Editor’s Notes

This is the second of two 2012 issues of the ATR focusing on Anglican moral theology. In the Spring 2012 issue, Jeffrey P. Greenman considered the moral vision of Anglican Evangelicalism, in which Scripture is central and preaching is a high priority. The stress on moral character is rooted in an analysis of human sin and the radical need for grace as formative of moral behavior and action. Timothy F. Sedgwick gave an account of the exemplary tradition, in which faith is a matter of practical piety, with a virtue ethics with a particular set of ends. Christ is the exemplar, so the focus of this tradition is “life lived in communion with God.” Also in the Spring issue, Benjamin J. King, Robert MacSwain, and Jason A. Fout discussed the work of contemporary theologians David Brown, Sarah Coakley, and David F. Ford, noting how their work elaborates and develops Anglican traditions in theology and ethics.

In the present issue, there are three major essays on other aspects of Anglican moral theology: casuistry, Anglican social theology, and postcolonial, feminist, and lay contributions to Anglican ethics. There is a review article that examines the work of Nigel Biggar and Oliver O’Donovan. And there are responses from three moral theologians, each of whom draws out certain aspects to the two issues in order to highlight trajectories and projects that spring from the Anglican inheritance and develop it into the future.

Together, these issues of the ATR provide as comprehensive a picture of Anglican moral theology as could be hoped for, given limitations of space and time. And we have a sketch of a number of ways forward in further retrieving, elaborating, and expanding this inheritance in the years to come. I am deeply grateful for these two issues of the Anglican Theological Review, first and foremost as a theologian and ethicist and a teacher, and also of course as Editor in Chief of the journal. I am grateful to Timothy Sedgwick for conceiving of these issues and working with many colleagues in developing them. I am grateful to each of the authors for the thoughtful, careful, extensive work that is so evident in each essay. I am also grateful to those who assisted this project, though some were unable, ultimately, to contribute an
essay or comment. And I am profoundly grateful for the results of this project so far.

In the first of this issue’s major articles, David H. Smith explores the tradition of casuistry (or case-based reasoning) in Anglican moral theology, noting that “the main task of Christian ethics is formation of individual conscience and creation of a community of moral discourse among persons who are loyal to Christ through the church. That entails addressing particular moral problems that specific people are dealing with here and now.” Case-based reasoning asks the question “What am I responsible for?” in a particular situation and context. The question presumes two things: the compatibility of faith and reason, and the development of a conscience that is formed within community, but may quite legitimately disagree with it. Case-based reasoning goes beyond rules and principles, which can only set parameters for moral discernment that has to take place in concrete contexts and in relation to particular and variable aspects of life as it is lived. Thus, an approach through the kind of casuistry described here may be quite helpful when a clear moral consensus is not present or evident within the community of faith. Case-based reasoning is also helpful in addressing the question of how Anglicans can continue to exercise public influence after the dissolution of Christendom and any shreds of establishment.

This question is the focus of Wendy Dackson’s discussion of the integral relation of church and society, a matter that has been of major importance in Anglican moral theology. As Dackson says, “For Anglican Christians, church and society can never be separated.” Thus it is more appropriate to speak of Anglican social theology than Anglican social ethics. The church is always an actor in society, in a variety of ways: not just the formation of individual good citizens, but also in the formation, expression, and support of a social vision that reflects what God intends society to be. Christians must ask how the church can influence a culture that cannot be assumed to share its ideals. This means, as William Temple saw, that the church does not exist merely for its members, but for a kingdom that is more than and beyond the church. The church must attend to its internal life in order to make a credible witness to God’s reign, but the direction of the church is always outward: “Society is not only the locus of salvation; it is also the object of salvation.” While Dackson’s focus in this article is on select developments and figures in British Anglicanism, her analysis can readily be elaborated to include the work of others, such as the American and Canadian social reformers, liberation movements in
the Global South, and so on. Doing so is crucial in a postcolonial and multicultural era when the Christian church is not central to society, but still has a role to play beyond the moral perfection of its individual members and internal life.

Libby Gibson's article reminds us that there are many contributors to Anglican moral theology whose voices have not been heard or whose voices have been silent and at points silenced. Anglican moral theology urgently needs these “counter-narratives” precisely because the legacy of colonialism in Anglicanism is so significant and so little explored at this point. “Even if ambiguity around neocolonialism exists, the legacy of colonialism—and reactions thereto—shape every aspect of the Communion’s ecclesiology, liturgy, theology, ethics, and biblical interpretation.” This raises the important question of the ethics of being church. Insofar as being church means the ordering of Christian life to participate in the mission of God, counter-narratives are vital in pointing toward what that life ought to be. In surveying the work of postcolonial, feminist, and lay Anglicans, Gibson’s essay points to riches yet to be retrieved and explored, and also to work still to be done. Gibson echoes postcolonial theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in asking, “But who will listen?” This question poses challenges for the content of future work in Anglican moral theology: further archeology, and also broader and deeper consideration of contemporary topics and insights. In addition, though, there is a question for the fundamental method of Anglican moral theology. Part of its task is to “create new ears to hear the experiences of those who have been wounded, forgotten, and ignored.”

