

*Authority in Anglicanism: Ephraim Radner*

**Authority in Anglicanism**

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*Introduction: Authority, Ethos, and Anglican Scripturalism*

To characterize authority for a community, one must first understand the organs of reception, the framework by which individuals and groups “hear and obey” the authoritative norms by which they live. Indeed, actual “authorities” – whether they be persons, ideals, or documented standards – achieve identifiable focus only within the parameters of these organs of reception, and ought not to be identified apart from them.<sup>1</sup>

Along these lines, Anglicans have often spoken in terms of an “ethos” that shapes and limits their common life, as opposed to a defined system of “authority” or “doctrine” that explicitly constrains it. This is a helpful and also misleading way of speaking. It is helpful in pointing to the fundamental force and reality of communal attitudes of particular authorities as they in fact order the church’s life; but it is misleading if the appeal to “ethos” is used to dissolve the reality within Anglicanism of a constraining authority altogether. Furthermore, it is often logically difficult to ground authority in ethos or in communal organs of reception in an exact manner, and hence Anglicans tend to work around the edges of the challenge, and in controverted situations to ignore the challenge altogether in favor simply of alternative modes of authoritative appeal which fail to convince precisely because their articulation tends to float free of the “ethos”.

Despite, or because of, the purported “vagueness” of an Anglican framework of authority, the experienced and increasing reality of diversity in both teaching and practice within and among Anglican churches has both seized upon and suffered from this long-standing inexactitude, giving rise to a host of competing arguments for “particular standards of authority”. These arguments have boiled down to several main commitments. All maintain a reference to Scripture, but the latter’s actual force in controverted discussions has been weak. The more substantive disagreements are from within the following positions:

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<sup>1</sup>To take the United States as a political example: while the Constitution represents a final authority of appeal, in fact very few people know it or refer to it. Representatives of the people do, under particular circumstances, and those circumstances themselves mark the parameters in which Constitution is articulated and applied. But what orders the representatives and their circumstances of hearing, especially in relationship with the “people”? Without arguing the point, we can see why some would place the Declaration of Independence on an authoritative par with the Constitution, insofar as it may define the limiting and informing character of the community’s encultured expectations or values, as it selects representatives and the circumstances that elicit and constrain appeals to the Constitution. “Constitutional” governments, from Africa to Asia, vary in the nature of their authority, despite having a common structure and set of appeals, in large measure because there is enormous variation in the organs of reception from culture to culture.

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- Anglicanism has no constraining authority besides the “Creeds”<sup>2</sup>;
- None besides the Book of Common Prayer (interpreted in full or thin terms)<sup>3</sup>;
- The normative authority of the several “Formularies” together<sup>4</sup>;
- In every case, “Canon Law” as the proper adjudicator of the above, defined within particular local synods.

Thus, whatever one’s views on the matter, the practical struggle over authority has moved into the realm of the legislative, and probably the proposal with the most potential for political and perhaps clarifying influence within Anglicanism as a whole, has been the initiated project out of Lambeth 1998 to rationalize and make coherent among themselves the canonical systems of the Communion’s constituent members.<sup>5</sup>

The press for canonical uniformity is, however, more a reactive response to a situation of growing unease within the Communion than the expression of a positive dynamic actually driving the Communion. In the past, the seeds of conflict between the kinds of positions noted above have been historically contained by functional “structures” of authority – the respectful collegial oversight of bishops bound to patterns of counsel and to *de facto* commonalities of formulary -- and it is just these structures that today appear unsteady. The Inter-Anglican Theological and Doctrinal Commission’s so-called “Virginia Report” on the “communion” of the church, for all of its careful examination of theologically substantive concepts like Trinity and *koinonia*, actually made its public mark by suggesting new and wider adjudicatory structures for the Communion, thereby furthering the sense that ecclesial “politics” should remain the arena in which “authority” finds its legs.<sup>6</sup> And in light of these trajectories, taken in the midst of very serious and developing conflicts around the Communion over teaching on sexuality in particular, the notion of “Anglican authority” might perhaps best be sifted from ecclesial debris when the dust settles over the next decade, and not before.

Short of such futuristic retrospectives, the purpose of this paper is to uncover a deeper source to this increasingly manifest problem of locating authority within Anglican

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<sup>2</sup>This represents the views of progressives within the Communion, especially in North America, who argue that beyond the credal affirmations and the Scriptural base to which they refer – variously understood -- much (all?) falls into the category of *adiaphora*; this might even include the shape and duties of the three-fold ministry (and here radical evangelicals in, for instance, the Diocese of Sydney overlap pragmatically with radical revisionists).

