What Is "Anglican" about Anglican Biblical Interpretation?

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The question, "do we, *should* we, as Anglicans, read the Bible in a distinctive way?" has earned a lot of attention in recent years.[1] One obvious, but circular, answer to the question, "What is 'Anglican' about Anglican biblical interpretation?" would be, "it's 'Anglican' because Anglicans do it." I wish from the start to impress us with the variety of Anglican biblical scholarship. There is a wide world of men and women engaged in amazingly diverse and creative approaches (feminist, womanist, liberationist, Marxist, Queer, postcolonial, and so on) to every part of the biblical corpus.[2] Over my fifteen years in theological publishing, I've been impressed how often the author of an engaging work of biblical scholarship turns out to be an Episcopalian—often, a priest—out of proportion with our numbers in the SBL.

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[1] Warm thanks to Elizabeth Struthers Malbon and Jane Patterson for the invitation to address this topic before the Anglican Association of Biblical Scholars meeting in San Diego in November 2019 and to Linda A. Maloney for her engagement as a fellow panelist. In addition to other sources quoted below, I've benefited greatly from Rowan A. Greer, *Anglican Approaches to Scripture from the Reformation to the Present* (New York: Herder & Herder, 2006); also from the contributors to *Healing Leaves: The Authority of the Bible for Anglicans Today,* from a 2000 conference at Church Divinity School of the Specific (*Anglican Theological Review* 83:1 [Winter 2001], 1-63, and to *Teaching the Bible in a New Millennium,* ed. Stephen L. Cook and Robert W. Pritchard (*Anglican Theological Review* 84:1 [Winter 2002], 1-65.

[2] A point ably made by Robert MacSwain, "'Scripture in the Toolshed': A Report from North America," *The Bible in the Life of the Church,* ed. Clare Amos (Canterbury Studies in Anglicanism; London and Harrisburg: Canterbury and Morehouse, 2013), 32-47.

I would characterize Anglican biblical interpretation as diverse, intelligent, creative, interested—and calm. I think there are reasons, distinctive to the Anglican tradition.

Compared to some other communions and denominations, we don't have a single distinctive doctrine of scripture.[3] Richard Hooker's often invoked "three-legged stool" has meant that our church doesn't put the weight of our theology on the Bible alone, *and* that we practice a healthy respect for critical thinking. We don't "need" to arrive at particular theological answers; there is more room for curiosity, for exploration, for following where the evidence leads.[4]

I turn in the remainder of this presentation to the U.S. church—because it is the communion I know best, and to avoid the considerable complexity of worldwide issues in an age when conservative U.S. forces have labored to leverage their counterparts in other provinces to sway the Anglican Communion to their perspectives.[5]

The closest the U.S. church has come to an "official" line on biblical interpretation might have been in the 1990s, when the House of Bishops asked their Theology Committee to propose guidance on the subject. The resulting process produced position papers that could be sorted into four major orientations (or "paradigms"):

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[3] MacSwain emphasizes that if one thing characterizes Anglican biblical interpretation in North America, it's opposition to fundamentalism; he contrasts the definitive statement on biblical authority of Liberty University with the cacophony of questions raised by his own working group to the question of biblical interpretation ("'Scripture in the Toolshed'").

[4] As Greer notes (*Anglican Approaches to Scripture,* chap. 1), the "three-legged stool" is something of a shibboleth among Episcopalians today. Greer argues that it is not an apt summary of Hooker's thought and that it played no consequential role for the Caroline divines who followed him. Because the concept is so widely traded with, I am nevertheless content here to refer to it without further engaging Greer's telling arguments.

[5] I thank Richard Burridge for comments at the 2019 AABS annual meeting reminding us of the importance of the worldwide Communion and the important work done under the auspices of the Bible in the Life of the Church project (see resources at https://www.anglicancommunion.org/resources/the-bible-in-the-life-of-the-church.aspx).

