



From the Editor

## Scripture, Conversation and Anglican Identity

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### ABSTRACT

This editorial piece considers the implications of Scriptural Reasoning, a method of inter-religious exchange that is the subject of the present number of the journal, for contemporary Anglicanism. It suggests that the character of Scriptural Reasoning as a conversation held across and despite religious difference offers a challenge to contemporary Anglicans to maintain their own conversation about Scripture.

Whoever then appears to understand the divine Scriptures or any part of them in such a way that by their understanding does not build the twin love of God and of our neighbour, does not yet understand.<sup>1</sup>

Anglicanism has rarely been well served by introspective quests for its own identity. The great movements and moments in Anglican history, contested as they may be – the Reformation, the Oxford Movement – have been to do with the character of the Church catholic, of Christian faith, of the sacraments, of Scripture – not of Anglicanism. Current quests for Anglican renewal, unity and identity often risk missing this fact, and the basic insight it offers into the character and mission of Anglicanism. Anglicanism can only be defined, let alone renewed, by focusing on larger questions of Gospel, Church and world rather than on those of Anglican polity and identity.

Anglicans tend not merely to respect but to love the Bible. If at the present time it is evident that they differ about its meaning in certain

1. Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, 1.36.40.

cases, this is not a new or unusual phenomenon; it is the willingness on the part of some to depart from conversation, even and especially about Scripture, that most distinguishes the present Anglican crisis.

The essays that form the bulk of this edition of the *Journal of Anglican Studies* emerge from the remarkable project known as Scriptural Reasoning. David Ford's piece more than suffices as an introduction to and account of the project; but Scriptural Reasoning embodies and offers more to the Anglican Communion and to those interested in the mission of the *Journal* even than these important essays make explicit.

What is most striking about Scriptural Reasoning to this Anglican outsider is that it manages to draw into fruitful conversation a set of participants whose commonality relative to faith is actually far less than that of the diversity of contemporary Anglicanism. There are of course other commonalities, of culture and of academic discourse, among those in conversation. Yet the abiding implication of these creative exchanges is a sort of *a fortiori* scandal – if these can not only speak but learn and celebrate together, how much more those who do share a particular history and profess a common faith?

#### *Scriptural Reasoning, Anglicanism and Difference*

Although it has roots in a form of textual reasoning developed by Jewish scholars, there is something unmistakably and characteristically Anglican about the Scriptural Reasoning project, not despite but arguably because its scope is far wider than Anglicanism. It exemplifies the need for an Anglicanism that pursues its integrity and identity in terms that look outward rather than inward.

Scriptural Reasoning is not inter-faith dialogue in the usual sense. While there are genuine and profound conversations involved between adherents of different faiths, these assume or allow the persistence within each tradition or interpreter's world not only of faith itself as given, but particularly of the relation between text and reader specific to each world. This persistence nevertheless grants the possibility of new relations between the 'given' and the 'found', as Ben Quash observes with reference to Peter Och's work.<sup>2</sup>

There is an unresolved tension within Scriptural Reasoning about where commonality itself lies. In its earlier forms the commonality of Abrahamic tradition was an assumption. Despite Dan Hardy's suggestion that the Abrahamic traditions at least have in common the

2. 'Abrahamic Scriptural Reading from an Anglican Perspective', this issue, 199–216.

notion of Scripture as ‘public form of primary discourse of God’,<sup>3</sup> even such attempts at a general theory of how Scripture functions are held to lightly. Quash’s observation that the relevance and authority of commentary traditions varies, and can be a source of tension in practice, exemplifies how these textual encounters do not really assume even a common morphology regarding readers and texts, let alone a shared theology.<sup>4</sup> Relative to Abrahamic tradition, participants could share if not quite a theological epistemology then at least a sense of history. Yet the history of Scriptural Reasoning reflects a tension between this particular common ground and more general notions of reading ‘Scriptures’ with ‘other religions’, as reflected in the *Generous Love* interfaith document,<sup>5</sup> and in Chinese developments.<sup>6</sup>

This does not mean that theology is unimportant to the conversation, or that the conversation is not theologized; Francis Clooney’s contribution here, while formally from outside the Scriptural Reasoning project itself, helpfully instantiates how a more specific understanding grounded in one tradition – in his case ‘comparative theology’, understood as a characteristically Roman Catholic theory and practice – can engage with other faith positions, not despite but because of its own particular theological understanding of what is taking place.<sup>7</sup> Elements of a complementary Anglican reflection are found in Ben Quash’s account here which, while affirming that a theoretical common ground is not a necessity for the conversation constituted by Scriptural Reasoning, nevertheless seeks to articulate a trinitarian post-liberal understanding of that conversation.<sup>8</sup>

Scriptural Reasoning thus exemplifies the possibility of a conversation that not only allows for difference but can celebrate it; yet it does not require the effacement of the specifics of faith or hermeneutics in each case. Anglicanism in general can learn from this; the manifest and increasing diversity within the Communion need

3. Daniel Hardy, ‘The Promise of Scriptural Reasoning’, in David F. Ford and C.C. Pecknold (eds.), *The Promise of Scriptural Reasoning* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), pp. 185–207 (185).

