

Anglican Identity

The Episcopal Church is an Anglican church, that is, a church whose doctrine, discipline and worship are derived from the Church of England (and are still in close relations with the Archbishop of Canterbury and other Anglicans worldwide). Anglicans have been described as a mix of protestant and Catholic, a “middle way” (many use the Latin term “via media”). Though this is a rough and quick way to locate us among our brethren, does it really constitute an identity of our own?

Other churches have well constructed self-definitions. The Roman Catholic Church defines itself and its beliefs on the Bible and the Dogma of the church: the “Magisterial authority” of the church’s tradition. Many Protestant churches rest on a foundation of a “confession:” the Augsburg Confession for the Lutherans, the Westminster Confession for many Presbyterians. Still other protestants, such as the Baptists, insist on nothing more than the Bible and the individual as defining faith.

Anglican Identity does not have such confessions, nor an extensive system of dogma, neither is it an individualistic faith with no corporate identity. The shape of Anglican Identity is not so much forecasted or codified by its origins, either. But looking back over the years to how the faith responds to its context over time, a continuity of identity can be seen. Vital elements of the life of the church, and the faith of the church show themselves as time goes on—not as developments, but as assumptions or claims with some staying power.

History

What I mean is that Anglicanism was not set in stone the day that Henry VIII broke from the Pope. The church of England had a wildly flip-flopping identity in its initial years:

- Catholic, but without the pope, then some protestant influence (original Book of Common Prayer)
- Heavily Puritan under Edward
- Catholic again under Mary
- Protestant “compromise” under Elizabeth (described by theologians such as Jewell & Hooker)
At this time, the BCP was revised to the form that is still the official BCP of the C of E.
- Breakdown of compromise and flip-flopping between Catholic and Puritan rulers in the 1600s.
During this time, Anglican writers stressed not doctrine, but rather the Christian life, or “piety” (see such writers as Jeremy Taylor or John Donne) that made connection to tradition and the sacraments. The worship of the church remained a constant.
- Answering the enlightenment and rationalism in the 1700s brought further reflections on the role of human reason in theology and doctrine (Butler embraced rationalism, while Wesley reacted against the dry, intellectual vision of the faith, with a more experiential relationship with God).
- Modernism, Tolerance and disestablishment in the 1800s brought new contexts in which to reflect on the interplay between scriptures, tradition, reason and society (Maurice & Temple reflecting theologically within and in response to modernism, Newman reacting to it by returning to tradition with the “Anglo-Catholic” movement at Oxford).
- Colonialism, post-modernism and post-colonialism in the 1900s: Now the Anglican Communion is neither institutionally British, nor culturally British, nor even majority English-speaking. As post-modernism challenges systems of authority and doctrinal claims, how do former colonial masters respond to the vast majority of the church that exists outside our borders (50 of 70 million Anglicans are African, Asian and South American)? Thinkers such as Rolland Allen look at what is essential to the church in a missions context. Desmond Tutu and other Africans claim their own Anglican voice, and Rowan Williams seeks a broader sense of a conciliar church that both responds to the present world and the voices of our orthodox forebears.

What shape rises out of this history?

Writer Paul Avis suggests that there are two kinds of Identity claims about Anglicanism: Method & Content. In other words, some claim that Anglican identity is found not in claims of doctrine or the particular decisions we make, but the method, or how we arrive at such decisions. Many stress our “via media” or middle way of balancing both the protestant and Catholic traditions. On the other hand, others suggest that there are particular doctrinal claims that can be made as to what constitutes Anglican identity. I suggest that method and content are closely interlinked for Anglicans—that our “method” both is and leads to particular claims, and both are important for describing who we are as Anglicans.

To help flesh out some of the claims of both content and method, **I would like to start with the cliché of “Scripture, Tradition and Reason.”** The idea that Anglican Christianity is based on “Scripture, Tradition and Reason” has a long and well trodden history. One of the foundational theologians in Anglican thought is Richard Hooker. Hooker wrote extensively (in the 1500s) of these three influences on doctrine and life. In my view, many people have misused this concept by suggesting that these are three independent sources for doctrine. The metaphor of the three-legged stool gained use in the 20th century, providing an image of three equal sources for doctrine and teaching, each independent from the others. In the last few decades, many have added “experience” to this list, and have treated experience as another independent source. Though there is some precedent for experience, as will be explained below, this idea of *independent* sources of any number is an anomaly to Anglican thinking.

