are the dictates of right reason” (Hooker, *Laws*, I.7.4).


\(^{26}\) Hooker, *Laws*, I.10.5.
sacred and secular) as defining obligations to God and others. Second, laws are best made by wise people. Hooker goes on to say that “the most natural and religious course in the making of laws is that the matter of them be taken from the judgement of the wisest in those things which they are to concern.”

Throughout Book III, Hooker explores the question of the mutability of laws. It is important to discern the desired end of the law, and to see whether or not it would be kept better by adhering to or departing from it. Hooker concludes that it is no dishonor to God to adjust the particulars of laws that no longer fulfill their original intent:

> The end wherefore laws were made may be permanent, and those laws nevertheless require some alteration, if there be any unfitness in the means which they prescribe as tending unto that end and purpose. . . . But that which hath been once most sufficient may wax otherwise by alteration of time and place.

And:

> that whether the matter whereon laws are made continue or continue not, if their end have once ceased, they cease also to be of force. . . if by alteration of persons or times they be found insufficient to attain to that end. In which respect why may we not presume that God doth even call for such change or alteration as the very condition of things themselves doth make necessary?

So, a brief summary of Hooker’s idea of law indicates that it must be reasonable, and possible, to direct humans to their highest good—and when it stops serving its purpose well or when its purpose terminates, it may have to change.

b. Plurality

“Plurality,” unlike “law,” is a word Hooker did not use; however, the concept is still to be found there. Arthur Stephen McGrade specifically says that one of Hooker’s key arguments for unified worship was to “establish and maintain connections between basic theological values and the needs and capacities of . . . a community of all sorts and

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conditions, a nation.” That is the thrust of Book V of the *Laws*; in McGrade’s words, “The rules framing the actions of a political community might reasonably be expected to take account of this wide range of human goals and activities.”

Although Hooker was writing from a distinctively Christian standpoint, he was concerned with “true religion in gross, and not according to every particular: for they which in some particular points of religion do swerve from the truth, may nevertheless most truly . . . be said to hold and profess that religion which is true.” Basic religious values held the church together rather than doctrinal specifics. A person was a Christian if she or he could affirm “One Lord, one Faith, one Baptism.” Even in the case of visible and notorious sin:

> If by external profession they be Christians, then they are of the visible Church of Christ: and Christians by external profession they are all, whose mark of recognizance hath in it those things which we have mentioned, yea, although they be impious idolaters, wicked heretics, persons excommunicable, yea, and cast out for notorious improbity.

Hooker’s concern was with a visible church on earth, but not a Christian society formed only of the elect—he was fully ready to admit that there would be some perhaps seriously flawed human beings in the church, but it was up to God to figure out who was fit for heaven (or not). Even less was failure in ecclesiastical discipline meant to exclude a person from civil society: “And concerning excommunication, it cutteth off indeed from the Church, and yet not from the commonwealth.” Again, this is a critique of the Puritan view that in a Christian nation, all areas of life, including the cultural or economic, should be under the jurisdiction of the church.

All of this points to Hooker’s desire to keep the boundaries of the church as broad as possible in the interest of fostering both spiritual and temporal well-being. But that did not mean the Church of

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31 McGrade, “Introduction,” xxiii.
33 Hooker, *Laws*, III.1.7.
England was devoid of religious mission. That mission, instead, was to reconcile rather than divide Christian believers, drawing religious bodies together on the things that could unite them, and leaving the finer points of scriptural, doctrinal, and moral differences to one side as things that were not essential. Reconciliation today is not just between Christians, but between the church and all members of society, showing that the institutional church is truly invested in the “good of the city,” rather than its own prestige and privilege.

This is the basis of the first concern of Anglican social theology—society. A society is persons bound together by reasonable, attainable, appropriate laws; these laws are rooted in and consistent with divine law. The divine society of the church may be conterminous with “secular” society (for Hooker, this is assumed). All laws, whether those of church or commonwealth, must allow for the greatest diversity of private opinion and practice compatible with good government and general social well-being.

