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AUTHORITY OF REASON IN THE ANGLICAN TRADITION

A b s t r a c t. The article examines the subject of reason in the Anglican theological tradition. First it examines the question of the relation between reason and the Scripture and its role in the proper understanding of the biblical message of faith. Reason safeguards the faith against the selective and literal use of the Scripture (“unthinking biblicism”). Next, the limitations of reason with respect to faith are indicated. Being necessary for the affirmation of the Scriptures, reason is insufficient in face of the mystery of God and thus requires revelation. The need for reason is ultimately recovered in the explanation and affirmation of faith: *intelligo ut credam*.

Key words: authority, reason, Anglicanism.

Among the sources of authority in the Church, reason is traditionally enumerated by Anglican theologians together with Scripture and tradition. An equally typical group of notions are faith and reason; the first of these is seldom discussed without the second. The point of gravity in the scale of sources of authority is thus put on reason immediately after or even with the Bible. What is therefore the place of reason in Anglican theological thinking and how does it resound with St. Anselm of Canterbury’s adagio *intelligo ut credam*?

1. AGAINST BLINDNESS IN BELIEFS

If the reference to reason is so often found in Anglican theology we are entitled to ask after Arthur Stephen McGrade: “What, then, can be distinc-

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tive about ‘reason’ in Anglicanism?”¹ McGrade would see reason in connection to other sources of authority, that is, Scripture and tradition. It served the Anglicans—he says—as an antidote to “unthinking biblicism or unthinking conformity to historical precedent.”² In this brilliant formula however we only discover what reason is not, but we still have no clue what in fact it is. We shouldn’t worry even if the Archbishop of Canterbury Michael Ramsey, once acknowledge that it is easier to indicate what the role of reason in Anglicanism is not than positively state what it is.³

To understand the fondness of Anglican early theologians such as Hooker or Locke for valuing proper reasoning, we must refer to the method commonly used in theology of those days. McGrade refers to Locke, who “objected to slicing up of Scripture into separate verses, which led so easily to citation out of context for sectarian dogmatic purposes, and to the disparagement of reason in favour of revelation: he argued that taking away reason to make way for revelation was like persuading a man to put out his eyes to receive the remote light of an invisible star by telescope.”⁴

One of principles of the Reformation was to emphasize the unique authority of the Scriptures in transmission of God’s Revelation.⁵ Paradoxically the Reformation itself, formulating one of its principles: *sola Scriptura*, largely contributed to the blind and unreasonable interpretation of the Scripture. In Anglicanism the principle *sola scriptura* (as one of the *Articles of Religion*) took the form of so-called «Doctrine of the *necessaria*», pointing that all things necessary for salvation can be found in the Bible.⁶ The fact that *sola Scriptura*

¹ Arthur Stephen McGrade, “Reason,” in *The Study of Anglicanism*, ed. Stephen Sykes, John Booty, and Jonathan Knight (London: Augsburg Fortress Publishers / SPCK, 1988), 106.

² *Ibid.*

³ Michael Ramsey, *The Anglican Spirit* (London: Seabury Books, 1991), 30.

⁴ McGrade, *Reason*, 106.

⁵ This principal role of the Scriptures is described by Bernard Lambert, OP: “The primacy of the Word of God in Protestantism is a fact, a climate, a dogma. It belongs to the whole Protestant tradition, right from its manifold origins. It holds the title role in every denomination, without exception. It is a pre-requisite to their activity, their thought, their life. It is the measure, the norm, the regulating principle of Protestant orthodoxy. It has an equal authority over official and individual thought. It is the inspiration for a way of life and for the organization of human life.” *Ecumenism: Theology and History* (London: Burns & Oates, 1967), 26. See also: *Anglicanism and the Bible*, ed. Frederick Houk Borsch (Wilton: Church Publishing, Inc., 1984).

⁶ Article VI (*Of the Sufficiency of the holy Scriptures for salvation*): “Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man that it should be believed as an article of the Faith or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation. In the name of the Holy Scripture we do understand those canonical Books of the Old and New Testament, of whose authority was never any doubt in

was designed to oppose tradition as a source or transmitter of divine revelation and to diminish the role of reason had no explicit meaning in this matter. To be fair to the Protestants and Anglicans we have to admit that Catholic thinkers, theologians and polemicists (as the adversaries would say: the papists) also willingly treated the Bible as a reservoir of citations for every occasion.