I believe that what has had staying power in Anglican thinking over the centuries is the interplay and integration of these three influences. I tend to notice the primacy of scripture as a source for doctrine, with tradition as a lens for understanding scripture, and reason as ongoing discernment with the Holy Spirit as to how to live and understand that doctrine. To some extent, this is naturally what happens—we all go to the scriptures with a bias shaped by our heritage, and we all use our own interpretive faculties to respond to scripture. For Anglicans, however, this process has been more explicit, helping us to mark out the boundaries of influence in any of these three influences.

Scripture

A basic claim for Anglican Christianity is that scripture is the inspired word of God. This means that the Bible has authority in doctrine and the Christian life, especially as revelation from God. What this means to Anglicans can be discerned from Anglican thinkers, the language of the prayer book, and to some extent the 39 Articles—position statements on doctrinal issues formed in the early days of the Church of England, and adopted by the Americans when they started the Episcopal Church. The articles are less influential now, but still provide a reference point when considering Anglican theology. The most common phrase about scripture in these sources is that scripture “contains all things necessary to Salvation.” This is in contrast to a more Roman Catholic position that would require teachings not found in scripture. One common theme of scripture, other than its general authority as the rule of faith in doctrine, discipline and life, is that scripture reveals Jesus Christ—that God is known in scripture, and that scripture reveals Jesus Christ and salvation. Thus scripture points beyond itself to knowledge of God, not just knowledge *about* God.

If scripture stood on its own, without the lens of tradition or the influence of reason, one would reach the more Puritan position. This view stresses the sole authority of scripture, reacting quite strongly to anything not in scripture (“if it is not in scripture, it’s wrong”). The Puritan tradition is relatively anti-sacramental, anti-clergy; they view faith as an individual matter, rather than a matter for the community; and they reject human capacity for good (the doctrine of “Total Depravity”). Their primary view of scriptures and faith is as a matter of Law & justification.

Tradition

In contrast to the more Puritan tradition of doctrine based solely on ‘the individual and the Bible alone,’ Anglicans stress the importance of Tradition as the proper lens for understanding the Bible. Tradition in this case specifically means the guidance of the Holy Spirit to the church over the centuries, fundamentally in the ecumenical creeds of the early church. These creeds include the Apostles’ Creed, and the Nicene Creed. Tradition also provides a link to our heritage of interpretation as well as piety, disciplines, forms of worship and governance. Tradition also finds a lasting heritage, established very early on, of the sacraments as essential to Christian life. While Anglicans part company for the most part with the reformation era definitions from the Roman Catholics about the Eucharist (council of Trent), Anglicans still leave room for a view of the Eucharist that is more than a mere reenactment. Christ is truly present in the Eucharist, though we don’t wish to go much farther in our claims, nor define too precisely the physics or metaphysics of what occurs.

This view of tradition is based in large part on the importance of the church as a body of many members—a “corporate” institution. By this we don’t mean a big American business conglomerate, rather by “corporate,” we mean that Christians are interdependent on one another, and that decisions should be made with the community as a whole—the whole “corpus” or body. The Holy Spirit is given to the community of the faithful, rather than simply to individuals within the community. The Holy Spirit is given for the building up of the *church* as a whole, not simply individuals within the church. Thus Anglicans tend to be more conciliar, that is, stressing councils of the church, rather than hierarchy of the church or local independence.

Taking tradition unmoored from the authority of scripture, or taking tradition as its own source of doctrine would be expressed by the Roman Catholic church and to some extent the Eastern Orthodox churches as well. Catholics stress the authority of the Pope as well as the authority of the “magisterium” of the church—the deposit of church teaching. Changing such teaching is extremely challenging for Catholics because it carries, in some ways, similar authority to scripture. For the Catholics, the Christian life tends also to be expressed in terms of law. For Eastern Orthodox, their diligence in standing against change has tended toward a certain isolationism, but with some recent engagement with theology and other traditions by several Orthodox theologians.