(1) "common-sense realism," which is how most people begin with scripture: "it means what it says"—until it simply can't;

(2) the search for ethical principles (or religious sensibilities) that must stand "within" or "behind" particular stories or commands, even when the latter don't appear either clear or palatable on the surface;

(3) a narrative approach that sets us in a larger "story of the people of God," allowing us to read the Bible as a series of snapshots of our ancestors' understandably imperfect drafts, upon which we have improved over time—the orientation that saturates the 1979 *Book of Common Prayer*; and, finally,

(4) liberation theology, which was explicitly endorsed as one authentically Episcopalian option among others. Significantly, the bishops did not choose between these positions but commended all of them to the discernment of the people.[6]

Also important is the centrality of the *Book of Common Prayer* to our liturgy, and the related theological principle *lex orandi, lex credendi.*[7] The primary context of biblical interpretation for us is communal worship. Our lectionary (and the Daily Office) put more scripture in our ears than happens in any other denomination. We don't promote solitary or "private" Bible reading so much as we look to common worship as the place where we discern scripture's meaning together. Two implications pop up so regularly that they're

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[6] See relevant documents in Frederick Houk Borsch, ed., *The Bible's Authority in Today's Church* (copyright 1993 the Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society of the Protestant Episcopal Church; published Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1993).

[7] There is of course a field of scholarship on just what this principle means and how it is applied; I am content for present purposes to refer to the frequency with which it is invoked, for example, by clergy and seminarians, as if we all knew what it meant. See W. Taylor Stevenson, "*Lex Orandi—Lex Credendi,"* in *The Study of Anglicanism,* rev. ed., ed. Stephen Sykes, John Booty, and Jonathan Knight (London and Minneapolis: SPCK and Fortress Press, 1998), 187-202.

practically de facto principles: (1) Scripture and people belong together and *have formed each other*;[8] (2) scripture does not speak in solitary, absolute, self-disclosing authority to which the individual heart must submit, so much as it is spoken, in all its complexity, into our gatherings, and heard and reasoned over together.[9]

Equally important, I think, our historical origins in the established church in England have instilled in our DNA an assumption of public responsibility in our wider society. And, because in our current climate, scripture has been weaponized by the religious Right, that means we accept some responsibility for making sense of scripture in our public life.[10]

Those characteristics promote latitude, depth, lucidity, and care in Anglican theology and biblical scholarship. But those same characteristics, as well as aspects of our contemporary context, also present distinctive challenges. I wish here to focus on the question of public responsibility in biblical interpretation.

Ian Douglas has documented how the Anglican legacy of establishment in England has sometimes led us to imagine that we Episcopalians constituted the "national church" in the United States as well. (Note, *ours* is the only denomination that presumes to operate a

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[8] An emphasis Greer draws from Samuel Coleridge: *Anglican Approaches to Scripture,* chap. 6, "An Inconclusive Conclusion."

[9] A point emphasized by MacSwain, "'Scripture in the Toolshed,'" and by Ellen Bradshaw Aitken, "Relentless Intimacy: The Peculiar Labour of an Anglican Biblical Scholar," in Amos, ed., *The Bible in the Life of the Church* (op. cit.), 112-32; see also Frederick Houk Borsch's introduction to *The Bible's Authority in Today's Church*, and Rowan Greer's concluding comments in *Anglican Approaches to Scripture.*

[10] That theme is of particular interest at this year's Annual Meetings, with multiple sessions on the role of the public intellectual and the multiple "publics" to which religious academics speak. Relevant sessions include the AAR Presidential Address by Laurie L. Patton and a panel review of her recent book *Who Owns Religion? Scholars and Their Publics in the Late Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019).

National Cathedral.)[11] One consequence is the assumption that when we speak, we often expect everyone else to hang on our every word—and assume we have exhausted our responsibility.

A related point: Some moral theologians argued in the early 1990s that in practice, Episcopal social teachings had less to do with sustained, cohesive theological argument—which properly belongs, they contended, to the teaching authority of bishops—than with policy pronouncements issued by General Conventions. They suggested that the U.S. church has largely abandoned the work of spiritual formation and turned instead to Left-wing politicking.[12] I'm not sure those arguments give due respect to the theological work that in fact goes into General Convention deliberations, or to the fairly spontaneous mobilizations

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[11] Ian T. Douglas, *Fling Out the Banner! The National Church Ideal and the Foreign Mission of the Episcopal Church* (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1996).

[12] Robert E. Hood argued that bishops have more often relinquished their proper teaching authority so that Episcopal social teachings have been shaped by General Convention as a series of policy resolutions. Hood remarks that General Convention more often acts on "proclivity" than theological "recollection," and because General Convention's policy prescriptions have no real "teeth," the assumed role of advisor to government is ineffective (*Social Teachings in the Episcopal Church: A Sourcebook* (Harrisburg: Morehouse, 1990).