The Continuing Challenge of Plurality

From 1600 to the mid-nineteenth century, the assumption of a Christian society with an established church was assumed to be normative for England. The question was not whether there should be an established church; it was a matter of what kind of church it should be, and what privileges it should have above any other Christian group. If a major purpose of an established church was to help in maintaining public morality, the Church of England, for the first time, needed to demonstrate that it was not merely the privileged minority at prayer. Furthermore, with the growth and success of other Christian denominations, relaxation of legal restrictions on dissenting churches, and the rise of religious scepticism, it became important to show that the church was truly “one holy catholic and apostolic,” and existed for the “good of the city.”

Thomas Arnold

Although F. D. Maurice confronted the increasing diversity of religious beliefs and ecclesial loyalties in nineteenth-century English society, his contemporary Thomas Arnold was the first to articulate a social theology that was not directed at converting those of other faiths or none, allowing that all might benefit from a Christian presence in every community. In a situation of established religion, this
may partially explain why Arnold’s work was not highly regarded during his lifetime. However, it is instructive for later generations, where the established church is responsible for protecting the rights of people of all religions, and of none. For a non-established church, such as in the American situation, it is resonant with the Baptismal Covenant which requires believers to “seek and serve Christ in all persons,” and to “strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being.”

Arnold’s immediate social situation was that of the French Revolution, the Evangelical revival, and the industrial revolution. As Headmaster of Rugby (1828–1841), he sought to educate middle-class boys to have a sense of duty, public service, and personal character. He was seen as a founder of the Broad Church movement, with a liberal interpretation of Anglican formularies and a suspicion of the excesses of both the Oxford Movement and evangelicalism. Even Arnold’s detractors had to admit that his *Principles of Church Reform* were the product of a “mind at once daring and well informed” and that Arnold was a “keen observer of society with no one else having quite his breadth of vision.”

Arnold did not want to disestablish the church, but he also did not object to healthy dissent. He challenged the nepotism and ineffectiveness of the national church, and called for a *true* reform of the church, rather than the false reform which he called “Church Destroyers.” Real reform, for Arnold, would be to make the national church a home for *all* Christians, and to preserve the parish system, because the benefit was “to secure . . . the greatest blessing of human society, that is, the constant residence of one individual, who has no other business than to do good of every kind to every person.”

The *physical* presence of the church building was likewise important for Arnold, as

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38 Arnold, *Principles of Church Reform*, 94.
public purposes, and for the welfare of the poorest and most destitute human being who lives within the hearing of its bells.  

As well, the minister, to do this kind of good, needs to have the kind of education that will enable him to be able to communicate with others. This would enable a “life of constant intercourse with men, of which the direct and acknowledged business is to do them good physically and morally.” But Arnold does not require the person to be holy—just wise, and desirous of improving the lives of those around him, with “none of the harshness of legal authority, yet with a moral influence such as no legal authority could give.” Even without specifically Christian belief, with the presence of such a person, for Arnold, “the amount of crime and misery would have been enormously lessened.”  

Arnold did think that the specifics of the Christian religion added a great benefit. The local minister’s authority and motivation came from his religious belief—it was not necessary for others to share that belief.

Furthermore, Arnold was firmly against sectarianism, claiming that without a national church as a rallying-point, one would have a situation similar to the then-unique case of the United States, “where the evil spirit of sectarianism has wrought his perfect work.” This is not saying that differences of opinion within Christian belief are undesirable or avoidable. Dissent had the salutary effect of bringing Christian faith to the poorer classes, although the good was “tainted” with sectarianism. Arnold saw both dissent and the High Church party to be guilty of schism, making Christians “more adverse to each other than to the cause of ungodliness and wickedness.” Arnold suggested that there be one place of worship in each community—it was better to have a visible sign of one church with different worship services, than a lot of churches worshipping differently at the same time. Admittedly, the differences with some groups—Quakers, Roman Catholics, and Unitarians—would be more difficult.

Arnold did not hesitate to name the problems of “church reform” (and to say what it is and is not), and simultaneously he did not hold

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39 Arnold, *Principles of Church Reform*, 94.
40 Arnold, *Principles of Church Reform*, 95.
41 Arnold, *Principles of Church Reform*, 98.
the Church of England harmless for the divisions within the Christian religion. He also opened the door to a social theology that is not directed at converting those of other faiths or none, allowing that all might benefit from a Christian presence in every community.