Reason

Simply put, Reason has to do with the use of God-given human capacities for thinking and reflection in understanding the faith. Richard Hooker, writing in the 1500s, used “reason” as a major part of the Christian life and development of doctrine and theology. For Hooker, however, reason involved both the image of God created within us, and the ongoing actions of the Holy Spirit. In later centuries, reason would come to be seen by the world at-large as a bare faculty of the human mind—indeed stripped of any involvement by God. Thus, Anglican thought has always lived with the risks of taking reason out of its theological context. However, because of the constant interaction between scripture, tradition, and reason, these risks have been largely manageable. Recent decades have stressed this boundary as some claims thought “reasonable” by some stand in sharp contrast to clear Biblical claims, as well as traditional teachings.

The foundations of reason carry philosophical implications on the sacraments and on the understanding of our ongoing relationship with God. Suffice it to say that Anglican foundations of reason pull against strict rationalism and allow room for the supernatural, and for mystery and a sacramental view of the nature—God at work in and through the world. This involvement of reason also means that Anglicans tend toward engagement with the thinking of the wider world, including philosophy, science and the thinking of other traditions.

Thus, Anglicans stand in contrast to the Puritan tradition and its view of utter corruptness of human nature. On the one hand, some speak of the goodness of human nature, recalling the Biblical teaching that we are made in the image of God. Others—especially those in the Puritan tradition—teach that sin has utterly destroyed the image of God within us, and that we are entirely evil without the help of God. Anglicans (with perhaps the exception of John Wesley and some who lean more toward puritan views) tend to see human nature as “broken” or “flawed.” Yes, we are made in the image of God, but yes, the problem of human sin spoils claims of our essential goodness. However, Anglicans would not say that the image of God was obliterated or totally lost to us, but rather “broken,” “clouded,” or “obscured” to us by sin. Thus we still need the salvation of Jesus Christ to deal with the problem of sin.

Thus, taking Reason as a source without the corrective of scripture and tradition would lead to unreliable results. Unmooring reason from scriptural foundations and traditional interpretations might lead you to the views of the Unitarians who broke with Christianity completely in the 1800s (?), as well as deists and other rationalists, or pluralists in our day (“religions are all the same”). Such rationality tends to also emphasize the individual rather than the community (except for communism, of course). One might also see the rationalist view of science as a view of law as well.

Putting it together

In Anglican Christianity, these three influences in the Christian life of Scripture, Tradition and Reason are brought together in constant conversation with each other in a community of Word and Sacrament. This is an identity claim of both method and content. The “method” of conversation between Scripture, Tradition and Reason (not as equal sources, but rather each with its own role) yields particular claims of “content” about these three influences and the community shaped by them.

One claim of content is that the nature of the Christian faith is one of relationship with God (and each other, in Christ). The problem of sin is then one of broken relationship with God and with each other. The nature of salvation (and concepts of redemption, atonement, and grace) is then described in terms of renewed relationship and reconciliation—that in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God restores our broken relationship with God and gives us the forgiveness and grace to be restored in relationship with each other, by the gift and power of the Holy Spirit. The kingdom of heaven is the eternal extension of this relationship. Though law is a metaphor that is used by Anglicans (with substantial Biblical roots) it does not seem to have the stress or widespread influence that it does for Catholics and the Puritan tradition. There, sin is described as law-breaking and salvation as legal justification by Jesus Christ.

Another claim implied in this method is that we come to know God in the revelation of Scripture, primarily as revelation of Jesus Christ and his free, unearned gift of Salvation. This is not a claim unique to Anglicans, of course. **This method does, however, claim a primary context in which this revelation takes place: the context of the church—the Community of Word and Sacrament.** The church is where the conversation of Scripture, Tradition and Reason takes place. We are a community—in conversation with each other, therefore more conciliar and less hierarchical. We are a community not only of a small group of Christians, but a community that sees all Christians present and past as part of the body of Christ, therefore our ties to the church through the centuries, and to whom the Holy Spirit also spoke, are important. Thus continuity and catholicity (pertaining to the whole church) are important to Anglicans in our interpretation of scripture, our understanding of the Christian life, and the ordering of the church.

We are a community of the Word—rooted in the scriptures that we might know the living Word of God—Jesus. We are a community of Sacrament, celebrating God’s presence and work in and through the material world. Jesus commanded us to Baptize and to celebrate the Eucharist, and in these sacraments, we find our identity as a Christian community and find God’s presence illuminating the Word. Sacraments are “outward and visible signs of inward and invisible grace.” Sacraments use the stuff of creation (water, bread, wine) as a means of grace—reflecting how the incarnation of Jesus (God becoming human) is the primary sacrament—that God can be present in the world, and active in our experience of the Holy Spirit. One can hear in these claims the interplay between scripture (Word and Sacrament), tradition (Sacrament, the church, catholicity) and reason (engagement with God’s presence in the world, the presence and voice of the Holy Spirit in the community and in reading scripture).

