Anglican Evangelicals on Personal and Social Ethics

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Anglican evangelicals over the past three hundred years have given significant attention to addressing moral, social, and political concerns. Scholars have often overlooked the contributions made by evangelicals in presenting a biblically-oriented, Christ-centered, and publicly-engaged vision of the moral life. This essay analyzes the approaches taken by leading voices in this strand of Anglicanism by exploring the work of Henry Venn, William Wilberforce, J. C. Ryle, David Gitari, and N. T. Wright. By looking for persistent patterns in their moral thought, this essay offers an introduction to the contributions made by evangelicals to personal and social ethics. It concludes by calling for Anglicanism’s conservative moral voices to contribute to contemporary ethical debates with “convicted civility.”

The least recognized and least studied strand of Anglicanism is the evangelical tradition.¹ Yet since the early eighteenth century evangelicals have been a notable presence within the Anglican

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Communion, and today they are an influential and sometimes controversial force. Even so, they sometimes perceive themselves to be marginalized or underappreciated, a sensitivity that undergirds Alister McGrath’s insistence that “evangelicalism is, historically and theologically, a legitimate and respectable option within Anglicanism.”

There have been few focused studies of Anglican evangelicals’ understandings of personal and social ethics. No comprehensive monograph on this topic has been published. General accounts of Anglican ethics hardly mention Anglican evangelicals. For instance, Paul Elmen’s widely cited essay on Anglican morality in The Study of Anglicanism devotes just one (helpful) paragraph to evangelicals of any era. His essay gives the impression that apart from noting the impressive social vision of the Clapham Sect associated with William Wilberforce, there is not much to say. A notable exception to this general neglect is an essay in The Anglican Moral Choice by Peter Toon, which offers a detailed discussion of the contributions of early evangelicals, focusing on William Wilberforce, Thomas Scott, and Thomas Gisborne. More sustained scholarly attention to the evangelical moral vision is overdue, not least to enable the worldwide Anglican Communion to understand more about its own conservative theological tradition.

As we begin, clarity about terminology is needed. Some leading voices within Anglican evangelicalism affirm the importance of using the term “Anglican evangelicals” rather than “evangelical Anglicans” to describe this group. For instance, J. I. Packer grounds this preference in a fundamental theological principle: “Consistency prompts them to call themselves Anglican evangelicals rather than evangelical Anglicans to describe this group. For instance, J. I. Packer grounds this preference in a fundamental theological principle: “Consistency prompts them to call themselves Anglican evangelicals rather than evangelical Anglicans, to show that it is the gospel as such, rather than the Anglican heritage as such, which determines their Christian identity.”

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and directs their practice of Christian fellowship.”

Similarly, Richard Turnbull explains his own choice for making “evangelical” the noun and “Anglican” the adjective by saying that evangelicalism is a “way of understanding the faith” that has “prior claim to any denominational allegiance, however closely related they may be.”

Turnbull speaks for many evangelicals by emphasizing that the two terms rightfully belong together since the two traditions are theologically compatible and complementary.

This essay will examine key features of Anglican evangelicalism’s engagement with personal and social ethics by discussing some major representatives of this strand of Anglicanism. After describing the contours of a movement with very consistent theological emphases, this essay examines contributions made by five major figures: Henry Venn (1725–1797), William Wilberforce (1759–1833), J. C. Ryle (1816–1900), David Gitari (b. 1937), and N. T. Wright (b. 1948). We will analyze their theological frameworks, patterns of moral thought, and distinctive approaches to personal and social ethics in order to discover some persistent patterns in Anglican evangelicalism.

Historical and Theological Contours

Anglican evangelicals uphold a distinctive interpretation of their roots and their place in the Anglican fold. They have a particular way of telling the historical story of Anglicanism. Typically they trace their heritage not merely to the English Reformation, but back further to John Wycliffe (c. 1330–1384) and the Lollard movement as a critical forerunner. Anglican evangelicals affirm their continuity with the Lollards’ emphasis on the centrality of Scripture, the priority of preaching, the cultivation of “inward religion” as superior to “mere formalism,” and the “heavy stress on moral character as the mark of a true Christian.”

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8 Steer, Church on Fire, 19.
The sixteenth-century Reformation is the supreme reference point for Anglican evangelicals’ understanding of themselves and of the entire Anglican heritage. Speaking for this strand of Anglicanism, Paul Zahl has argued that the English Reformation was Anglicanism’s “defining moment,” not a “detour.”9 From this standpoint, “moderate Calvinism” and an emphasis on justification by faith represents Anglicanism’s authentic theological heritage. Zahl says it “was the Evangelicals who gloried in the Thirty-Nine Articles and the Reformation Homilies and in the Book of Common Prayer as the doctrinal exposition of what they so deeply felt in their hearts.”10 They view these as the theologically foundational statements of normative Anglicanism. Generally they recognize that although Anglicanism’s core documents are not as detailed or contentious as those defining other churches, the Anglican Communion always must be understood as a confessional tradition with irreducible and irreplaceable theological convictions that reflect Reformation priorities. For example, Oliver O’Donovan devoted a full volume entirely to the Thirty-Nine Articles, affirming them, together with the Book of Common Prayer, as “the foundation of Anglican theology.”11 Indeed, no other group within Anglicanism gives as much weight to the doctrinal teaching of the Articles or devotes as much energy to their continued study and dissemination.12

In more directly theological terms, J. C. Ryle articulated what he identified as Anglican evangelicalism’s five “leading features,”13 to which we append a few lines of Ryle’s own explanation of each one:

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10 Zahl, The Protestant Face of Anglicanism, 44.
13 Ryle’s list of key features is consistent with David Bebbington’s famous analysis of the evangelical movement’s fourfold emphases: “conversionism, the belief that lives need to be changed; activism, the expression of the gospel in effort; biblicism, a particular regard for the Bible; and what may be called crucicentrism, a stress on the sacrifice of Christ on the cross.” See David W. Bebbington, Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 3.
(1) “The absolute supremacy it assigns to Holy Scripture”: “If the thing is not in the Bible, deducible from the Bible, or in manifest harmony with the Bible, we will have none of it.”