The responses that follow take into account all the essays in the two issues on Anglican moral theology. Many thanks to D. H. Kortright Davis and Timothy F. Sedgwick for their very helpful comments on the project we have presented here. For myself, I will say simply that it is an honor to have been asked to respond.

We have also included two “practicing theology” essays, not explicitly connected to the focus on moral theology of this issue, but clearly deeply informed by it in a variety of ways. John C. Bauerschmidt, Episcopal co-chair of the Anglican–Roman Catholic Consultation in the United States (ARCUSA), discusses the differing views of private confession held by Roman Catholic and Anglican moral theologies. The continuing dialogue between these two traditions would be enriched by mutual retrieval and perhaps reinstitution of the primitive practice of public penance, envisioned by Thomas Cranmer.
From a different direction, Torey Lightcap considers a challenge to the everyday ethics of most people in the United States and Canada: the cost to others of what is convenient for ourselves. This is a thorny issue: we know that much of what we purchase—goods and services—is produced by the labor of those who are underpaid. We also know that realistic alternatives are difficult to find, and are not necessarily affordable. At the same time, gestures of hospitality and neighborliness may have consequences we do not anticipate and do not intend. Lightcap gives us much to ponder as we consider our next ventures into consumption and the service economy.

Also in this issue is the second of our series of essays on the interrelationship of theology and poetry. In this issue, Barney Hawkins discusses that relationship quite concretely in reflections on his own work throughout his ministry. Hawkins notes that all who serve have limited vision and so must search for inspiration and “a vocabulary to talk about the ultimate meaning of life,” a vocabulary which we may find as we connect with the imaginative processes of the arts.

In their review article on the work of Nigel Biggar and Oliver O’Donovan, Philip Lorish and Charles Mathewes discuss counsel as an integral part of moral theology: “Counsel is insight given to a willing recipient, from a wise colleague or fellow-traveler along the way; one who is earnest in care of the auditor, and who has some insight or wisdom to convey, yet who recognizes that all such insight can only be offered, can never be forced, and must inevitably be apprehended and put to work by the person on the spot, not the one giving the advice.” Counsel, then, presumes that the recipient is a moral agent with a formed and informed conscience who is addressed by God and makes her/his own decisions. It is to such an agent that the church speaks, and with authority. O’Donovan’s work emphasizes the virtue of judiciousness that is foundational to giving and receiving counsel, a virtue which recognizes both the sinfulness of the human condition and our deep, persistent longing for the good, a longing whose fulfillment can only be glimpsed in this life. This emphasis shapes and propels his work on political theology (with Joan Lockwood O’Donovan) as well as on moral theology. Nigel Biggar’s work continues O’Donovan’s interest in giving counsel that “honor[s] the integrity of the vocations of the human world’s various practitioners” by “bringing all the relevant theological material to bear upon the forces and factors that inhibit those practitioners from fully inhabiting their particular vocations.” This is how “moral theology helps to
protect and preserve the goods that adhere to the myriad aspects of everyday life.” Valuable counselors are those who are able to resist perfectionism while always keeping the moral order firmly in view. As the article’s authors make clear, the work of O’Donovan and Biggar stands firmly in the tradition of Anglican moral theology presented in the rest of the articles in these two ATR issues. And their work furthers this tradition in rigorous, invigorating, and provocative ways.

I want to take this opportunity to thank Jay Emerson Johnson, ATR’s Book Review Editor for the last six years, for his dedication and wisdom in choosing the books to be reviewed in the journal—always only a small number of an incredible wealth of published material—and the reviewers whose insights and understanding guide us in choosing our own reading for both professional development and enjoyment. The task of the Book Review Editor is always challenging, and I am grateful not only for Jay’s persistence in carrying it out, but also his grace and good humor, and his companionship on the way of theological reflection.

In conclusion, let me note that I am completing these Editor’s Notes just days after the General Convention of the Episcopal Church has made two momentous decisions: approval of provisional use of a liturgy for blessing same-sex unions, and authorization of ongoing work in restructuring the Episcopal Church. The former is of course more noted by various media, and no doubt the multiple responses sure to appear in the subsequent months will draw out the implications of this action. Among them already is emerging clarity that the Episcopal Church (and others?) need to engage in a serious study and discussion of Christian marriage. The second decision, on structure, is also bound to have serious implications, many of which will not be evident for a period of years, as the scope of changes suggested is vast. In both instances, proponents see these decisions as necessary for the Episcopal Church to be faithful in participating in the mission of God. Of course we will pursue these discussions in future issues of the Anglican Theological Review.

Ellen K. Wondra
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