Christianity Is All for Practice

ELLEN K. WONdra*

As a theologian and ethicist, and as a teacher, I greatly appreciate the collection of essays and review articles in these two issues of the Anglican Theological Review. Together they provide as comprehensive a picture of Anglican moral theology as could be hoped for, given limitations of space and time. And they sketch of a number of ways forward in further retrieving, elaborating, and expanding this inheritance in the years to come. The major essays—by Timothy F. Sedgwick and Jeffrey P. Greenman in the Spring 2012 issue and by David H. Smith, Wendy Dackson, and Libby Gibson in the present issue—and the review articles by Benjamin King, Robert MacSwain, and Jason Fout and by Charles Mathewes and Philip Lorish identify major characteristics—themes, sources, methods, and trajectories—in the rich and complex tradition of Anglican moral theology. I want to note just three characteristics at the outset.

The centrality of Scripture understood in and through corporate worship of Word and sacraments. While the various strands and periods of Anglican moral theology interpret and use Scripture in a variety of ways, some of which at times seem incompatible, they all nevertheless see Scripture first and foremost as the Word of God written, spoken, received, and lived (Greenman). Because the Book of Common Prayer is comprised so extensively by Scripture, Anglicans encounter Scripture week after week in its canonical form, the foundation and expression of faith with which all other statements and practices must in some sense cohere. While the understandings of “coherence” are multiple and contested, they nevertheless share the fundamental view of Scripture encountered again and again as the Word of God.

The sustained appropriation of commonly held Christian moral traditions. Anglican moral theology, as varied as it is in its judgments and methods, is continuously nurtured by deep theological and

---

* Ellen K. Wondra is Professor of Theology and Ethics and Academic Dean (Seabury) at the Bexley Hall Seabury Western Seminary Federation. She is also Editor in Chief of the Anglican Theological Review.

spiritual roots shared by all Christians. Certain magisterial theologians—Augustine, Aquinas, the early church and Eastern fathers—clearly provide baselines of both content and method. Ordered common prayer in forms that date to the apostolic era and that use most of Scripture in a regularized way frames theology and practice as matters of fidelity and holiness. A particular ecclesiology that sees the church and its members as in but not of a divinely ordered and guided world is central to the formation of individual and community.

The focus on virtue and character. To put it another way, a major focus of Anglican moral theology is the formation of Christians who are faithful in belief and practice. Ethics pertains primarily not to what one does or judges in particular situations, but to what kind of person one is becoming within a community of faith that is deeply immersed in but not fully identified with the larger world. Habits and dispositions are formed within that community, informed by Scripture, prayer, and practice. Such formation also develops a conscience that can be heeded, even over against external authorities, precisely because of the contexts and processes in which it is formed. Habits, dispositions, and virtues are all sufficiently malleable to be genuine guides in varying and changing contexts and circumstances. And at the same time they are sufficiently rooted and grounded in the God whom the community worships, praises, and trusts as to continue to express this faith in word and deed in widely varying situations.

It is important to note here what is not offered: sets of rule or principles, magisterial authority-bearing teachings, unified and unifying theories, or elaborate normative practices. In times (such as ours) of widespread and even vituperous disagreement, social and ecclesial polarization and turmoil, and rapid far-reaching change, Anglicans may long for more than the guidelines that a virtue- and practice-oriented ethics may provide. I would argue, though, that it is just such an ethics that provides the kind of grounded reflective engagement that can assist individuals and communities of faith to navigate unclear and even unknown territory (Smith).

A character- and virtue-based ethics asks these questions: What kind of community are we in faith called to be? What kind of person am I in faith called to be? These questions presume a particular identity that is to be formed over time, and that is ultimately eschatological. This formation takes place through experience with God and others, an experience that entails participation or interactive relationship (Sedgwick). Equally important is careful reflection on experience
and on oneself and one's community, reflection that is appreciative but also critical in light of the purposes or ends of formation—ends pertaining to oneself, one's community, and one's life in a world that is created, sustained, and redeemed by God but also beset by limitation and human sin, individual and corporate. How a community or an individual is to move toward these ends is profoundly contextual; virtues are sufficiently malleable and proximate ends and goods sufficiently fluid that faithful inculturation and indigenization are possible though challenging. At the same time, when the focus is on formation, a variety of resources is available for use, depending on their fit with the various goods and purposes that are part and parcel of community-based virtue. Does this get us through our troubles quickly and easily? No. But that's not the point.