4. ‘Abrahamic Scriptural Reading’, this issue, 199–216.

5. Anglican Communion Network for Interfaith Concerns, *Generous Love: The Truth of the Gospel and the Call to Dialogue. An Anglican Theology of Inter Faith Relations* (London: Anglican Consultative Council, 2008).

6. See Ford, ‘Scriptural Reasoning: Its Anglican Origins, its Development, Practice and Significance’, this issue, 147–65.

7. ‘A Catholic Comparativist’s View of Scriptural Reasoning in the Anglican Context’, this issue, 217–32.

8. ‘Abrahamic Scriptural Reading’.

not be an impediment to conversation, even if the character of the conversation is inevitably different as the partners themselves change.

There are other conversationalists still to engage more fully; despite a sense that some of the difficulties that have emerged as new voices have found postcolonial strength, it is at least as true that new voices still demand to be heard whose impact on the conversation could be quite different, and as creative as challenging.<sup>9</sup>

### *Lex Orandi*

One of the places where that Anglican commonality has often been sought is in liturgy itself; this is not just to offer a hopeful or ambitious application of the *lex orandi* principle, but to acknowledge that the tradition of the Books of Common Prayer has contributed to the liturgical life of virtually all Anglicans, if in different ways and to different extents.<sup>10</sup>

Yet the Prayer Book tradition has now been stretched in very different directions, and even let go in some places. Worship as doxological commonality is limited by the actual forms of liturgy and of worshipping community, and is a sign of failure as well as of success; worship has become part of the Anglican problem, whatever it may offer regarding solutions.

In his essay David Ford sounds the familiar and important caution that Christians, Jews and Muslims also cannot worship together. In fact Ford's own broad definition of worship allows or implies a more precise observation, that they cannot pray together, although even this is queried by his striking story of a *lectio divina* informed by Scriptural Reasoning.<sup>11</sup> Is it possible that understandings of worship, which seem so native to a particular tradition and dependent for their integrity on the specific sources of that tradition, can be part of that 'found' alongside the 'given'?

Rumee Ahmed's contribution may suggest as much.<sup>12</sup> He shows how a characteristic sort of Anglican *lex orandi* question illuminates Muslim practice, but starts from an initial difference in patterns of

9. See for instance Kwok Pui-lan (ed.), *Anglican Women on Mission and the Church* (Canterbury Studies in Anglicanism; Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2013).

10. Reflected in the diverse pictures in Charles Hefling and Cynthia Shattuck (eds.), *The Oxford Guide to The Book of Common Prayer: A Worldwide Survey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

11. Ford, 'Scriptural Reasoning', this issue, 147–65.

12. 'Scriptural Reasoning and the Anglican-Muslim Encounter', this issue, 166–78.

prayer and worship, not from any presumed resemblance or parallelism. His assertion that mutual alienations can be the source of the mutual enlightenment is confronting to glib notions of shared understanding as the basis for conversation across difference.

The possibility that patterns of sacramental worship, even when marred or broken, can be illuminating beyond their own participants and their self-reference, provides a hopeful reminder to those concerned about broken communion regarding the purpose and means of communion.

In foregrounding the centrality of ‘worship’ in Anglicanism, Ford rightly defines worship not (merely) liturgically, but as what is done for the sake of God.<sup>13</sup> Acknowledging that worship is the whole of our divine service – not merely that synecdoche of it performed in Church – changes the sense of what we can do together, or of what worship cannot do for us. ‘Worship’ need not be off-limits for conversation, and the conversation may change our understanding of what it can be. Conversation itself may yet be service.

### *Scripture and Anglicanism*

The common Anglican liturgical tradition is also a tradition about Scripture itself; the Book of Common Prayer represents a standard of doctrine and practice based on Scripture, but also presents and reads Scripture in the very texture of its own language, even aside from the actual reading of the Bible which is so central to it. The problem already noted regarding the failure of worship as usually understood now to provide unity extends into Anglican use of the Bible; while the pattern of the Book of Common Prayer seems to prescribe or at least imply a lectionary-based system for reading Scripture, there are Anglicans whose engagement with the Bible actually has a shape more like that of Ahmed’s ‘whenever’ account of reading Qur’an.

Anglican Christians do rely on an understanding that the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments contain ‘all things necessary to salvation’. In classical Anglican terminology, Scripture is thus ‘God’s word written’ – insofar as its words are both a form of this effective revelation of God, and particularly witness to Christ the Word. Yet that phrase also qualifies the identification – ‘God’s word written’ is not merely identical to ‘God’s Word’.

