SOURCES OF AUTHORITY IN THE CHURCH

It is necessary to recall how we look to authority. An old joke has authority defined in the Roman Catholic Church with reference to the pope, by a Baptist with reference to Scripture, and by an Episcopalian with reference to what "the last rector did". As in all jokes there is some truth. The Roman Catholic Church has the luxury of a formal teaching magisterium. Under Catholic doctrine, doctrine can be defined by the church hierarchy, and the hierarchy has the sole power to interpret Scripture.[1]

The Protestant Reformation focused very much on the idea of *sola scriptura* (only by Scripture) as the source of authority, with the interpretation of Scripture redounding (with certain limitations) to each individual. How the Bible is interpreted thus varies widely along a spectrum from literalism to metaphorical narrative.

As in most things, Anglican doctrine on authority takes a middle position, recognizing the teaching authority of the Church while at the same time recognizing the individual relationship of each believer to authority. In the *Articles of Religion* of the prayer book (the so-called "Thirty-nine Articles") we are taught:

> "Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation ..." (Article VI).

This teaching is reflected in the ordination vows made by each order of clergy, *e.g.*, that of a priest:

> "... I solemnly declare that I do believe the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the Word of God, and to contain all things necessary to salvation ..." (*BCP* 526).

Article XX states (in part):

> The Church hath power to decree Rites or Ceremonies, and authority in Controversies of Faith: and yet it is not lawful for the Church to ordain any thing that is contrary to God's Word written, neither may it so expound one place of Scripture, that it be repugnant to another.[2]

Anglicans also look for authority in their so-called "standard divines". Historically, the most influential of these–apart from Cranmer–has been the sixteenth century cleric and theologian Richard Hooker. Hooker's description of Anglican authority as being derived

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[1] The nature and sources of authority in the Roman Catholic Church are defined extensively in canon law and under the constitution of the Church.

[2] As in many things, The Episcopal Church is slightly out-of-step with the rest of the Anglican Communion, in that the *Articles of Religion* are not defined as normative. The articles are considered an "historical document" in the Episcopalian prayer book of 1979 (pp. 867-876), but are not incorporated into the prayer book ordinal or into canon law. Current disputes within the Communion (*e.g.*, on issues of human sexuality) are very greatly accentuated by the fact that the other 37 provinces in the Communion recognize the Articles as normative, and would deem innovations in North America as an "[ordinance] contrary to God's Word written ..."

primarily from **Scripture**, informed by **Reason** (the intellect and the experience of God) and **Tradition** (the practices and beliefs of the historical church), has influenced Anglican self-identity and doctrinal reflection perhaps more powerfully than any other formula. The analogy of the "Three-legged Stool" of Scripture, reason and tradition is often incorrectly attributed to Hooker.

The influential character of Hooker's *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* cannot be overestimated. Published in 1593 and subsequently, Hooker's eight volume work is primarily a treatise on Church-state relations, but it also deals comprehensively with issues of biblical interpretation, soteriology (the theology of salvation), ethics, and sanctification. Throughout the work, Hooker makes clear that theology involves prayer and is concerned with ultimate issues, and also that theology is relevant to the social mission of the church.

In the *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, Hooker argued against both the Puritans and Roman Catholics. He claimed that Puritans claimed too much in proposing that Scripture provided the only source of knowledge, including knowledge about all matters of church order and discipline.[3] In turn, he claimed that the Roman Catholic Church claimed too much in believing that the Church had infallible understanding of faith (as given by the Pope speaking in Council), much less the order and discipline of the church.[4] Instead, Hooker maintained, Scripture contains all things necessary to salvation. We know this as we come into relationship with God through Scripture and worship. In other words, Scripture speaks to us the truths of faith as we have come to experience those truths in our lives. There is a mutual, inward hold that Scripture makes upon us and we upon it. The Christian life is then lived out in light of this faith, shaped by the order of Church and society as that reflects the continuing, developing understanding of both.