A brief reading of Thomas Arnold’s *Principles* helps articulate a theology for society. As the established church’s hold on all levels of English society was weakening, Arnold made a case for the benefits of a unified Christian presence in every community: reduced crime, poverty, and general human malaise. However, “unified” did not mean a narrow doctrinal or liturgical interpretation of Christian belief and perspective, nor did it mean that every person had to be a professing Christian in order to benefit from the care of the church in his or her community. Rather, the presence of a Church of England minister would serve as a rallying point for coordinating Christian action in that location.

*Moving toward Public Theology*

*William Temple*

It was evident by the early twentieth century that the established church’s influence on the nation was waning. The writings of William Temple (1881–1944) provide material for moving from the idea of a predominantly Christian society with an established church, to thinking through the role of Anglican theology (established or otherwise) in a pluralistic society. His work indicates the third aspect of Anglican social theology: the place of the church within a wider, pluralistic society. This is especially important in terms of how the church conducts its internal business (which is still visible to a wider world), and how it relates corporately to those of other traditions.

I see Temple as a transitional figure, in whose work can be read the tension between confident Christian faith and openness to the truths found in other religious and philosophical systems. He provides, in his most famous mis-quote, a model of the church in terms of its relations to the world. Many believe that Temple said that “the Church is the only organization that exists for those who are not its members,” but what he actually said is this:

An army does not exist for the soldiers who compose it; you ask them! An army exists for the sake of the nation to which the soldiers belong. It is not for their sake that there is an army; it is for
the sake of the nation and the cause which it has espoused. So the Church exists in the first place, not for us who are its members, but for the Kingdom of God.\(^4\)

Obviously, other organizations besides the church exist to serve people who are not their members: armies, governments, hospitals, and research institutes would be good examples. Furthermore, even if the members are not the principal beneficiaries of these organizations’ work, members can have a reasonable expectation of sharing in the fruits of their own labors on behalf of a wider community. Indeed, in the case of the church, they should, and should be seen by “outsiders” as doing so. If the church, in its internal relations, does not appear to be of benefit to those who claim membership, it is a detriment to spreading the gospel.

Temple also provides a model for the church in terms of how it should conduct its discourse, both among its members and with a wider society. He frequently said that the church claimed to be “the representation in this earth of the life of heaven.” However, he added that if those outside the church were to look at it and say, “In that case, we don’t much want to go to heaven,” it meant that the church as an institution, and as the collective of its individual members, was at fault.\(^5\) This means that the institutional church, in its internal relations, must not only conduct itself well, but be seen to do so. Everything which can be observed by those outside the church—the tenor of discourse by which church business is discussed, the ways in which clergy malfeasance is handled, the justice of employment practices—has to be done in a way that assures people that the church is a trustworthy institution, not only in the interest of winning converts, but in the interest of joining together for purposes shared across the boundaries of wisdom traditions.

Service beyond its own membership and trustworthiness to outsiders (largely demonstrated by the way members are treated) are hallmarks of Temple’s thinking about the church which are pertinent to the development of a social theology for the twenty-first century.


These should be seen as two sides of the same coin. The same can be said of two other important features: respect and humility. The two, for Temple, are so closely related it is almost impossible to separate them. To respect the views of others is not to take an “agree to disagree” position, but to listen and learn, being open to the possibility of change, even when attempting to convert another:

I am sure that if I were called to be a Missionary, I should desire abundant liberty of re-translating the experience in the Catholic tradition into language more intelligible to the children of another civilisation, and I should hope to learn from my way of responding to the revelation of God in Christ so much new truth as might require some change in my own formulation of belief.\textsuperscript{46}

Temple, like Hooker, was willing to construe Christian belief as broadly as possible, and found it distressing when others tried to force more narrow theological definitions. In his Chairman’s Introduction to the 1938 report \textit{Doctrine in the Church of England}, he reminded his fellow bishops and theologians that “to become bitter in controversy is more heretical than to espouse with sincerity and charity the most devastating theological opinions.”\textsuperscript{47} Today, Temple’s words about the need for religious understanding that could take into account the “wealth of spiritual activity in the world now”\textsuperscript{48} are no less true than they were when written almost a century ago. Nor can we ignore Temple’s warning that conversation and cooperation with non-Christians (whether religious or not) cannot happen unless “full appreciation has been shown for the spiritual treasures of which they are the heirs.”\textsuperscript{49} This requires that, no matter how firmly held one’s beliefs are, one must also remember that no single person or group possesses the totality of religious truth: “There is no faith which is held by any very large body of people or by any sincerely reflecting


\textsuperscript{49} Temple, \textit{Church and its Teaching Today}, 32.
people, which has not the truth as its mainspring.”

