Anglican Ethics and Moral Traditioning

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Three articles in this issue of the Anglican Theological Review and two articles in the Spring 2012 issue are the result of a two-year project by five scholars on the archeology of Anglican ethics as a practice of “traditioning”: passing on Christian faith from one generation to the next for the sake of the life of Christian faith and the mission of the church. These five essays seek to identify understandings that have shaped the work of Anglicans in addressing matters we now call Christian ethics, aware that past understandings offer important claims about the tasks or purposes of contemporary Christian ethics. As stated in the introduction to this project in the spring issue, “The reading of a tradition or strand of a tradition is itself . . . an act of interpretation,” and this interpretive practice provides “the basis for exploring shared convictions, reasons for differences, and outstanding questions for a contemporary Christian ethic.”¹

Each of the five articles construes Anglican thought in terms of a distinct set of questions, claims, or problems that have been addressed. In the spring issue Jeffrey P. Greenman offers what is the first historical-critical essay on Anglican Evangelical ethics. Drawing on Henry Venn, William Wilberforce, J. C. Ryle, David Gitari, and N. T. Wright, Greenman concludes that this strand of Anglicanism sees the pervading human problem as that of “the crippling pervasiveness and profundity of individual and collective sin”; hence, the primary claim of conversion and good news given in life in Christ.² This claim is tied to the primacy of Scripture as the saving Word of God and, for Anglicans, is known in worship, where the reading of Scripture is tied to a practical piety. The likes of Wilberforce and Gitari make clear that the primacy of individual conversion and responsibility is tied to

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a social ethic that embraces all people, offers prophetic critique of nations, and calls politicians and citizens to their vocation as servants of God. Venn, Byle, and Wright bring to the fore the holiness tradition that is central to conversion. This tradition has a clear virtue ethic, a description of the character and practices that stand at the heart of life in Christ.

In turn, my article on “The Anglican Exemplary Tradition” focused on the virtue ethic as developed by Anglicans who understood Christ as exemplar, not narrowly as a moral example but as the Second Adam, as God incarnate, as revealing God as the order of all things. As represented by such Anglican divines as Jeremy Taylor, Thomas Traherne, Joseph Butler, F. D. Maurice, and Kenneth Kirk, this strand of Anglicanism shares in common with the Eastern Orthodox tradition the understanding of the Christian life as participation in the divine or what the Orthodox speak of as theosis. As a virtue ethic, these writers are concerned with shaping and forming human intentions through actions toward God and neighbor. They variously focus on and connect mystical and ascetical theology with moral theology. The kenotic shape of the Christian life places emphasis on repentance as turning in love from self to God and neighbor. As revealed and effected in Christ, worship and especially the eucharist celebrate and effect this life.

The Evangelical and exemplary traditions are by no means distinct. Though they may be viewed as reflecting the Evangelical and Anglo-Catholic branches in Anglicanism, they overlap in concerns and convictions. Both emphasize the primacy of the individual in making moral choices. Both understand that the shape of the moral life is a matter of love of God and neighbor. Both see Christian faith as theocentric, as grounded in God’s actions which displace and transform human self-centeredness. At the same time, they offer similar and yet distinct accounts of the virtues and practices that form Christian faith and life. Eschatological virtues come to the fore in Evangelical thought: for example, kindness, humility, and forgiveness. In the exemplary tradition, Thomas Traherne offers the most systematic account, with emphasis on felicity, patience, meekness, humility, contentment, magnanimity, modesty, liberality, magnificence, and gratitude. Such accounts illumine what is meant by love of God and neighbor and how they are integrally connected. They also point

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to Christian practices such as the reading of Scripture, the examination of conscience, praise and worship, forgiveness (and what forgiveness entails), acts of service toward others, and how charity is tied to a just love that addresses the ordering of society. Such “cross-fertilization” between strands of each tradition enriches any singular account and illumines other questions and concerns that the community of faith has. For example, the centrality of conversion need not diminish the importance of addressing the mystical sense of God’s presence in the world or the moral psychology of human virtues and the dynamics of resentment and forgiveness.

The Anglican Evangelical and exemplary traditions are, moreover, shaped and formed by the established Church of England. Part of the archeology of the Anglican tradition is digging out the reactions to an established church and its offspring in British colonialism, which spread the English church throughout the world. These responses of critique and dissent offer their own account of what is central to Christian faith and life. In this issue of the ATR, Wendy Dackson’s article on Anglican social theology and Libby Gibson’s article on post-colonial, feminist, and lay voices offer such accounts, which center on forming a holy people for the sake of the world. As expressed in Richard Hooker, Thomas Arnold, William Temple, and Rowan Williams, Dackson tells the story of the ongoing critical protest to English Erastianism and the development of a sacramental understanding of the church that seeks the common good while respecting the diversity and difference that form any human community. Gibson offers the counter-narratives of those on the margins, who come to Christian faith in the knowledge that salvation is liberation and forming the people of God. What comes to the fore are understandings of justice as the divine order in which all have voice and power in forming life together.