(2) “The depth and prominence it assigns to the doctrine of human sinfulness and corruption”: “Man is radically diseased, and man needs a radical cure.”

(3) “The paramount importance it attaches to the work and office of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the nature of the salvation which He has wrought out for man”: “An experimental knowledge of Christ crucified and interceding, is the very essence of Christianity”; “We can never dwell too much on Christ himself, and can never speak too strongly of the fullness, freeness, presentness, and simplicity of the salvation there is in Him for every one that believes.”

(4) “The high place which it assigns to the inward work of the Holy Spirit in the heart of man”: “Its theory is that the root and foundation of all vital Christianity in any one, is a work of grace in the heart, and that until there is real experimental business within a man, his religion is a mere husk, and shell, and name, and form, and can neither comfort nor save.”

(5) “The importance which it attaches to the outward and visible work of the Holy Ghost in the life of man”: “Its theory is that the true grace of God is a thing that will always make itself manifest in the conduct, behavior, tastes, ways, choices, and habits of him who has it.”

Ryle’s list contains a set of priorities that still reflect the consensus of worldwide Anglican evangelicals. It is important to see that Ryle’s inventory associates Christian conduct and behavior with the grace of God and the Spirit’s work, thereby offsetting the tendency toward a moralistic reduction of the gospel into a message of better behavior through compliance with a set of predetermined rules.

At this point, I will turn to an examination of major writings by five key figures of the Anglican evangelical tradition, in chronological order.

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A key figure of Anglican early evangelicalism was Henry Venn, a respected clergyman who served in Huddersfield. Venn’s *The Complete Duty of Man: Or, A System of Doctrinal and Practical Christianity, Designed for the Use of Families* (1763) is, according to Bebbington, a “classic compendium of Evangelical faith and practice.” It has extensive theological content that makes it more than a handbook of Christian conduct. It is a didactic work of “practical divinity” that provides a comprehensive overview of the Christian moral-spiritual life, seen in evangelical terms.

The work’s title suggests that it was intended to provide an explicit theological counterpoint to the widely read *The Whole Duty of Man* (1658), an anonymous work usually attributed to Richard Allestree (1619–1681), which “became for more than a century a central book of devotion for Anglicans who gave pride of place to the church and the sacraments.” According to C. J. Stranks, “the emphasis on every line of the book . . . is on conduct rather than belief.” He notes that evangelicals criticized its “failure to give sufficient emphasis to the doctrine of grace.” Venn never mentions *The Whole Duty* directly but its outlook is under constant attack.

*The Complete Duty* gives great prominence to orthodox belief. The first half spells out a doctrinal framework commonly called “moderate Calvinism,” while the second addresses personal ethics and spiritual practices. Morality must be founded on sound doctrine. The work does not break any new ground theologically. Throughout, Venn’s goal is to establish the supremacy of “real religion” or “true faith” as opposed to nominal or merely “professed” faith. His central assertion is that “the foundation of the Christian religion . . . is a knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ, and a sincere love for his person. Till this knowledge and this love possesses your soul, though you may do many things which are commanded by God, and seem by

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17 Rowan A. Greer, *Anglican Approaches to Scripture: From the Reformation to the Present* (New York: Crossroad, 2006), 51.
profession a Christian, you still want the root of all acceptable obedience in your heart.”20 Thus, Christocentric piety is the indispensable starting place for the moral life.

The first chapters make the case for the primacy of personal salvation. Then Venn’s chapters on humanity detail “the natural depravity of man” as expressed in a “denial of his absolute dependence upon God for all good,” self-indulgence, “entire forgetfulness of God.” Disobedience to God’s law is summarized as “an aversion to the very Author of his being.” In a long section, the law of God is explained as the absolute standard of conduct expected by God and the basis of all human moral obligations. Venn emphasizes its ability to reveal the intentions of the human heart and its power to “convince every man living of his guilt and sinfulness in the sight of God.”21 The law is affirmed as a “schoolmaster” to bring us to Christ. Venn aims the discussion to the cross, showing that Christ does not merely give Christians an example to follow, but “redeems us from the curse of the law.”22

Faith is “an abiding heartfelt trust” or “constant lively dependence” on the Redeemer for “present help and deliverance.”23 Authentic faith involves the operation of the Holy Spirit. The work of the Spirit is central to an all-encompassing spiritual vision: “The life of holiness in the soul of one born of the Spirit appears in his actions, discourse, desires, affections and most secret thoughts.”24 Venn’s target in his account of faith is “formalists” who have “used their best endeavors to lead a good life” but who lack this sort of “lively” faith. He criticizes those who are “attempting a new life by the strength of your resolutions and endeavors” in contrast to those “looking only to the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ for grace and strength, as well as for pardon and freedom from condemnation.”25 Venn strikes what might be called an anti-moralistic note.

What is the place of good works? Despite such a strong emphasis on Christianity as a “religion of the heart,” authentic faith cannot

21 Venn, Complete Duty, 85.
22 Venn, Complete Duty, 83.
23 Venn, Complete Duty, 115, 119.
24 Venn, Complete Duty, 178.
25 Venn, Complete Duty, 189.
be reduced to mere feeling. Therefore good works are essential, but they have no place whatsoever as a possible meritorious basis of salvation, but are understood as “visible vouchers that you believe in Jesus” and “the infallible evidence of the truth of your repentance and conversion.”26

In the second half of the book, Venn describes the “Christian graces and dispositions” that follow from the Christologically-focused, atonement-centered theological basis established in the first half. “True religion” also involves imitation of God’s holiness, righteousness, forbearance, mercy, and “communicative goodness.”27 Venn’s account of central Christian graces concludes with humility, understood as “living under a constant sense and acknowledgement of his own weakness, corruption and sin, in the sight of God.”28 Turning to “the tempers of a Christian towards men,” Venn claims that if a Christian “has at heart the welfare of society, it can only be promoted to the utmost, where the faith of the Lord Jesus Christ is sincerely embraced.”29