Similarly, Timothy Sedgwick and Philip Turner declared it a "crisis" that Episcopal moral teaching was determined by majority vote at General Conventions, after heated debates that owed more, they argued, to ideological commitment than to sustained theological reasoning (Sedgwick and Turner, eds., *The Crisis in Moral Teaching in the Episcopal Church* [Harrisburg: Morehouse, 1992]).

of clergy and laity today.[13] *I* would be happier if we understood "spiritual formation," not least at the parish level, to include informing and shaping men and women in ways that included political agency, rather than leaving matters of public concern to delegates at General Convention. But I appreciate their calling attention to our tendency to identify public responsibility with providing "advice and consent" to government, rather as if our church constituted a sort of sacred privy council.

More recently, Robert Jones has described White mainline churches—generally, that's us—as locked in competition with White Evangelicalism as the two factions of an ever-declining White Christian America. Others have analyzed the deep roots of white supremacy in American Christianity.[14] Jones describes a robust period in the mid-20th

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[13] I think, for example, of the Anglo and indigenous clergy of Minnesota who have fairly spontaneously assembled to fight oil pipelines across sacred Lakota land and asylum-denial policies at the southern U.S. border. I have wondered whether the contributors to the works just named would have been content if the church never spoke again on contemporary political issues; and were I feeling cranky, I might hear those 1980s complaints as the protests of self-described "moderates" disgruntled that the Episcopal Church had often moved in more progressive directions, without showing proper deference to the theological professionals. (Sedgwick and Turner identify themselves and their contributors as "moderately conservative to moderately liberal": ibid., 9.) One measure of their "moderation" might be taken from Sedgwick's essay, a decade later, on the church's just war teaching, which reproduced, without critique (or even demurral), the George W. Bush administration's talking points regarding a U.S. "global war on terror" and the necessity of bombing and invading Iraq: "In Times of War and Rumors of War," *ATR* 85:3 (Summer 2003), 421-27. I offered a response in "Reclaiming the Christian Just-War Tradition," *The Witness* (online), Jan. 31, 2005.

[14] Note especially David P. Gushee's AAR Presidential Address for 2018, "In the Ruins of White Evangelicalism: Interpreting a Compromised Christian Tradition through the Witness of African American Literature," AAR presidential address 2018; *JAAR* 87:1 (March 2019) 1-17. See also Miguel A. De La Torre, *Burying White Privilege: Resurrecting a Badass Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018); Gary Dorrien, *Breaking White Supremacy: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Black Social Gospel* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018). Richard A. Hughes rewrote the second edition of his remarkable *Myths America Lives By* around a dominant myth he confesses he'd missed in the first; his new subtitle is *White Supremacy and the Stories That Give Us Meaning* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2018).

century when the white mainline was confidently progressive; now, he suggests, we are more worried about competing with Evangelicals for ever-scarcer numbers: for "market share."[15]

This long detour is meant to problematize our tendency to congratulate ourselves as Episcopalians for our sense of "public responsibility." But more can be said—more *has* been said about the ideological context that surrounds and shapes U.S. churches, by some of our own theologians.

In the 1970s, William Stringfellow observed that American exceptionalism, the national civil religion, and the property tax exemption offered to U.S. churches constituted "a practically conclusive inhibition to the church's political intervention" in public life, except to cheerlead the nationalist cause; the church "becomes confined," he wrote, "to the sanctuary and is assigned to either political silence or to banal acquiescence."[16] In the 1980s, Carter Heyward described our task in Reagan's America as "doing theology in a counterrevolutionary situation."[17] It's not just that she disagreed with the administration's policies. Beginning in 1981, the so-called Institute for Religion and Democracy has orchestrated massive misinformation campaigns to target and harass hundreds of liberal

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[15] Robert Jones, *The End of White Christian America* (Washington: PRRI, 2016).

[16] William Stringfellow, *Conscience and Obedience* (Dallas: Word, 1977), 102-5.