David Smith addresses in this issue of the ATR the tradition of casuistry, often called moral theology, as constituting a fifth tradition of ethics in Anglicanism. As a contemporary casuist who has directed an ethics center at Indiana University and most recently the bioethics center at Yale University, Smith describes how this tradition has sought to provide moral guidance or, more accurately, enabled moral discernment. As he describes, this is an exercise in practical reasoning working from the bottom up, from the experience of individuals and the choices they confront individually and together as they seek the common good. This focus is distinctively, though not uniquely,
Anglican. It assumes the primacy of the church as a community of practices forming persons in the love of God and neighbor and so what persons see and address as moral problems. It stands only in relationship to the other strands of Anglican tradition.

In his response to these articles on the Anglican moral tradition, Kortright Davis has identified the broader challenge of Anglican thought as that of moving beyond reaction to the constructive work in moral traditioning. What is central to this larger task is identifying the questions and challenges that need to be addressed in the passing on of Christian faith and life.

These articles on Anglican moral traditions assume five questions as central to this task of constructing a Christian ethic.

1. The first question is theological and moral: How is the knowledge of God in Christ, and with that the love of God and love of neighbor, effected in human lives? Tied to an understanding of sin as the pervading human problem, this is the central question for the Anglican Evangelical tradition, though it is central to the Anglican exemplary tradition as well.

2. A second question is: What does life in Christ look like? In other words, what are the virtues and practices that describe Christian faith as a way of life? This question and the response in terms of the development of a virtue ethic are central to the Anglican exemplary tradition, though again it is also assumed and addressed in the Anglican Evangelical tradition.

3. The third question is political and prophetic: What is the nature of God’s justice, of God’s order for human life? What should be done in the annunciation of justice and the denunciation of injustice in the midst of the principalities and powers that shape our lives together?

4. The fourth question is: How are moral choices supported and enabled in concrete situations? This is the question of moral discernment and casuistry, considering specific moral quandaries, such as what medical treatment should be provided at the end of life or when should lethal action be taken to protect innocent life against those who threaten that life.

5. These four questions are framed and addressed in light of a fifth question: What is the nature, mission, and ministry of the church as bearer of Christian faith and life? In more
sacramental terms, how is the church the sacrament of Christ for the sake of the world?

Something of the critical, comparative work needed for addressing these five questions is suggested in the summaries of the articles provided above. That work may be understood as the need to address and include in the process of traditioning the voice of “the other,” the stranger, those who stand on the margins. The question of the other arises from the understanding that, as a life given in history, there is no understanding of the moral life that is universal, applied to all persons in all places and at all times. Every account is from somebody somewhere. As Gibson describes, the experience of God’s presence is multifaceted, given the varying needs of different people. How Christ is exemplar, empowering and enabling participation in the life of God, differs between those in and those outside of power and privilege. The virtues central to the Christian moral life and the practices that shape that life will differ or be enlarged. For example, forbearance as a matter of bearing the burden of oppression requires different practices from the virtue of compassion for one who has resources to meet the needs of another. Both require love, but the one requires attention to moments of grace and small acts of kindness, and rests on the imagination to hope and envision the captivity of the oppressor and the possibility of release. The other requires paying attention to the stranger in need, to recognizing and acknowledging the stranger through listening to her so that food and shelter are signs of a shared humanity and not of privilege and dependence. Or to consider the example of justice, in considering “the other” the understanding of justice is enlarged from that of fairness and due process to an ordering of society where the minimal conditions necessary for participating fully in that society are given to all.

An account of the Christian moral life and of God’s justice as grounded in the presence of God and embodied in virtues and practices requires the counter-narratives of the outsiders. These narratives, moreover, challenge traditional accounts of moral discernment as the application of moral principles to moral quandaries. Instead, the first task in moral discernment is imagining possible courses of action tied to purposes that draw the person into the presence of God. Moral discernment may then best begin as the voices of outsiders are heard and received. In turn, dominant stories that depict human choices are challenged through remembering the past and imagining the future.
as enlarged or repaired. So, moral discernment about medical treatment is deepened as possibilities are retold and healing reimagined so that death is not the last word. Or, politically, the possibility of living in God’s order, God’s justice, is changed from Christianizing the social order to forming a holy people for the sake of the world.

As Christian ethics addresses the questions of otherness in its various tasks of traditioning, the question of the church as a community of memory and celebration and of formation and action come to the fore. At the heart of Christian faith is the eucharist as *anamnesis*, remembering as the celebration and enactment of life in Christ. The conversion and reconciliation that stands at the heart of such a faith means that such a church is sacramental. A sign that effects what it proclaims, the church must be forever remembering and reconciling its members together in service to the world. This is what is meant by saying that word and sacrament are incarnate in the body of Christ as the sacrament of Christ for the world. As this life is given as God’s order, as life to be lived as wholly human, the church offers this life to the world.

Given the identity and mission of the church, Christian ethics is fundamentally ecclesial. It calls the community of faith into a way of life by offering the resources for seeing and enacting life in Christ. As a way of life distinct from the world, an account of this life is needed. Clarity of practices that incarnate this life is required for it to be lived. In its eschatological dimensions—already but not yet—moral discernment as remembering life together is called for. The strands of Anglican Christian ethics—like the strands of ethics in all Christian traditions—address such matters. These articles on Anglican ethics begin the critical and comparative work needed for such traditioning, for passing on resources for the spiritual and moral tasks of forming and supporting the body of Christ.