<sup>3</sup> This represents the more moderate position of most North American Anglicans, and undergirds hopes for “comprehension” through the BCP’s wide set of references as well as the assumption that Prayer Book revision represents the appropriate place in which to further theological reform.

<sup>4</sup> This, finally, is the more conservative position, embodied in something like the Prayer Book Society, which appeals to a strict set of purportedly “classic” Anglican “standards” – Creeds, BCP, Ordinal, and Articles of Religion.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. the paper of Norman Doe on “Canon Law and Communion”, presented to the Anglican Primates in March of 2001 (available through the Anglican Consultative Council). Doe has written widely on local and world-wide Anglican canon law. There is reason to doubt the Communion’s ability to further this project legislatively any time soon.

<sup>6</sup> The report, commissioned by Lambeth 1988, was published in 1997 (London: Anglican Consultative Council). Chapters 3 and 6 raise the “structural” issues which caught people’s attention.

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churches. I will argue, first, that this source can be found in the historic Anglican refusal to inhibit the “first-order” character of Scriptural language and substance, a refusal that derives from what I would call the “encultured” base of Anglicans’ various appeals to authoritative entities or documents. And, secondly, I will suggest that the odd disappearance of Scripture’s claims in present Anglican discussions (despite appeals made by conservatives especially to its supreme authority) is attributable to the disarray of Anglicanism’s “second-order” structures (those noted above).<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the original relationship of Scripture and Standard was one wherein the latter’s role was to protect the former’s unfettered hearing. The dynamic of evolution in rapidly emerging modernity, however, with its overturning of the “corporate” character of Scriptural formation, has been to reverse these roles and purposes: Scripture has more and more been applied primarily to buttress the authority of the Standards, however they may be identified by various Anglican groups. Unlike other churches, Anglicans have traditionally refused to demand anything other than Scripture as the ostensive framework for their primary claims (and I say this well aware that it flies in the face of much contemporary popular, if unexamined, wisdom about the supposed “three-legged stool” of Anglicanism’s appeal to Tradition and Reason in addition to Scripture). In any case, I believe that the problems inherent in such “fundamentalism” when it is corporately – as opposed to individually – embraced are those with which we live today.<sup>8</sup>

***2. The form of the 18<sup>th</sup>-century Anglican “ethos”: the Religious Society***

I propose now that we look at the question of Authority within context of this discussion with Methodists in terms, first, of the 18<sup>th</sup>-century alternatives of ethos which, in a critical way, bear some connection with contemporary realities: that is, in response to the growth of religious pluralism within the British nation. From there, I will try to move backwards to locate a more general set of informing Anglican commitments about the role of Scripture and community that, I will argue, continue to be embodied in the movement outside of England into America and the evolving Anglican Communion.

The reality of religious pluralism in England was determined amid the violence of the Civil War and subsequent Commonwealth in the mid-17<sup>th</sup>-century. Its intractability and social challenge, while resisted in many ways at the time of the Restoration, was inescapable; and by the early 18<sup>th</sup>-century it had become the primary motive behind ecclesiastical politics and the theology that grew up around such discussions. There was a time when every English schoolboy – and certainly every student of divinity – knew about the Bangorian Controversy. The fact that this episode is no longer a standard part

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. arguments in R. R. Reno’s *In the Ruins of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2002), cc. 5 and 9. In these chapters, Reno contrasts the increasing inability of the “standards” *qua* functional norms to maintain the more fundamental (to Anglicanism) practice of the “reiterated” hearing of Scripture embodied in the Daily Office.

<sup>8</sup> For a pugnacious discussion of the conceptual ambiguities in speaking about “Scripture, Reason, and Tradition” within the context of contemporary Anglicanism (in contrast to its more “classic” 16<sup>th</sup>- and 17<sup>th</sup>-century texts), cf. Christopher Seitz, *Word Without End: The Old Testament as Abiding Theological Witness* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publ., 1998), chapter 8, “Biblical Authority in the Late Twentieth Century: The Baltimore Declaration, Scripture-Reason-Tradition and the Canonical Approach”.

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of Anglican self-understanding, however, does not subvert its status as an exemplar of the religious age: the bishop of Bangor, Benjamin Hoadly, had argued in a sermon that the “Kingdom of Christ” was a purely “spiritual” reality and hence was not logically (or morally) subject to a political establishment. Hoadly’s vision, impregnated as it was with overt Lockean sentiments, was designed to open up a social space in England for most religious sects and denominations, and to question the Anglican claim that ecclesial structures (including and especially forms of worship) themselves formed an essential part of the Gospel. The ensuing controversy grew so heated, and came to engulf the passions of the Church’s political parties so voraciously, that the synodical center of the Church of England, its “Convocation”, was simply dissolved – “prorogued” – indefinitely; indeed, it failed to meet for almost another 150 years.