With regard to the social expression of faith, Venn emphasizes acting with justice in whatever social role one chooses—as a member of government, in business, or in the home. Justice is expounded as a social virtue that renounces oppression and exploitation of all kinds. He adds mercy, meekness, candor, forgiveness of enemies, and humility (again, called “the crowning achievement of a real Christian”) to the catalog of traits meant to typify Christian action in the world. Such conduct is motivated by a concern “to be approved by God in your behavior, and determined to do nothing knowingly or willfully that is offensive to him, whether any besides himself are present to observe you, or not. From a desire also to adorn and recommend to others that Gospel of which you know its excellency, you will be uniform in the practice of honesty and justice.”30

This survey of Venn’s key themes in *The Complete Duty* suggests that he offers a biblically construed account of the Christian’s moral

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27 Venn, *Complete Duty*, 217.
29 Venn, *Complete Duty*, 232.
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and spiritual life that reaffirms all the essentials of Reformation doctrine. These beliefs are explained thoroughly and applied to the daily lives of Christians. The entire book is animated by recurring references to the basic drama of sin and salvation, leading to a personal and saving faith in Christ, and the guidance of the Holy Spirit into a godly life of faith, hope, and love. There is an unmistakably and exclusively biblical idiom at work throughout, featuring endless citations of Scripture. The Old Testament is invoked readily for spiritual principles, and the New Testament account of Christ occupies center stage from start to finish.

Surprisingly, there are no references whatsoever to other theological writings. No allusions or quotations from the church fathers or reformers or Puritans or Venn’s contemporaries can be found; his argument is presented as flowing naturally and confidently from the Bible alone. Perhaps this explains why The Complete Duty is unconcerned with ecclesial polemics: there is no anti-Catholic rhetoric. The main targets in the book are nominal or formalist Christians, who are most likely to be his fellow Anglicans. The book contains no “cases of conscience,” and this cannot be called a “moral theology” by any stretch. There is no proposed methodology for resolving conflicts of duties. Christian faithfulness is depicted in a rather idealized light, as if no struggles or conflicts face those who are sincere in their faith in Christ and attentive to their devotional duties. It does display the typically Anglican penchant for practical over theoretical discussion. For Venn, the gospel has public relevance through the personal conduct of Christians in everyday life, causing those in business or politics to eschew self-interest and resist oppression. Christianity will be socially beneficial on account of the presence of upright individuals. But this line of application is hardly developed, since Venn’s interests are more oriented toward personal morality than social issues. After all, it is what the book’s title suggests: a handbook for use in families. There is no discussion about the broader political, economic, or social implications of Christian faith; there is neither awareness of the sinfulness of social structures (such as slavery) nor any sense that Christian faith would call for social change at the political level. Personal morality and private spiritual practices are emphasized to the exclusion of a wider scope of vision. Venn is open to the criticism that his gospel is overly individualistic, especially since corporate membership in the body of Christ
and the morally transformative impact of ecclesial practices are not addressed.

William Wilberforce

William Wilberforce was a British Parliamentarian from 1780 to 1825 who became famous for his persistent campaign for the abolition of the slave trade.31 He was a member of a group of lay Anglicans later known as the Clapham Sect, which included John Venn (1759–1813, son of Henry Venn), Henry Thornton (1760–1815), Zachary Macaulay (1768–1838) and Hannah More (1745–1835). This group, which worked for penal and educational reform as well as promoting missionary work overseas, has been called “a network of friends and families in England, with William Wilberforce as its centre of gravity, who were powerfully bound together by their shared moral and spiritual values, by their religious mission and social activism, by their love for each other, and by marriage.”32 Their views were disseminated through a monthly magazine, The Christian Observer, edited by Macaulay, which was founded in 1802.

In 1786, Wilberforce had an evangelical-style conversion experience that redirected his focus. Wilberforce’s diary entry for October 28, 1787 has become famous: “God Almighty has set before me two great objects, the suppression of the slave trade and the reformation of manners.”33 The term “manners” is archaic, referring to the prevailing patterns of behavior in society. Thus it was his intention to improve private and public morality, which he and the Clapham Sect considered to be dangerously in decline.

What began as a short tract to give to friends to explain his religious beliefs eventually grew by 1797 into a full book, A Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System of Professed Christians in the Higher and Middle Classes in this Country Contrasted with Real Christianity. According to Charles Colson, “the book’s impact can scarcely be overstated. It became an instant bestseller, and remained


33 Tomkins, William Wilberforce, 59.
one for the next fifty years.” Wilberforce called it his “manifesto.” It
has seven chapters and aims at a more highly educated readership
than did Venn’s work. Whereas Venn’s approach was didactic,
Wilberforce’s aim is largely apologetic. He is not merely putting
forward a defense of evangelical Christianity, but arguing for its
superiority to all other forms of Christianity, and extolling the moral,
social, and political necessity of evangelicalism. Venn’s focus was
providing the theological foundation for an exposition of personal
ethics; Wilberforce assumes Venn’s framework and proceeds to
address personal and social morality in greater detail. For our
purposes, we will examine the key arguments that characterize
Wilberforce’s distinctive contributions. He offers a spirited defense of
a very particular way of seeing the Christian life, one which he
perceived to be unpopular and was for many people in his own day
simply indefensible.