Besides the negative side of reasoning in theology and in faith, that is the role of reason as an antidote to “unthinking biblicism,” there must be a positive side, too. Would it be the role of gap-filling in those matters where the Bible is silent? What to do if the Scripture does not contain an explicit response to man’s questions? How, in that case, can we discern the truth? Supposing that this is the proper case for the use of reason alone, there must be a method to determine the whole range of issues not clearly expressed in the Scripture. But should we be allowed to use reasoning only when there is a “blank” in the Bible? Or may a path of positive thinking about the role of reason be found in the proper explanation of biblical truth and building up of theory based upon biblical rudiments rather than scriptural citations? McGrade is sceptical about the possibility of positively characterizing “Anglican reason.” “This is partly because Anglicans have disagreed among themselves about what counts as reason, partly of historical change in what counts as reason in the world at large.”⁷

Robert D. Cornwall backs the opinion that in eighteenth century debates, reason became equal if not superior to revelation in theological and religious matters.⁸ The Latitudinarians⁹ including such eminent thinkers as John Tillotson

the Church.” Quotation after *The Book of Common Prayer* (London: William Pickering, 1844). Cf. John William Charles Wand, *What the Church of England Stands for: A Guide to its Authority in the Twentieth Century* (London: Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc., 1951), 35. G.D. Yarnold points out at the basic statements contained in the VIth Article of Religion: “(1) God is the ultimate source of all authority. (2) The scriptures contain the Word of God to man. (3) The books of scripture were written under the inspiration of God the Holy Spirit. (4) Their inspiration was recognized by the Church, under the guidance of the same Holy Spirit; and so the Canon of scripture was fixed. (5) The Church lives under the authority of scripture, which is the final arbiter in all matters of faith and morals.” Greville Dennis Yarnold, *By What Authority? Studies in the Relations of Scripture, Church, and Ministry* (London: Mowbray, 1964), 24–25. See also: Emmanuel Amand de Mendieta, *Rome and Canterbury. A Biblical and Free Catholicism* (London: H. Jenkins, 1962), 129; John Dillenberger and Claude Welch, *Protestant Christianity* (New York, London: Pearson, 1988²), 39–41.

⁷ McGrade, *Reason*, 107.

⁸ Robert D. Cornwall, *Visible and Apostolic. The Constitution of the Church in High Church Anglican and Non-Juror Thought* (Newark, London, Toronto: University of Delaware, 1993), 54.

⁹ Latitudinarianism was a theological current in the Church of England dominant in the second half of XVII and in the XVIII century. Latitudinarians dissociated from Catholicism and Purita-

placed strong emphasis on the use of reason and believed Christianity to be the most reasonable of all religions. For Richard Hooker reason should remain in balance with revelation. While the Scripture contains matters going far beyond reason, at the same time the very truth that the Scripture is the Word of God is discerned by reason. Therefore, the arguments on behalf of the Christian faith and the Scripture itself should be submitted to the “test of reason.”¹⁰

2. THE LIMITS OF REASON

Even if placing the confidence in reason, the high-church Anglicans were well-aware of its insufficiency. Reason can determine the existence of everything only *a posteriori*: discovering what was the cause of everything cannot by itself decide the nature of the cause. That is because reason—being only a human precept—has no authority by on its own. Moreover, most people are unable to “deduce the truth from clear and self-evident principles” and thus cannot move beyond instinct and conscience.¹¹

Contemporary theologians like Mark Chapman also point out this insufficiency of reason. To what extent, asks Chapman, can reason be accepted as a source of authority without any reference to the Scripture? The question is not pointless, as many Anglicans in the past and nowadays believe it can. Chapman recalls Richard Hooker, one the founders of Anglicanism and a great protagonists of reason, who in his masterpiece *The Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* after Martin Luther named reason the “devil’s wife.” This was because Anglicanism adopted Lutheran anthropology with its conviction of total destruction of human nature, including reason itself. Thus reason would be the central notion for Christianity only in the context of such anthropology.¹²

Other thinkers such as William Lowth and William Law also saw the limits of reason before God. Reason can only conceive God imperfectly. Discovering

nism. They propagated religious tolerance and believed in conformity of reason, Christian faith and morals, as well as were often unfairly accused of deism and anti-trinitarism. Cf. Michel Grandjean, “Latitudinarisme,” in *Encyclopédie du protestantisme*, ed. Jean Baubérot, Isabelle Engammare, Pierre Gisel & others (Paris: Cerf, 1995), 856.

¹⁰ Cf. Cornwall. *Visible and Apostolic*, 54–55.

¹¹ Cf. *ibid.*, 56.