The practical result of this studious avoidance of decision-making was that religious pluralism become ensconced as the “new fact” of British society by the 1720’s, its legally protected status, of course, requiring another century to work itself out. And in line with Locke’s own explicit theological vision, the center of gravity for understanding Christianity began to shift from communal conformity into the realm of “private” belief, the standard of which was, to use the technical phrase of the day (and so pilloried by someone like William Law) “sincerity of conscience”.

Amid the growing and increasingly recognized market place of religious choices, the individual’s religious identity demanded new criteria, beyond the authority of hierarchy and nation, indeed beyond even the imprimatur simply of Protestant claims to Scriptural origins, by which to judge the internal commitments by which religious values were now seen to be determined. These criteria fell within the category of what today we would call “authenticity” of Christian character, and what in the 18<sup>th</sup>-century were qualified as “marks of genuineness”.

It is here that I would like to disengage some of the peculiar elements that pressed Anglicanism and what became Methodism in different directions: how do we know and judge what is “genuine” Christianity, or a “genuine Christian”? Without going into details, let me simply say that the search for the “authentic” in the face of religious privatization had for some time – indeed as a recurrent dynamic within the Church’s history but with a special purpose since the Reformation – followed the logic of “primitivism”: that which could be tied most closely to the apostolic and early church was to be most valued. In the debate among competing sects in the 16<sup>th</sup>-century, this form of argument had gained a new edge with the evolution of historical research, and by the mid-17<sup>th</sup>-century in England it had triumphed as the standard form of documentary science. Now thrown to the individual, the quest for the “original” Christianity in the 18<sup>th</sup>-century had become a national passion, for many something almost at one with religious faith itself.

On a broader level, Primitivism came to fuel a variety of what could be called “renewal” movements designed to refocus the lives, not only of individuals in their private decision-making, but in their association with the Church or churches themselves. Chief among

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these renewal movements were the so-called Religious Societies that began to spring up around London and elsewhere in the country beginning in the late 1600’s. I want to turn our attention here in particular to the useful contrasts that emerge in this context between conforming Anglicanism and the nascent Methodist movement. My comments are general and hardly novel; but because so much attention has been paid to Wesley’s adaptation of the Religious Society, Anglicans have tended to ignore the illuminative value for their own tradition of the original structures that Wesley, as it were, inherited and transformed.<sup>9</sup>

The form of the Religious Society was that of a weekly gathering of parish laymen for the purpose of prayer and mutual edification. Its origin is usually associated with Anthony Horneck, a German émigré to England who became an Anglican minister and who, in 1678, organized such a group in London for which he wrote a set of “Rules” that became fundamental to the many societies that later spread through the Church. The religious motive behind these societies was explicated by Horneck in a number of sermons and books, including a work entitled “The Happy Ascetick” (1681)<sup>10</sup>. Horneck conceived of his small groups as the seed or leaven of witness by which the larger Church and world would be converted to a deeper Christian discipleship. This hope was, in turn, based on his reading of the conversionary history of the early Church (particularly through the eyes of the highly popular primitivist historian William Cave). As Horneck explained, the Roman Empire was converted through the testimony of small societies of “holiness” -- the early Christians that is -- whose pneumatic existence exhibited the embodied form of the Crucified Jesus in the pagan culture’s midst.

However much Horneck’s Lutheran background may have influenced his stress upon the Cross, his theological outlook apparently hit upon an Anglican enthusiasm (if there is such a thing), for not only did his societies proliferate but the shape of their life, as Horneck described it, followed a pattern bound to appeal to the established church.<sup>11</sup> While the overall criterion of membership was an individual “resolution” to pursue “a holy and serious life” (Rule 1), the way this was to be enacted was decidedly familiar: only those “confirmed by a bishop” could be members; only ordained ministers could lead the group; only prayers from the Prayer Book could be used; only “psalms” could be sung; personal discussions of “practical divinity” or of “spiritual concerns” were neither required nor to be freely pursued except with the direction of the minister; and a large part of the society’s efforts involved the regular collection of dues and contributions to be used for preaching missions and almsgiving among “the poor”. Finally, Horneck

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<sup>9</sup> The literature on the Religious Societies has grown over the years. For an overview, see *The Church of England c.1689-c.1833* (eds. J. Walsh, C. Haydon, S. Taylor, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), esp. the c. 5 (“The Church, the societies and the moral revolution of 1688” by John Spurr) and c. 7 (“The origins and ideals of the SPCK 1699-1716”, by Craig Rose).