From the standpoint of the contours of an Anglican evangelical
view of personal and social ethics, Wilberforce’s *Practical View*
makes four distinctive contributions. First, the defining theological assertion
that drives his entire view of the moral-social meaning of Christianity
is the concept of the “real internal principle of Religion.” Merely
“nominal” faith lacks the “radical principle” taught by Scripture: “love
for the Savior.” For Wilberforce, “our blessed Savior” should be
the “object” of our religious affections. He goes beyond Venn by
elaborating on the significance of Christocentric piety as the hallmark
of the moral-spiritual life. It is a “vigorou and active principle” that is
“seated in the heart” that “gradually brings all the affections and
desires under its complete control and regulation.” Christian living
is fundamentally a matter of a renewed heart, he says. “It is the Heart
that constitutes the Man; and external actions derive their whole
character and meaning from the motives and dispositions of which
they are indications.” This internal principle of love for Christ is
“like the principle of vitality, which animating and informing every

34 Charles Colson, “Preface,” in William Wilberforce, *A Practical View of Christi-
anity: Personal Faith as a Call to Political Responsibility*, ed. Kevin Charles Belmonte
35 Wilberforce, *PV* (hereafter PV), 42.
36 Wilberforce, *PV*, 95.
part, lives throughout the whole of the human body, and communicates its kindly influence to the smallest and remotest fibers of the frame.”

Second, Wilberforce offers a thorough defense of the centrality of passions in Christian faith. This brings a level of philosophical sophistication to his work that is not found in Venn. He does not operate with any real distinction between passions and affections; they appear synonymous. Interacting with an imaginary objector, Wilberforce asks: Are the religious affections “merely the flights of a lively imagination, or the working of a heated brain”? He is willing to grant that there have been “wild fanatics and brain-sick enthusiasts.” But he refuses to admit that these abuses discredit or invalidate all uses. Rather, he argues that it would be unwise to dismiss “so grand a part of the composition of man.” The Creator bestowed “the elementary qualities and original passions of the mind” for “valuable purposes”; however, “one of the sad evidences of our fallen condition” is that “they are now perpetually tumultuating and rebelling against the powers of reason and conscience, to which they should be subject.” This is a key move: the passions are defined as fundamentally rational, not as irrational drives. The passions enjoined by Scripture are “grounded in knowledge.” Thus, Wilberforce answers the potential objector by distancing himself from any conception of passions as “animal fervor” or “ardors” or “transports” or “raptures.” Rather, when through divine grace they are restored to their proper position, made “conformable to reason,” and oriented toward their proper object, they are essential to “real Christianity.” Beyond the rationality of the passions, Wilberforce contends that the achievement of Christianity—Wilberforce is thinking that this is gained through redemption from sin and the presence of the Holy Spirit—is “to bring all the faculties of our nature into their just subordination and dependence; that so the whole man, complete in all his functions, may be restored to the true ends of his being, and be devoted, entire and harmonious, to the service and glory of God.” This restoration of the “whole man” is the basis for genuine service of God, in a God-centered rather than a self-serving way of life.

38 Wilberforce, PV, 96.
39 Wilberforce, PV, 42.
40 Wilberforce, PV, 45.
41 Wilberforce, PV, 49.
42 Wilberforce, PV, 49.
43 Wilberforce, PV, 50.
Third, Wilberforce argues for the social importance of evangelical piety. A major part of Wilberforce’s agenda is to show that this view of “real Christianity” is anything but a detriment to society, but exactly what benefits it the most. The concern for “social apologetics” cannot be missed. He believed that the morality of “heathen” nations was inferior to Christian nations: “Christianity has set the general tone of morals much higher than it was ever found in the Pagan world. She has everywhere improved the character and multiplied the comforts of society, particularly to the poor and the weak, whom from the beginning she professed to take under her special patronage.”

He refers no less than five times in the book to the entirely negative example of France (which was marked by social chaos and mob violence in the 1790s) as showing that when Christian “influence is withdrawn, the most atrocious crimes can be perpetuated shamelessly and in the face of day.” He is referring to France when he says that “superior polish and refinement may well consist with a very large measure of depravity.” Referring to Britain, and presumably every nation, Wilberforce boldly asserts that “fruitless will be all attempts to sustain, much more to revive, the fainting cause of morals, unless you can in some degree restore the prevalence of Evangelical Christianity. It is in morals as in physics; unless the source of practical principles be elevated, it will be in vain to attempt to make them flow on a high level in their future course.” He continues by explaining that “it has graciously pleased the Supreme Being so to arrange the constitution of things, as to render the prevalence of true Religion and of pure morality conducive to the well-being of states, and the preservation of civil order.”

The logic of Wilberforce’s case is really just an extension of his thinking about how the “active principle” of real Christianity is expressed in social and political terms. He admits that “vital Christianity” would stand in the way of some national pursuits, namely, those that put “national wealth and aggrandizement” at the forefront. But it would greatly advance the “general peace and prosperity.”

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44 Wilberforce, PV, 17.
45 Wilberforce, PV, 17.
46 Wilberforce, PV, 231.
47 Wilberforce, PV, 234.
48 Wilberforce, PV, 235.
49 Wilberforce, PV, 219.
comes down to the insight that the New Testament does not suggest that Christians should withdraw from “secular” affairs, but instead it “expressly and repeatedly enjoined them to perform the particular duties of their several stations with increased alacrity and fidelity, that they might thereby do credit to their Christian profession.”\textsuperscript{50} Animated by the love of Christ, “no calling is proscribed, no pursuit is forbidden, no science or art, no pleasure is disallowed, which is reconcilable with this principle.”\textsuperscript{51} For Wilberforce, this means that Christians in politics cannot endorse the attempt for the country to achieve “extended dominion, and commanding power, and unrivaled influence,” but would rather seek “the more solid advantages of peace, and comfort, and security.”\textsuperscript{52} He does not explain, but simply asserts, a seemingly inviolable moral principle: that politics is forbidden from seeking national “aggrandizement” through “the oppression and conquest of every other.”\textsuperscript{53} Such attempts are not an authentic or true patriotism. But true patriotism, which seeks national welfare without doing so at the expense of other nations, has Christianity as its “most copious source, and the surest preservative.”\textsuperscript{54} “The best man is the truest patriot.”\textsuperscript{55} Why? Chiefly because Christianity fosters benevolence and public spirit, but firmly opposes selfishness. “Benevolence, enlarged, vigorous, operative benevolence is her master principle.”\textsuperscript{56}