Challenges:

The diversity of the Anglican Communion often makes comprehensive claims about Anglican Identity too vague to be useful, or too specific to be accurate. Today, perhaps more than ever, the Anglican Communion faces remarkable stress to its unity. The battles of years past were about the degree of formality of vestments or the frequency of communion, even though the words and form of the liturgy were remarkably similar around the world. Now, a great deal of diversity within the communion has allowed emphasis in one area to pull against emphasis in another area. Where one community is shaped strongly by the authority of Scripture and less by intellectual debate, another community is shaped more by the theology and philosophy of Reason, and less by the primacy of Scripture. Temperament and language and post-colonial cultural diversity and post-modern moves to re-define traditional concepts undermine basic assumptions of theological discussions. We don’t all share the same assumptions about how decisions are made within the church (clergy only? clergy and laity? local only? national or international?). Our engagement with the world and our cultures brings uncertainty about our continuity with tradition and whether or not we are inappropriately influenced by our cultures.

Many of these issues are involved in the current presenting issue of homosexual practice. Many in the U.S. church want to approve gay sexual relationships, while others (especially elsewhere in the Anglican Communion) continue the teaching that disapproves such behavior, based on Scripture and previously consistent teaching in the church. Questions are raised about the extent to which Reason is authoritative (or whether or not either view is reasonable and on what basis), about how the voice of the Holy Spirit is discerned, about the limits of Scriptural interpretation, about decision-making and authority in the church and in the Anglican Communion, and about the extent to which other Christians should influence some of our decisions (especially ecumenical partners such as the Lutherans and Roman Catholics). Thus these challenges are also part of the conversation between Scripture, Tradition and Reason.

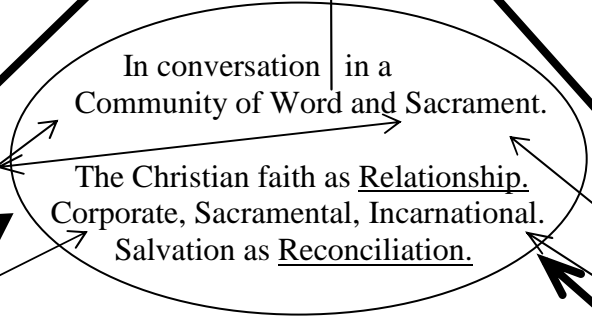
Another challenge to Anglican Identity is a more welcome challenge. Perhaps at some point, our identity as distinctive from other Christians becomes so vague that we enter into conversation with other Christians and other denominations and seek, and eventually find, visible unity with them. This is the goal of the ecumenical movement, a movement that joins Jesus in praying for the church “that they all may be one.” The Episcopal Church was very influential in this movement in the late 1800’s, and we have made great strides in forming and shaping our common life in response to other Christian traditions. The Episcopal Church is now “in communion” with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and continues in fruitful dialog with other protestant, Catholic and Eastern Orthodox bodies. Perhaps we can learn and grow together so that our identity is one of brothers and sisters in Christ, and all members of one body, building each other up in Christ through our different voices. *Amen.*

Scripture

Authoritative in faith & life
Revelation
-primarily of Jesus Christ and Salvation
-points to God rather than itself
Primary in development of doctrine



Scripture only:
Puritans:
Total Depravity (vs. church or reason)
private vs. corporate (vs. church)
Law & justification



Tradition

Creeds
Catholicity
Heritage of interpretation, piety & discipline
Sacraments
Corporate interdependence



Tradition more than the rest:

Roman Catholic:
Magisterial Dogma
Extra-Biblical mandates
Over-confidence in the structures of the church
Law (especially in piety & ecclesiology)

Reason (& Experience)

connection with the divine 'logic' in God's creation
created in the Image of God (though marred by sin)
God active in the world through the Holy Spirit
-illumination of the word; -Sacraments
-engagement with the world and nature through our
God-given faculties.



Reason more than the rest:

Unitarians, Deists, rationalists, secularists
-anti-revelation (progressive/social-evolutionary)
-anti-supernatural
-idea-centered; ends in the primacy of the self
Law of nature (devoid of God)