[17] Carter Heyward, "Doing Theology in a Counter-revolutionary Situation," in *The Future of Liberation Theology: Essays in Honor of Gustavo Gutierrez,* ed. Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1989), 397-407. The phrase is in keeping with the legacy of Stringfellow, who declared the Nixon administration to be the climax of "a quarter-century of counterrevolution" in the United States: "Does America Need a Barmen Declaration?" *Christianity and Crisis,* Dec. 24, 1973, 274-76.

clergy, seminary professors, and denominational officials in "mainline" denominations, including ours.[18]

Today, right-wing media personalities regularly decry a commitment to social justice as "code" for *socialism*, a term that enjoys a fright value today not seen since the Cold-War.[19] They illustrate a point made decades ago by Robert Bellah, who described how one of the civil religion's chief functions was to ostracize even the thought of socialism as "the American taboo."[20]

It's not surprising, then, that today, the most visible form of Christianity in the United States teaches a calculated indifference to the poor and vulnerable; or that—even in the Anglican tradition, which was once the headwater of *Christian socialism*—that term is off-

[18] The Institute's website is at www.ird.org. The IRD's campaigns merited an extraordinary emergency plenary session at the AAR in the 1990s. For context see Sara Diamond, *Roads to Dominion: Right-wing Movements and Political Power in the United States* (New York and London: Guilford, 1995).

[19] So Glenn Beck told his television audience on March 2, 2010.

[20] Robert N. Bellah, *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in Time of Trial,* 2nd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992 [first ed. 1975],) chap. 5.

limits, the "politics that dare not speak its name";[21] even center-left "mainline" leaders, in our denomination as well, urge us to practice a theology of love "above politics."[22]

My purpose here is not to *politicize* biblical interpretation—to make it "useful" to one or another political cause. Almost a decade ago, AABS president and dear colleague Ellen Bradshaw Aitken warned against the utilitarian approach to scripture, whether on the Left or the Right.[23] But she also urged that we approach scripture with all the complex and deep concerns that we carry in our hearts and minds; what we might call a fully *engaged* biblical interpretation.[24]

The ideological atmosphere around us is already politicized in a sharply partisan way. Others have drawn a clear bright line that we, as religious professionals in the mainline, must not cross; namely, we must avoid any expressions (especially from the pulpit) of the concerns on our hearts and minds that militate against the neoliberal capitalist order; we must stick resolutely to a *depoliticized* version of theology—or of biblical studies. (No such

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[21] On the heritage of Christian socialism, see John C. Cort, *Christian Socialism: An Informal History* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1988); Gary Dorrien, *Soul in Society: The Making and Renewal of Social Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995); on Anglican socialism, Bernard Kent Markwell, *The Anglican Left : Radical Social Reformers in the Church of England and the Protestant Episcopal Church, 1846–1954* (Brooklyn: Carlson, 1991); A. Wilkinson, *Christian Socialism: From Scott Holland to Tony Blair* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998). It bears note that not long after Karl Marx described religion as the "opiate of the people," Anglican socialist Charles Kingsley confessed that clergy "have used the Bible as if it was . . . an opium-dose for keeping beasts of burden patient while they were being overloaded," etc. ("Letter to the Chartists. No. II," in *Politics for the People*, ed. F. D. Maurice (London: James W. Parker, 1848), 58.

[22] "Politics undermines theology," declared the statement "Reclaiming Jesus," signed by (among others) the presiding bishop of the U.S. church (www.reclaimingjesus.org); on this point, the statement resembled a response signed by thousands of conservative Evangelical scholars (www.statementonsocialjustice.org).

[23] Aitken, "Relentless Intimacy," 117-22.

[24] Ibid., 120-21.

discipline is observed, of course, on the Right, where the Bible is routinely deployed in remarkably tendentious ways.)

Ellen Aitken spoke of her concern that biblical scholars were "marginalized" in our church.[25] But this isn't just an Anglican church phenomenon. We have seen a relentless public campaign to diminish and erode the validity and authority of *faith leaders* and *academics* alike over the last few decades. Naturally, biblical and theological scholars should be dismissed, unless they serve the ideological goals of the current order. This is, to quote Noam Chomsky, just what we should expect in an effective propaganda system.[26]

That line is clear enough in biblical studies. One senior Christian scholar has pronounced that Marxist and liberationist criticism were mere fads, already irrelevant, and that postcolonial criticism is of no interest to Christian scholars. (Feminist criticism doesn't even merit mention in his address.)[27] Another scholar—an Anglican—declares that political interest in the New Testament is the tendency—implicitly, an object of sympathy—of U.S. scholars who work in more downtrodden, "below-the-tracks" contexts, without acknowledging that his own reading of the Bible—by implication, higher and more properly "theological"—might have some relationship to his own circumstances (for example, sitting in the British House of Lords); indeed, he attributed his own reading to nothing more than

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[25] Ibid., 114 and passim.