Fourth, Wilberforce’s approach is distinctively Anglican because of his appeal on several occasions to the liturgy of the Church of England. No doubt this is part of his rhetorical strategy, devised to appeal to his fellow Anglicans on the basis of shared common ground. In one passage, he uses the doctrinal content of the liturgy as grounds for chiding “professed” Christians into more serious expression of faith. More specifically, the “leading Doctrines” of Christianity as taught by Scripture are all found “dispersed throughout our excellent Liturgy.” Finally, we should note that in a fascinating short section toward the end of the book, Wilberforce comments on the Anglican theological-moral tradition. This returns us to issues of Anglican evangelical historiography noted at the start of this essay. Wilberforce states that

\textsuperscript{50} Wilberforce, \textit{PV}, 200.
\textsuperscript{51} Wilberforce, \textit{PV}, 200.
\textsuperscript{52} Wilberforce, \textit{PV}, 200.
\textsuperscript{53} Wilberforce, \textit{PV}, 222.
\textsuperscript{54} Wilberforce, \textit{PV}, 222.
\textsuperscript{55} Wilberforce, \textit{PV}, 223.
\textsuperscript{56} Wilberforce, \textit{PV}, 226.
“Christianity in its best days . . . was such as it has been delineated in the present work.”

What is striking is his account of the continuity between his views and his Anglican predecessors. He writes:

This was the religion of the most eminent Reformers, of those bright ornaments of our country who suffered martyrdom under Queen Mary; of their successors in the times of Elizabeth; in short, of all the pillars of our Protestant Church; of many of its highest dignitaries; of Davenant, of Jewell, of Hall, of Reynolds, of Beveridge, of Hooker, of Andrewes, of Smith, of Leighton, of Usher, of Hopkins, of Baxter, and of many others of scarcely inferior note. In their pages the peculiar doctrines of Christianity were everywhere visible, and on the deep and solid basis of these doctrinal truths were laid the foundations of a superstructure of morals proportionably broad and exalted. Of this fact their writings still extant are a decisive proof, and those who may want leisure, or opportunity, or inclination, for the perusal of these valuable records, may satisfy themselves of the truth of the assertion, that, such as we have stated it, was the Christianity of those times, by consulting our Articles and Homilies, or even by carefully examining our excellent Liturgy.

Several of the features previously noted are here, including veneration of the English reformers and affirmation of the doctrinal teaching found in the Articles, Homilies, and Prayer Book. The list of seventeenth-century divines is interesting, to be sure. Major figures notably absent from the list include Jeremy Taylor, Richard Allestree, and Henry Hammond, whose theological views would have been suspect as tending dangerously toward works-righteousness.

**J. C. Ryle**

John Charles Ryle was converted to Christianity as a student at Oxford University upon hearing a New Testament reading during worship: “For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God” (Eph. 2:8, KJV). As a new believer in Christ, Ryle read Wilberforce’s *Practical View*.

Within a few years he

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was ordained. Ryle served two unremarkable rural parishes in Suffolk for nearly four decades before becoming the first Bishop of Liverpool in 1880, where he served until just weeks before his death. Ryle’s appointment as bishop “was viewed as a guinea pig case as to whether or not the Church of England was to have any effective impact on a modern urbanized, industrial and commercial city.”

His enduring influence in evangelical circles stems from collections of his tracts and sermons, which were composed in a simple, plain style. According to biographer Ian Farley, “Ryle’s works provide the clearest, most detailed and comprehensive description of evangelical theology in the reign of Victoria.”

Ryle’s best-known book, *Holiness: Its Nature, Hindrances, Difficulties, and Roots* (1877), draws on Scripture, many Puritan writers, and key Anglican sources such as the Prayer Book and Thirty-Nine Articles to advocate the necessity of what he calls “scriptural holiness.” Ryle offers the following clarification about his subject:

True holiness . . . does not consist merely of inward sensations and impressions. It is much more than tears, and sighs, and bodily excitement, and a quickened pulse, and a passionate feeling of attachment to our own favorite preachers and our own religious party, and a readiness to quarrel with everyone who does not agree with us. It is something of “the image of Christ,” which can be seen and observed by others in our private life, and habits, and character, and doings (Rom. 8:29).

This statement reflects Ryle’s desire to distinguish “scriptural holiness” from superficial, emotionally-oriented approaches to sanctification. Ryle’s reference to becoming like Christ is indicative of his consistent emphasis throughout. For Ryle, a true mark of a spiritually renewed person was his or her moral conduct in daily life: “a regenerated person was known by his fruits.” For example, he writes that someone who is “growing in grace . . . strives more to be conformed

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64 Farley, *J. C. Ryle*, 66.
to the image of Christ in all things, and to follow him as his example, as well as to trust in him as his Savior.”65 This imitation of Christ does not imply withdrawal from the world: “He does not neglect his duty in the world. He discharges faithfully, diligently, and conscientiously every relation of life, whether at home or abroad. But the things he loves best are spiritual things. The ways, and fashions, and amusements, and recreations of the world have a continually decreasing place in his heart.”66 In keeping with Victorian sensibilities, Ryle complains that “the old golden standard of the behavior which becomes a Christian man or woman appears debased and degenerated.” The evidence for this is how “religious people” spend their leisure time. He criticized people who “see no harm in such things as card playing, theater going, dancing, incessant novel reading, and Sunday traveling.”67

For Ryle, as for Venn and Wilberforce, “private religion” and “personal holiness” nurtured by Bible reading and prayer “is the root of all vital Christianity.”68 Personal evangelization proclaiming the saving power of the cross was essential. Yet Ryle did not neglect the social dimensions of faith. Farley comments that “the most common misconception about J. C. Ryle is that he was an ultra-conservative unconcerned with everyday affairs.”69 He was actively involved with various organizations and movements in Liverpool to address issues of unemployment, poverty, and substandard housing. He promoted the improvement of education and advocated for women’s education. Seeing drunkenness as a sin, he supported the work of temperance societies. Ryle campaigned for Sunday observance, a hotly disputed subject in his day, and in the political arena he actively opposed attempts to bring about the disestablishment of the Irish Church.