A sincere spiritual and intellectual humility, along with respect for the beliefs of others, will go far, both for a greater apprehension of truth as well as for cooperation for the good of the world.

Temple’s tradition is still vibrant, largely through the work of Ronald Preston, late Canon Theologian of Manchester (UK), and professor of pastoral and social theology at the University of Manchester. However, as I have said at length elsewhere, I question whether Preston is the theological heir to Temple that he and others claim. I have argued that Preston carried on Temple’s commitments to ecumenical relations and particular social issues (especially involving economic justice), but that he did not ground these concerns in Temple’s theological warrants. A deeper examination of Temple’s work—which I have only briefly sketched here—is needed to use his work as a resource for contemporary social theology.

Rowan Williams

Anglican social theology comes to a high point in the work of Rowan Williams. His earlier work (prior to his 2003 translation to Canterbury) forms a basis for this endeavor. I would like to examine, briefly, two main concepts which can form a ground for the practice of social theology which is not narrowly tied to partisan ecclesial politics or stances on particular ethical issues. These two concepts are integrity and space. I see them as indispensable for Anglicans in their relation to other Christian churches, as well as in relationship with those of other faiths or no religious background at all.

In a short essay written in 1993, Rowan Williams set out his vision of theological integrity, which can be summarized by the following four requirements:

1. It does not conceal its true agenda, but rather truly talks about what it says it is talking about.
2. It is open to genuine response from the concerned parties, rather than a prescribed or predetermined one.
3. It declines to take “God’s view” or claim to have a “total perspective.”

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50 Temple, *Church and its Teaching Today*, 34.
Theological integrity is foreshadowed in Temple’s work. The need to listen to others and to learn from them, rather than to try to move them to a predetermined outcome, and to recognize that no Christian individual or community has possession of the entire truth of God in Christ, is neatly summarized for the later twentieth and early twenty-first century in Williams’s essay.

There are a number of good reasons to incorporate this notion of theological integrity into the practice of contemporary social theology. Not the least of these is that it avoids foregone conclusions, and thus encourages the oft-praised Anglican virtue of “comprehensiveness,” and avoids the possibility of thinking that there are some conclusions that Anglicans simply cannot, or do not need to, reach. It is also in continuity with Temple’s idea that we all must have the humility of learners, and that changing our position in the light of new information or encounters is not an indication of infidelity. Without this kind of integrity, the institutional church has no business entering into public discussion of social issues.

The second concept I find in Williams’s work is the idea of space—“breathing space,” as he so eloquently uses the term in Writing in the Dust: After September 11. Strongly stated, “space” is a necessary condition of humility, integrity, and theological understanding. This phrase, introduced in discussing the “last words” of the aircraft passengers who died in the 2001 terrorist attacks, deserves to be seen in its context:

Someone who is about to die in terrible anguish makes room in their mind for someone else; for the grief and terror of someone they love. They do what they can to take some atom of that pain away from the other by the inarticulate message on the mobile. That moment of “making room” is what I as a religious person have to notice. It isn’t “pious,” it isn’t language about God; it is simply language that brings into the world something other than self-defensiveness. It’s a breathing space in the asthmatic climate

52 This summary is the one I used in an earlier essay, “Integrity, Alternative Aggressions, and Impaired Communion,” in Ecumenical Écologies: Unity, Diversity and Otherness in a Fragmented World, ed. Gesa Elsbeth Thiessen (London: T&T Clark, 2009), 89–90.
There is much here for discussion, but I will only point out a few highlights. First of all, “breathing space” is not for ourselves, individually or institutionally—it is for the “other” (in the case of the institutional church, most likely it will be for those who do not claim membership). Secondly, this space does not necessarily speak directly of God, but that does not mean God is absent. It indicates a sort of “moving out of the way” on the part of those who are in (possibly even causing) that “asthmatic climate of self-concern and competition.” It may have the effect of taking competing persons or groups out of immediate reach of each other, providing a more civilized distance for respectful, caring, and constructive discourse. By getting out of the way, it leaves room for God to enter the situation—for wisdom and compassion to come to the surface when it might otherwise be blocked or thwarted. Finally, it is something that “religious language doesn’t often manage to create by or for itself.” Religious language is too often heated, too often certain of its own rightness, only seeing what is closest (which means seeing only a small part of what should be seen) to make space for the “other.” To put space between ourselves and others in an “asthmatic situation” can allow some of that heat to dissipate between “us” and “other,” and can allow a fuller view of how both fit together than is otherwise possible.