Hooker himself does not use the phrase "Scripture, Reason and Tradition". In fact, it is not clear who first used the phrase itself. However, Scripture, Reason and Tradition designate the sources that mediate Christian faith, inform the understanding of that faith, and shape the order and discipline of the church. They also have come to designate a method in which the understanding of Christian practice (as distinct from what is necessary to salvation) is understood to always be informed and shaped by these three sources.

Finally, it should be added that Richard Hooker and the early Anglican tradition is misunderstood when understood as theoretical reasoning. "Reason" was understood in a classical sense (as a form of Natural Law), drawing from Plato and Aristotle, as a participatory knowledge. To know something was to experience it, to share or participate in something. It is not just about how we think. Hence, Scripture and reason inform each other, with Reason allowing us to experience some of the revelation of God (His "general revelation") in nature; in how we can come to know some aspects of God though our experience of the world. Equally, there is a mutual, inward hold that Scripture makes upon us and we upon it. As such, reason may be best understood as a practical wisdom. It is in this sense that Scripture, reason and tradition inform each other.

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[3] The Puritans claimed that unless something is allowed specifically in Scripture it is to be banned. For example, the use of musical instruments in church services was banned.

[4] The Roman Catholic position has tended to be one of "If something is not banned in Scripture, then it is allowable." This position is consonant with that adopted in Anglicanism.

"Tradition" is also misunderstood. It is *not* just about "how we have always done things in the Church," for in truth most of what we do in ceremony and order has changed.[5] Tradition, understood properly, is defined under the so-called "Lerintian canon" of St. Vincent of Lerins (5th C.), who defined Catholic doctrine as "That which has been believed everywhere, always, and by all." Hooker was thinking of this rule, with a mind to dogma, doctrine and discipline *as defined in ecumenical councils of the Church*, when he spoke of "Tradition". In other words, when the Church has gathered in council and defined belief (*e.g.* in the Creeds), that constitutes Tradition. Tradition is about the content of belief, not just about practice. Universally in Anglicanism, the first four general councils (Nicaea I, Constantinople I, Ephesus, and Chalcedon (in which the Creeds were agreed) are recognized as authoritative. Most Anglicans recognize the first seven councils; many recognize others.

Finally, many Anglicans look to the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral of 1888 (*BCP* 876) as the "*sine qua non*" of identity. In brief, the Quadrilateral's four points are the Holy Scriptures, as containing all things necessary to salvation; the Creeds (specifically, the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds), as the sufficient statement of Christian faith; the dominical sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion; and the historic episcopate.

Scripture, Reason and Tradition are not to be used independently of each other. They each comprise a form of revelation, with Scripture and much of Tradition being defined to be "special revelation," and Reason being defined as "general revelation". Scripture is considered a higher authority than Tradition in the sense that Tradition cannot contradict Scripture. Both Scripture and Tradition are considered consonant with Reason (with general revelation), but to the extent that Reason cannot reveal to us the mysteries of faith (*e.g.*, the working of miracles, the final judgment), Reason is considered incomplete.

Note that the hierarchy of authorities does not include the individual teachings of the faithful, even of noted theologians and revered saints. Individual teaching which is consonant with Scripture, Tradition and Reason is considered to be "pious opinion," but it is not binding. The faithful may disagree with pious opinion without having this disagreement understood to be heretical. Individual teaching may constitute pious opinion or heresy (from the same author), with this being determined in relation to Scripture, Tradition and Reason. Finally, individual teaching may be adopted within Tradition. For example, the *Te Deum laudamus* was composed in *A.D.* 387 by St. Ambrose of Milan and St. Augustine of Hippo, at the latter's baptism, but has become part of the formularies of the Church. The *Gloria in excelsis Deo* has many origins, but was rendered in its final form by St. Hilary of Poitiers (d. 366). It is part of Tradition within the western Church, but is not used in the East. The *akathist* hymns in the East are not used in the West. Tradition may be seen, therefore, to be at times particular, but it is never so particular as to include pious opinion which has not been adopted within the wider Church.

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[5] For example, the placing of candles on the altar lead to the General Convention of the Episcopal Church refusing to consent to the election of James Dekoven as bishop of Wisconsin in 1874. The Episcopal Church in the nineteenth century thought of altar candles or the vesting of a choir as "popish".