Ryle’s handling of social and moral issues exemplifies an approach which is routinely found in evangelical circles, which sociologist Christian Smith has labeled the “personal influence strategy.” According to this view, social problems are seen as consequences of fundamentally personal, spiritual problems. According to Smith, evangelicals commonly seek to exert social influence or “change the world” as they “build personal relationships with people, impress them with lives

65 Ryle, Holiness, 111.
66 Ryle, Holiness, 111.
68 Ryle, Holiness, 381.
that are good examples, and share with them their own beliefs and concerns.”

Positive social changes happen “one-individual-at-a-time through the influence of interpersonal relationships.” For example, in Ryle’s charge to his diocese in 1884, he states that if enough Christians would go “telling the story of the Cross, and approaching every one with love, sympathy, and sanctified common sense—if this could be done, I have not the smallest doubt that in five years there would be an immense change for the better in every part of Liverpool.” Speaking the next year to his diocese, he states:

It is my firm conviction that if more was heard from all our pulpits about such simple topics as brotherly love, consideration for one another, good nature, good temper, unselfishness, and readiness to be helpful and make the best of one another, it would go far to make the machinery of our social system work more smoothly than it does now. In short, England would be a happier country if there was more of the Sermon on the Mount and the 13th chapter of the First Epistle to the Corinthians in all churches.

He emphasizes that the needs of the poor should be the church’s concern. The gospel message implies that all social classes are equal in God’s sight, therefore fostering unity across the economic divisions of society. Ryle rebukes those who have little hope for the lower classes: “It is false to say that naturally they are a bit more inclined to infidelity or immorality than other classes. They are all descended from the same parents, Adam and Eve, and are all born with the same hearts and consciences as the highest and noblest in the land.” He calls on clergy to recognize that “in Christ’s holy religion there is no respect of persons, that rich and poor are ‘made of one blood,’ and need one and the same atoning blood, and that there is only one Saviour, and one Fountain for sin, and one heaven, both for employers and employed.”

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74 Ryle, *Charges*, 77.
75 Ryle, *Charges*, 181.
In an 1895 address to the Liverpool Diocesan Conference, Ryle gave explicit attention in one section to “social problems.” He notes that the air is thick with concern about the social ills plaguing Liverpool specifically and England generally. He nods to the usefulness of some legislation under consideration which would alleviate suffering for the working classes, especially since it may serve as a kind of praeparatio evangelica: “These things, of course, are not the gospel, and will not save souls. But they are helps and aids, and ought not to be despised.”

David Gitari

David Gitari was the first bishop of the new Diocese of Mount Kenya East (1975–1990), then bishop of the Diocese of Kirinyaga (1990–1996), and served as Archbishop of the Anglican Church of Kenya from 1997 until his retirement in 2002. He exercised a courageous ministry as a “meddlesome priest” during the regime of Daniel Arap Moi, who ruled as President of Kenya from 1978 to 2002. One analyst believes that during these stressful years of political turmoil, Gitari “did as much as any Anglican churchman to call the nation to transform in the light of the Kingdom of God.” He was an outspoken critic of political corruption, vote rigging, and other violations of Kenya’s constitution, and was a leading voice advocating the return to multiparty democracy after Moi moved Kenya into a single party state. As a result, Gitari was sharply criticized in the media and by politicians for wrongly intruding religion into politics. More dangerously, he and his family were attacked at their home in April 1989 by a gang of thugs shouting, “We have come to finish the Bishop.” The family escaped to the rooftop, and neighbors managed to chase away the thugs. A service of thanksgiving for his deliverance was held eight days later, which drew a crowd of fifteen thousand people.

Gitari was nurtured in the tradition of evangelical piety in the East African Revival of the late 1930s and early 1940s. The revivalist

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76 Ryle, Charges, 294.
79 On the East African Revival, see J. E. Church, Quest for the Highest: An Autobiographical Account of the East African Revival (Exeter, U.K.: Paternoster, 1981);
tradition emphasized repentance, confession of sin, and the pursuit of personal holiness. Seeking to “walk in the light” with each other, and to pursue the “victorious life,” revivalist piety favored dissociation from politics. While appreciating some aspects of this heritage, Gitari ultimately rejected the revivalist pattern of social disengagement. He noted that the Revival movement “has been more of an inward looking spiritual movement, concerned about the Kingdom to come rather than participating in the Kingdom which Jesus came to inaugurate on earth.”

Inspired by Wilberforce, Lord Shaftesbury, and Martin Luther King, Jr., and galvanized by the affirmation of “holistic mission” made by the Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization held in 1974, Gitari became a champion of social justice and human rights in Africa.

Gitari’s primary mode of public engagement as priest and bishop was preaching. A proponent of expository preaching, he once stated: “I have always confined myself to the Word of God, expounding it faithfully and systematically and applying the same to the prevailing political situation.” Gitari emphasized that “bringing God’s word to bear on our contemporary world is part of what is meant by a prophetic ministry.” He explained his approach to addressing moral and social issues through the pulpit as follows:

There are many who think that the work of a preacher is only to say nice things so that everyone goes home feeling good: No. The work of a preacher and a prophet is “to pluck up and to tear down”—it is to root out, and to tear down and to destroy idolatry and other wickedness among men. It is to root out habits and customs which have taken root, it is to throw down the kingdom of sin and to expose injustices in society. But all that is negative: positively, the preacher has to build and plant. Having pulled down idols, then the prophet must plant and build true religion and virtue.

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82 Gitari, *Let the Bishop Speak*, 27.
Furthermore, in Gitari’s explanation of the theological basis for his understanding of public life, the doctrine of the incarnation plays a central role, in addition to the doctrines of creation and humanity as bearers of God’s image. The imitation of the incarnate Jesus compels Christian moral action: “To tell us not to be involved in the welfare of our country is virtually to tell us not to follow the example of Jesus Christ. Jesus assumed human form and took up residence in this world prepared to take part as a perfect human being in every sphere of life with hope of bringing salvation to the world.”