¹² Cf. Mark Chapman, “The Authority of Reason? The Importance of Being Liberal,” in *Hope of Things to Come: Anglicanism and the Future. A collection of essays on the past, present and future of Anglican theology in the context of the Lambeth Conference of 2008*, ed. Mark Chapman (London: Bloomsbury Publishing PLC, 2010), 46.

few of divine attributes, it remains blind in the face of God's true nature. Revelation then is given to free man from false judgement of reason.¹³ When reason is called upon to interpret the Scripture, it has no independent authority. "To give human reason an authority equal to or above Scripture was seen as blasphemous and as a usurpation of God's rights"—stated Cornwall. "When reason was used with Scripture and tradition, it was considered safe."¹⁴

3. THE ROLE OF REASON: *INTELLIGO UT CREDAM*

If theology is interested in exploring reason, it is only in the context of faith. Reason cannot provide evidence of divinity and credibility of God's word by means of experimental science. Faith itself is possible even without proper reasoning producing evidence. John Henry Newman used to say, that "if children, if the poor, if the busy, can have true Faith, yet cannot weight evidence, evidence is not the simple foundation on which faith is built."¹⁵ If only those who are able to assess evidence—remarks Nicolas Lash—could reasonably believe, "then the Church would necessarily be divided into two classes: 'those who know' and 'those who do not know—but trust those who do.'"¹⁶ However, there is another kind of evidence than the one produced by highly sophisticated intellectual process. Newman called this other kind "the evidence of the heart," that is a kind of strong conviction derived from prayer and practice of faith, in the intimate relation of a human being with God.

What is then the role of reason? Newman stresses that as far as a human being can reach, faith is naturally submitted to approval by reason. It does not mean however that faith is grounded on reason in the mind of a believer. Reason can play the role of a judge, without being the origin of faith.¹⁷ Reason therefore examines and approves what we believe, but our existence is based on beliefs. It is because most things we pretend to know are in fact beliefs adopted by obedience or trust in authority of those who

¹³ Cf. Cornwall, *Visible and Apostolic*, 56.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 57.

¹⁵ John Henry Newman, *Newman's University Sermons: fifteen Sermons Preached Before the University of Oxford, 1826-43*, Introduction by D.M. MacKinnon, J.D. Holmes (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1970), 231.

¹⁶ Nicholas Lash, *Voices of Authority* (London: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1976), 76.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 77.

instructed us about it.¹⁸ The role of reason then would be to evaluate and justify the credibility of what we believe: *intelligo ut credam* – I think so that I may believe.

The last question to be addressed here is whether we can rely on reason alone in search for the sources of authority. As it was said in the beginning, the typical Anglican triad is Scripture, tradition and reason. Even if we were to conclude with Stevenson's statement that reason is the most satisfactory way in which Scripture and tradition can be appropriately evaluated and measured, the Anglicans would be reluctant to rely upon reason alone: "for scripture alone, devoid of the collective and developing interpretation of the church, might result in an individualistic and unhistorical fundamentalism; while tradition by itself could easily result in an uncritical conservatism and reason on its own can end in the sheer rationalism of individual judgment."¹⁹ Stevenson also stresses after the Primate of the Anglican Church of Canada, Archbishop Michael Peers, that reason "needs both Word and tradition to give it a strong and faithful underpinning."²⁰

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We are ready now to conclude that reason in the Anglican tradition (often written with the capital "T") is perceived as one of the sources of authority and is inseparable from Scripture and tradition. Knowing its own limits, reason safeguards faith against the selective and literal use of the Scripture ("unthinking biblicism"). At the same time the proper use of reason helps to justify and understand faith, protecting the believer against atheistic rationalism as well as unrealistic dreaminess. Thus the *intelligo ut credam* perfectly completes the *fides quaerens intellectum*.

¹⁸ Lash (*Voices of Authority*, 80) quotes from Newman: "One of his favourite examples was the proposition, to which most of us would be prepared to subscribe, that 'Great Britain is an island'. How do we know this? Do we not, in fact, merely believe it?"

¹⁹ Ronald C. Stevenson, "An Anglican understanding of authority. A paper prepared for presentation to the Anglican Baptist international conversations (North American session). Wolfville, Nova Scotia, Canada, September 10–12, 2003," <http://www.anglican.ca/faith/identity/an-anglican-understanding-of-authority/>

²⁰ *Ibid.*

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AUTORYTET ROZUMU W TRADYCJI ANGLIKAŃSKIEJ

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Słowa kluczowe: autorytet, rozum, anglikanizm.