[26] See Henry A. Giroux, *Neoliberalism's War on Higher Education* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2014); Noam Chomsky and Edward A. Herman, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Vintage, 1988; rev. ed., 1998).

[27] The remarkable claims of Larry Hurtado, "Fashions, Fallacies, and Future Prospects in New Testament Studies" (*JSNT* 36:4 [2014], 299-324). See in particular the rebuttal by Michael Sandford, "On the Past and Future of New Testament Studies: A Response to Larry Hurtado," *Relegere: Studies in Religion and Reception* 4:2 [2014], 229-40. Many of us learned of Professor Hurtado's untimely death during the AAR/SBL Annual Meeting; my criticism here does not diminish respect for his many contributions to our field. May he rest in peace.

his own pious "acquaintance with Paul," as was the case for "most Christians in the world."[28] (Alas, feminist critics play no role on this interpretive horizon, either.)[29]

This construction of biblical studies as a *theological* discipline, and thus as by definition "*apolitical,*" appears to me a transparently ideological maneuver. It's perhaps more attractive when it's been presented in recent years as a piously "contemplative," "listening" approach to scripture; under the guise of *lectio divina* or "African Bible study," we are meant to turn our focus inward, and away from historical or critical questions. I suggest that whatever its merits, such practice is not enough for this time.[30] But recognizing that implies that *our* work will inevitably require awareness and engagement with contested ideological forces in our own disciplines.

Toward that end, we can rely on that same Anglican resource, William Stringfellow, who taught us to read the world around us as the arena of what the New Testament called the "principalities and powers" of the age. If we Episcopalians are eager to fly the banner of "incarnational theology,"[31] there is no better theologian to attend to; for Stringfellow reminds us repeatedly that the Word made incarnate in Jesus is the *perpetually militant* Word,

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[28] N. T. Wright, *Paul in Fresh Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 16-17, 20.

[29] N. T. Wright, *Paul and His Recent Interpreters: Some Contemporary Debates* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015). Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Antoinette Clark Wire merit only a single glancing mention in a survey of fifty years of scholarship, and then only as subjects of Dale B. Martin's interest (but apparently not Wright's own).

[30] I've commented on this tendency at greater length in a 2008 presentation to the AABS, "The Bible in the Public Square . . . and at Lambeth," and in "A Famine of the Word: A Stringfellowian Reflection on the American Church Today," *The Bible in the Public Square: Reading the Signs of the Times,* ed. Cynthia Briggs Kittredge, Ellen Bradshaw Aitken, and Jonathan A. Draper (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 185-96.

[31] The incarnation has enjoyed pride of place in Anglican theology at least since the essays published in Charles Gore, ed., *Lux Mundi: A Series of Studies in the Religion of the Incarnation* (13th ed. New York: Thomas Whitaker, 1891; first ed. London: John Murray, 1889), and Edward Gordon Selwyn, ed., *Essays Catholic and Critical: By Members of the Anglican Communion,* 3rd ed. (London and New York: SPCK and MacMillan, 1929; 1st ed. 1926).

always and implacably opposed to the stratagems of the demonic powers, the false discourses of lying and deceitful powers bent on the destruction of human reason and conscience.[32] I hear Stringfellow's legacy whenever we renew our baptismal promise to "resist the evil forces of this world that corrupt and destroy the creatures of God."

There is room in the Anglican legacy—indeed, there is urgent *need* today—for a robust, critical, and politically engaged biblical interpretation, not just in our classrooms and seminary chapels but across our church, and not least in our pulpits. We need to embrace and endorse practices that combine

- historical-critical insights and liberationist commitments,
- attentiveness and connection to the perspectives and situations of the marginalized,
- and rootedness—both in the shared life of the worshipping community
- and in the life of the Spirit who stirs among us toward the liberation of all creation.

Those practices are already alive among us; let us own *them* as characteristically Anglican.

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[32] See especially Stringfellow, *An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land* (Dallas: Word, 1974), 97-107. Perhaps no one has done more to keep Stringfellow's legacy alive among us than Bill Wylie Kellermann, not least through his assembly of a sourcebook in *A Keeper of the Word: Selected Writings of William Stringfellow* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994); see also Robert Boak Slocum, ed., *Prophet of Justice, Prophet of Life: Essays on William Stringfellow* (New York: Church Publishing, 1997); Bill Wylie Kellermann, *Principalities in Particular: A Practical Theology of the Powers That Be* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017).