He notes that an incarnational model of ministry “demands our Christian presence in the world so that we may be able not only to evangelize but also to be involved in every aspect of human life.” The category of presence or involvement goes beyond what proclamation can accomplish. “The incarnational model invites us to proclaim the Gospel not from a distance but rather by penetrating communities and cultures, cities and villages so that we can see for ourselves the harassment and helplessness of God’s people and then stand in solidarity with them even if that means taking a political stand which brings hope to humanity.”

Gitari also emphasizes the transformational and moral implications of the biblical doctrine of the Kingdom of God, a theme not found much in earlier evangelicalism. “The doctrine of the Kingdom of God demonstrates how the Incarnate Son of God got deeply involved in the affairs of the world be they economic, political, social or spiritual.” Social engagement is tied to his understanding of conversion, which always is a key priority for evangelicals. “To be converted to Christ means to give one’s allegiance to the Kingdom, to enter into God’s purposes for the world expressed in the language of the Kingdom.” This is why Christians cannot “leave politics to the politicians.” Gitari believes that the gospel cannot be reduced to “preparing people for the future” but living a new life in the midst of the world as a Kingdom citizen and representative, which means identifying with the needs of the world.

Responding to intense pressure from politicians to stay out of politics, he commented: “The churches have constantly and patiently

84 Gitari, “Church and Politics,” 10.
85 Gitari, “Church and Politics,” 10.
86 Gitari, “Church and Politics,” 10.
87 Gitari, “Church and Politics,” 10.
88 Gitari, “Church and Politics,” 11.
to make clear that the gospel of Jesus Christ is concerned about every aspect of human life—intellectual, physical, spiritual and social.”

Referring to Romans 13, he says: “The Church’s task is to steer the state away from doing evil, and to remind it of its high calling as the servant of God. It cannot fulfill the task by ‘concentrating on saving souls,’ while ignoring other duties. The Church must be ready to encourage and praise the good which the state does, while challenging and advising the government whenever it is in danger of doing ill.”

Gitari developed his own philosophy of social engagement, which calls the Christian community to three practices:

1. “Distinctive separation,” by which he means “living on a level and according to standards different from the rest of society,” marked by “unselfishness and supernatural love informing its activities.” Social witness begins with personal morality. “Only by illustrating in our lives the kind of life which is God’s will for society as a whole, are we in a position to effectively exercise a prophetic ministry to the State.”

2. “Creative participation,” by which he means Christians being “rooted in society” and playing an active role in society, rather than being “cut off from the rest of society, living a separate and enclosed life of its own.” Instead, “where there are openings, Christians should find their way into every aspect of the nation’s life, including business, education and politics. They should identify with those aspirations of the nation which are aimed at development, but not with those which involve oppression or exploitation of fellow men.” This echoes a theme found strongly in Wilberforce.

3. “Judgement,” which refers to the church’s need to “exercise the prophetic ministry of judgement by reminding people of the righteousness and justice which alone exalts a nation.” Gitari believes that the church should support the state when it genuinely serves its people, but must criticize the state for its injustices. “When society accepts as normal racism, tribalism, corruption or the exploitation of fellow men, Christians

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89 Gitari, *Let the Bishop Speak*, 52.
90 Gitari, *Let the Bishop Speak*, 65.
91 Gitari, *Let the Bishop Speak*, 85.
92 Gitari, *Let the Bishop Speak*, 85–86.
cannot be silent. They, like the prophets of old, must speak out and pronounce the will and judgement of God. The Christian must be an ever-present reminder to the State that it exists only as the servant of God and man.  

A striking example of Gitari’s activist, prophetic biblicism is his recasting of President Moi’s call for *Nyayo* philosophy (which called for a strongly centralized state, and used a Christian-derived slogan of “peace, love and unity”). Gitari adapted this philosophy by incorporating a deeply biblical notion of *shalom*, “the state of things which comes when God’s will is being done.” He explains that “to do the will of God on earth is to exercise justice in every aspect of our national life. Injustice is the great cause of strife among men; but when justice is done, the cause of peace is served.” This is a clear challenge to Moi’s teaching, using biblical theology to critique and correct *Nyayo* by inserting the centrality of justice as the true foundation for peace and unity. “If *Nyayo* philosophy stands for peace, love and unity,” Gitari asserts, “I would like to state that regardless of where they classify you, you remain a true *Nyayo* follower, if you are working for peace in the spirit of love by struggling against all kinds of injustice.”

**N. T. Wright**

Gitari’s concerns for personal morality and social activism in holistic witness to the gospel are given deeper biblical and philosophical foundations by N. T. Wright, who served as Bishop of Durham in the Church of England from 2003 to 2010, and is currently Research Professor of New Testament and Early Christianity at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland. Among his prolific writings, we will focus on his most focused description of Christian ethics, *After You Believe: Why Christian Character Matters*. 

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93 Gitari, *Let the Bishop Speak*, 86.
95 Gitari, *In Season and Out of Season*, 46.
96 Gitari, *In Season and Out of Season*, 89.
Drawing upon and at times summarizing his more technical and exegetical work, Wright offers here a biblical theology of Christian moral virtue. The book’s title reflects a starting point on familiar evangelical territory: having put one’s faith in Christ, or “been converted,” what’s next? What should Christians do after they believe in Christ for salvation from sin? Is there a need for personal transformation now that someone has been “saved”? Wright develops his answer by showing the inadequacy of two “theories about human behavior”: “either you obey rules imposed from the outside, or you discover the deepest longings of your own heart and try to go with them.”98 Similarly, he interacts throughout the book with the ancient philosophical concept of virtue, which he associates primarily with Aristotle. Wright argues that the priority for Christians, after they believe, is to pursue the transformation of character, a “second nature” that is synonymous with the development of Christian virtue, which he describes as “a totally different way of being human” from anything the ancient world had previously understood.