None of which is to say that this particular interweaving of virtues, goods, and ends, formation, participation, and reflection are complete, perfect, or satisfying. A major challenge here is the persistent need for self-critical reflection and evaluation, for continuous engagement and adaptation, for a high tolerance for ambiguity and uncertainty. We always need more wisdom, more knowledge, more insight; we always need to be more open to and reliant upon grace. We are always faced with our own longings for more certainty, more direction, and more calm. It is hard to appreciate the fact that even these things are part of the process of formation for the reign of God.

So how do the essays and review articles offered in these two issues of the *ATR* help us move forward in the midst of these challenges?

First of all, the very fact of these essays and review articles is of great assistance. It has been some time since anyone has attempted such a comprehensive overview of Anglican moral theology, and this overview includes approaches, methods, and thinkers whose work has come to the fore relatively recently. These *ATR* issues also offer a retrieval and reconstruction for our time and context of certain "classics" of Anglican moral theology. Having all of this broadly available in a coordinated collection helps us all rediscover and appropriate this inheritance. Along with a well-conceived and coordinated overview, these essays and reviews provide enough information on key figures and movements to whet the appetite and provide direction for further investigation and study.

Second, this collection of articles and reviews already moves Anglicans forward in understanding how a tradition of rich and influential "social theology" (as Dackson helpfully terms it) can continue
to have currency in a post-Constantinian, post-Christendom world. While Anglicanism may be established *de jure* in some few places, virtually everywhere it, and even Christianity, has been decentered *de facto*. What, then, of Anglican moral theology’s function as moral conscience in the public square? In a pluralistic and rapidly changing matrix of interrelated contexts, a kind of sectarianism may be tempting, in which Anglicans speak only to each other and in increasingly localized ways. But to proceed in this direction is to mistake a key characteristic of Anglican identity, one that continues to be a gift to the church catholic and even, I dare say, to the larger world. The scope of influence of a William Temple or a Reinhold Niebuhr or even a Martin Luther King, Jr., may not be possible or desirable currently. But that does not relieve any of us of the responsibility to bear witness to the need for greater justice, well-being, compassion, and reconciliation and to offer possibilities that may further those fundamental moral values. We need to learn humility. We also need to learn perseverance in the face of lack of interest, dismissal, and even scorn. What we do not need is withdraw.

Third, this collection of articles and reviews reminds us that our fundamental values must include hospitality and genuine reception of “others.” While this theme comes most to the fore in Gibson’s essay, it is present in the others as well, with every reminder that Anglican moral theology deals with everyday life, with formation, and with concrete practices that are adaptable to quite a wide range of human circumstances.

All the more reason to keep Gibson’s question, “But who will listen?” firmly in front of us. While it may be inevitable that an overarching account of Anglican moral theology will be to a large extent Anglocentric (as this one is), it is worth keeping in mind that English imperial expansion was well underway as the Church of England emerged. This suggests that there is much archeology yet to be done pertaining to how English Christianity was in fact practiced and conveyed by those deeply steeped in it who, while not perhaps authorized to do so, nevertheless served in effect as missionaries. There is much to be uncovered of how the Christian moral life was perceived, received, and in turn passed on by those who did not write much or anything at all. We may not be able to reconstruct much of what has been unseen for generations. The absence of written materials is often a testimony to how little listening has taken place. But we can broaden the scope of our inquiry now, difficult as that may prove to
be. Certainly it will take us out of our offices and studies, away from our familiar research methods, and into unfamiliar and uncomfortable situations.

The question “Who will listen?” is a question about the ongoing mission of the church and its role in society. It is also a moral imperative regarding fundamental method and procedure. As Gibson notes, even with the dangers of misrepresentation and misappropriation, not to listen is to collude in continuing the silence. And that, I would argue, is contrary to the rich and broad heritage of Anglican moral theology, rooted and grounded, as it is, in faith in a God who becomes flesh in order that we may come closer to God.