This “breathing space” requires the sort of integrity described earlier in this section. For Williams, creating a space in which discourse about the most uncomfortable aspects of contemporary life can be carried out is a primary contribution Christian theology can make to contemporary society. In his “Leader” commentary in the New Statesman of June 9, 2011, Williams finds an “ironic satisfaction in the way several political thinkers today are quarrying theological traditions for ways forward,” and goes on to say that

a democracy that would measure up to this sort of ideal—religious in its roots but not exclusive or confessional—would be one in which the central question about any policy would be: how far does it equip a person or group to engage generously and for the

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long term in building the resourcefulness and well-being of any other person or group, with the state seen as a “community of communities.”

An established church has the opportunity and responsibility to do this in ways that would not be possible in, for example, the American disestablishment situation. But in both contexts, churches—both local congregations and regional/national denominational bodies—can work with those of other traditions (religious or not) to create spaces in which difficult social issues can be discussed with respect and understanding.

Such respect and understanding, however, does not mean that when something has gone terribly wrong, it cannot be named as wrong. Speaking of the summer 2011 London riots, Williams did not sugar-coat the actions of those who participated in looting, violence, or property destruction. He noted that

there is nothing to romanticise and there is nothing to condone in the behaviour that has spread across our streets. This is indeed criminality. . . . Seeking explanations, it is worth remembering, is not the same as seeking excuses, and in an intelligent and critical society, we do seek explanations so that we may be able to respond with greater intelligence and greater generosity.

The church, along with other groups in society (religious, cultural, educational), has a responsibility for promoting education that is not merely “instrumental,” Williams continued, but that “builds character, that builds virtue.” A desire for such an educational system can surely arise from Christian motives, but need not be narrowly Christian.

Integrity and space—even if just enough space to keep conflicting parties from striking out at each other, and held long enough so that they learn to reach out to each other—are, I think, two key concepts which the writing and ministry of Rowan Williams contributes to an appropriate Anglican social theology for the twenty-first century.

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Summary

The trajectory of Anglican social theology, from Augustine’s mission in 597 to the present, is one of the church’s service to society—in Atherton and Forrester’s phrase, “for the good of the city.” There have been, as in the Becket incident, notable lapses from this call to serve, but in general, the foregoing should indicate that there has been a generally positive relation between “secular” society and Anglican ecclesial groups. This has taken many forms, from Anselm’s theological reflection on the restorative and proportional nature of divine justice and how that might shape human justice, to the space created by the church to provide a forum to express outrage at (perceived or real) misdeeds on the part of secular authorities after Becket’s murder—which is not far from the sort of “breathing space” called for by Rowan Williams in the aftermath of both the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, or the London 2011 riots. Hooker’s understanding of a theologically plural society serves us well today, as the variety of religious and secular spiritualities increases far beyond what could have been imagined at the Reformation. Arnold’s advice that the parish priest needed to be an educated, broad-minded person is continued in both William Temple’s and Rowan Williams’s insistence on the value of moral education with a focus on character formation (rather than an “instrumentalist” approach) for society, and the guiding (rather than controlling) role of the church to ensure that such an education is available to all.

This approach of mining the continuing argument of Anglican social theology for themes and principles is, I think, crucial for developing an adequate social theology for the twenty-first century. Although the three themes identified—thology of, for, and in society—have dominated particular historical periods, they have all been present (if in the background) throughout post-Reformation Anglicanism while still honoring the pre-Reformation heritage of English theology. As we move forward, keeping all three in the foreground, realizing that as each theme is redefined it will necessarily mean alterations for the others, will contribute to a richer and more vibrant Anglican presence in contemporary society.