Wright asserts that the New Testament’s answer to the question “What are we here for?” is to “become genuine human beings, reflecting the God in whose image we’re made, and doing so in worship on the one hand and in mission, in the full and large sense, on the other.” Christians do so by “following Jesus,” and through the work of the Holy Spirit. As opposed to the pagan approach, Christian moral growth is a matter of “looking away from oneself and toward God on the one hand and one’s neighbor on the other.”99 Wright argues that Paul presents “a thoroughly Christianized” form of the ancient pagan theory of virtue.100

Wright claims that ancient pagan moralists were correct in seeing a threefold pattern to the development of character: aiming at the right goal, figuring out the steps to achieve that goal, and having those steps become habitual.101 For Aristotle, the goal was a fully flourishing human being, “someone who has lived up to his or her full potential, displaying a complete, rounded, wise, and thoroughly formed character.”102 For Christians, the goal is “larger and richer” due to its

98 Wright, After You Believe, 17.
99 Wright, After You Believe, 204.
100 Wright, After You Believe, 240.
101 Wright, After You Believe, 29.
102 Wright, After You Believe, 33.
theocentric orientation, and one that highlights qualities (such as love, kindness, humility, forgiveness, and so on) that Aristotle did not prize highly. The aim is not “to go to heaven when you die,” but to be “genuine, image-bearing, God-reflecting human beings.” According to Wright’s overarching biblical theology, Christian virtue—constituted by faith, hope, and love—is cultivated through prayer and worship, and by conscious choice to cooperate with the working of the Holy Spirit, is the fulfillment God’s creational intention for human beings, to be “priests and rulers” in God’s world.

For Wright, the human vocation to “reign” (referred to in Romans 5:17) means exercising “the wise rule of humans over creation.” As such, Christians share with Jesus in his sovereign rule, which has been inaugurated, and which Wright calls “God’s new world which is coming to birth.” Eschatology has a direct moral implication because virtue anticipates “the future in the present.” This means that Christians are meant to be “kingdom-agents through kingdom-means,” entering into the “habits and practices of heart and life which demonstrated in advance that God’s kingdom was indeed turning the world the right way up, cleansing the world so that it would become the dwelling place of God’s glory.” Hence, argues Wright, “morality, surprisingly to some, is part of mission.” Part of this mission of the newly reconstituted royal priesthood is announcing Jesus as Lord, a theme that reflects evangelical priorities.

Wright is clear that none of this transformation toward “genuine humanness” is the result of “self-help moralism,” yet he does not shy away from advocating the necessity of “effort” in the process of moral growth. Wright spells out a “virtuous circle” consisting of five elements: Scripture, stories, examples, community, and practices. These are the key components of moral-spiritual formation. His evangelical instincts are clearly represented by his choice to make Scripture the starting point of his circle: “The practice of reading scripture, studying scripture, acting scripture, singing scripture—generally soaking oneself in scripture as an individual and a community—has been

103 Wright, After You Believe, 71.
104 Wright, After You Believe, 89.
105 Wright, After You Believe, 124.
106 Wright, After You Believe, 206.
107 Wright, After You Believe, 257.
108 Wright, After You Believe, 260.
seen from the earliest days of Christianity as central to the formation of Christian character.” He claims that reading the Bible “will form the habits of mind and heart, of soul and body, which will slowly but surely form your character into the likeness of Jesus Christ.” This is exactly the sort of Bible-based piety that the evangelical movement has always championed, but reframed within a Christian theory of virtue. For our purposes, the other element that is especially worth noting is Wright’s emphasis upon liturgical, corporate worship as a “practice” that forms Christian character and fosters moral and missional discernment. For Wright, the centrality of the reading and preaching of Scripture is coupled with the importance of eucharistic participation. This dual vision of worship is characteristically Anglican, and would distinguish Wright from most non-Anglican evangelicals, who typically are non-liturgical.

Conclusion

Oliver O’Donovan articulates a core conviction shared by Anglican evangelicals when he writes, “The foundations of Christian ethics must be evangelical foundations; or, to put it more simply, Christian ethics must arise from the gospel of Jesus Christ. Otherwise it could not be Christian ethics.” O’Donovan suggests that the proper path between the twin perils of antinomianism and moralism is an “integ- rally evangelical ethics which rejoices the heart and gives light to the eyes because it springs from God’s gift to mankind in Jesus Christ.” For Anglican evangelicalism, the focus of ethical reflection and the norms guiding moral action must follow coherently from the revelation of the gospel, which is known to us through God’s written word in Scripture. On this account, the chief problem for Christian ethics is the crippling pervasiveness and profundity of individual and collective sin, which undergirds the evangelical sense that conversion to Christ is necessary and must take highest priority in the church’s ministry.

In light of the unshakable biblicism and conversionism of this strand of Anglicanism, the task of Christian ethics is to discern the meaning of the gospel’s call to personal transformation in becoming

109 Wright, After You Believe, 261.
110 Wright, After You Believe, 262.
112 O’Donovan, Resurrection and Moral Order, 12.
like Christ and to probe from a biblical standpoint the full range of questions about moral, social, and political life. Not only is Scripture the supreme authority in all matters of faith and conduct, but additionally, biblical preaching and teaching are the foremost means of authentic ministry. Encountering the Bible’s teachings is the hallmark both of private, moral formation and of active, public witness. The church’s prophetic engagement with social issues or resistance to injustice is understood as a social practice that is properly based upon the Bible’s normative standards for human life and the common good.

Each of the thinkers we have examined strongly affirm the importance of their Anglican identity (after all, three of them were bishops!) and place significant emphasis on the value of Anglicanism’s liturgical practice and early theological heritage. In the decades ahead, Anglican evangelicals worldwide will be challenged by the ongoing debates with those of a progressive moral outlook within the Anglican Communion. Evangelicals will best represent their tradition by demonstrating what has been called “convicted civility,” a stance that puts forward one’s passionately held moral convictions with humility and charity.113

113 For more on “convicted civility,” see Richard J. Mouw, Uncommon Decency: Christian Civility in an Uncivil World (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1992). See also Martin E. Marty, By Way of Response (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon, 1981), 81, where he says “the committed lack civility, and the civil often lack conviction.”