13. ‘Scriptural Reasoning’, this issue, 147–65. See further Ford, *Christian Wisdom Christian Wisdom: Desiring God and Learning in Love* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

A genuinely Christian scriptural doctrine of God's word is not however merely a doctrine of the Bible, but of the fact of God's effective revelation, of the word which is spoken and effects what it says. This is the word of God's 'let there be' at Creation, the word which for Isaiah will 'not return empty', the word which speaks hope and judgment through Ezekiel, the word which is living and active according to the Letter to the Hebrews. God's 'word' is God's effective communicative action.

More specifically, God's word for Christians is definitively Jesus Christ. This identification of Jesus as one in the beginning with God, the creative power through which God's purpose is mediated to all things, is in any Christian reading of the Bible the most fundamental element of a doctrine of revelation; for it shows us that God's communication is the giving not only of words, but of self.

While Scripture is a unique witness to God's word, its reading must also be informed by a wider sense of that divine action – as the patristic notion of the 'Rule of Faith' necessary to proper interpretation attests, and as Augustine's hermeneutic of charity necessary to proper application insists. Scripture points to its own use and reading in terms that are open-ended; its authority as divine word is dependent on its effective reading, use and practice, not on mere affirmation of any theory of inspiration.

In the Anglican Communion much has been made of the prominence of differences over interpretation of Scripture. However, the validity of an interpretation depends not only on what it stated, but on the fact of the conversation from which it stems. Augustine's dictum quoted at the head of this essay suggests that unwillingness to converse is by its very nature as great a flaw as other forms of wrong interpretation.

### *The Academy and Anglicanism*

Peter Ochs has elsewhere considered the particular character of the Church of England, not least its establishment, as offering the promise of various conversationalists 'on the doorstep'.<sup>14</sup> If this universal possibility – of the doorstep as a locus for conversation, and neighbourliness as implicitly its basis – has striking power (as well as significant possibilities for specifically Christian theologizing, cf. Lk. 10.29), it also risks being too general for the purposes of a particular scriptural engagement. On whose doorstep will Scripture be read?

14. Ochs, *Another Reformation: Postliberal Christianity and the Jews* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), p. 173.

The Jewish origins of the Textual Reasoning practice that preceded Scriptural Reasoning bequeathed a pattern of exchange based on much more specific shared identity between readers, which was not dependent on confessional agreement, but nonetheless a given.<sup>15</sup> The obvious commonality of Judaism does not constitute a neat analogue to what underlies Scriptural Reasoning, or even to what is shared or assumed in Christian 'Bible study' as usually understood, because Jewish identity is a more complex matter than 'faith' in the modern Western sense. Jewishness provides an acknowledged basis for conversation in part because of its difficulty of definition, not in spite of it.

Odd as it may seem to those of us steeped in the very modern concept of 'religion', what these conversationalists had in common was as much an academic connection as a religious one; as much as any matter of 'faith', the conversationalists both in Textual and Scriptural Reasoning have tended to be partners in research and in teaching.

It is a largely unstated premise of the Scriptural Reasoning enterprise that it has emerged in specifically if not narrowly academic circles. While reading scriptural texts across religious difference has more obvious features than this, and more important ones too, the fact that Scriptural Reasoning arose in the university and among scholars deserves to be treated as more than either incidental or obvious. Scriptural Reasoning may be able to breathe the air outside the university, but first breath was drawn there.

The academy is perhaps as contested now as any religious practice or confession, but is the 'doorstep' of this journal's life. At its best the academy – a community open in a radical sense, even while gathered around a common concern or aspiration – is the crucible within which new learning can be identified and shared. Like the academy itself, a scholarly journal provides an opportunity for conversation occasioned by some common interest or focus, but whose character is defined as much by openness to its various 'found's' as to its foundational 'given'. The purpose of the *Journal of Anglican Studies* is of course to explore and to converse, not primarily to persuade or to advocate, except to advocate for the conversation itself. Yet this is precisely the challenge for contemporary Anglicanism. Above all, Scriptural Reasoning urges the possibility and the profitability of conversation held in charity.

15. See Ochs, 'Hospitality and the Power of Divine Attraction: A Jewish Commentary on the Anglican Setting of Scriptural Reasoning', this issue, 179–98.

*Epilogue*

This number of the *Journal* is also the first of which Bruce Kaye is not the editor, although in fact it was assembled largely under his direction. Brian Fletcher's note herein indicates the gratitude of the Trustees for Dr Kaye's achievement, and I share that gratitude even as I feel the considerable weight of his mantle. His contribution to maintaining and enriching a conversation at once academic and ecclesial, conscious of its strong focus on a particular faith and tradition as well as profound openness to truth in all its forms, remains the mission of the *Journal* and is aptly embodied in this number.