<sup>10</sup> *The Happy Ascetick: or, The Best Exercise, To which is added a Letter to a Person of Quality, Concerning the Holy Lives of the Primitive Christians* (London: Henry Mortlock, 1681).

<sup>11</sup> Horneck’s “Rules” were published as a Preface to his *Several Sermons upon the Fifth of St. Matthew; Being Part of Christ’s Sermon on the Mount*, 2 vols. (London, 1717), pp. viiiff.. They are reproduced in David Lowes Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting: It’s Origin and Significance* (Nahsville: Discipleship Resources, 1987), pp. 188f..

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appended a set of “special” rules, which included the relational elements of the Sermon on the Mount, the discipline of self-examination, daily prayer, obedience, and commitment to the Church of England (Rule 17) – all things that, in his other writings, Horneck associates with the apostolic imitation of Christ’s own life.

It should be said that subsequent societies, whose origins were quite independent of Horneck’s personal legacy, tended to cohere in vision with this general outlook: that is, they all exhibited an intentional renewal of “primitive apostolic” holiness of life that was tied to the “form” of the crucified Christ in such a way that its manifestation might work for the “world”’s conversion; further this renewal’s formative vehicle proved to be the instruments of the established church itself, in whose patterns of relationship “holiness” would be embodied. Finally, I would note that while the explicit theological rationale disappeared, many of the practical forms of this “society” devotion entered into the mainstream of Anglican evangelical spirituality, in part through the 19<sup>th</sup>-century evolution of the Religious Society itself into the missionary movement of the Church of England through organs like the Church Missionary Society (CMS). (I point this out because even Anglican evangelicalism moved in a direction somewhat different from the original branching out of the Religious Society Movement that marked the birth of Methodism.)

While I have no expertise to comment very accurately on this matter, it is worth simply contrasting Horneck’s vision with Wesley’s more mature use of the Classes and Bands. One way to state this contrast is to describe Horneck’s societies as a kind of communally *formative* primitivism, while Wesley increasingly saw his societies more explicitly as the instruments of *conversionary* primitivism. And in this sense Wesley’s instincts were far more in tune with the religious thrust of evolving pluralism, for he tied primitive holiness more to the individual’s conscience than to the individual’s community, and saw the latter more as a vehicle for this conversion and transformation than as the object of the holy, and even less (in the Puritan sense) as an *ecclesiolum* of the holy. Not that the formative character of the religious society was not somehow basic for Wesley as for his contemporaries. But because Wesley’s understanding of “Genuine Christianity”, with its emphasis upon the experiential contours of justification and sanctification, found its articulation as an internal phenomenon, the communal character of the society was identified less by its ostensive practices – common prayer, study, discussion, almsgiving, and relational accountability – than by the *nota* of its conversionary functions: preaching that leads to justification, commitment, and the effectiveness of individual encouragement and growth. “Authentic” Christianity, as Wesley described it, found its demonstration in the internal legitimation of the era’s critical religious categories: the “assurance” felt by a “sincere conscience”.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> I have in mind here Wesley’s 1753 “A Plain Account of Genuine Christianity”, reprinted in Albert C. Outler’s (ed.) *John Wesley* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), pp. 181-196. I should point out that, in our own post-Emersonian American context, Horneck and Wesley will seem to have far more in common than in distinction, given their sense, for instance, of the essential Christian need for a regulated and formative “society” at all.

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The formal “standards” for this genuineness, as Wesley saw it, were of course Scriptural, just as with all the religious societies; indeed, they were soon explicitly “Wesleyan” as well (a development whose logic I would like to hear about). But my purpose now is to bring into view the “ethos”, and not the bare standards themselves. For as the religious societies went, so arguably went the churches that finally embraced them. While the Classes and Bands of Methodism finally moved in the unambiguous direction of conversionary devotion and the ecclesial structures that facilitated this, Renewal Primitivism that remained within the Church of England eventually fell back firmly upon the standards that the High Church movement had been culling from its documentary mining of the Early Church over many years, that is to say, the particular “forms” of communal life deemed “apostolic”. In William Beveridge’s enumerations (common with many others’), these included the “Apostolic Deposit” of Scripture (and enshrined in the Book of Common Prayer and in the Articles of Religion); the “fellowship” or “communion” of established ecclesial life; the Lord’s Supper as the “highest act of religion”; and finally regular corporate public prayer according to the BCP.<sup>13</sup>

And while it is true that the “conversionary” ethos of the Methodists initially had a far greater missionary success than the “conforming” religious societies, “formative primitivism” had its own outward impetus, enacted by the missionary societies like the S.P.G., which sought to “propagate the Gospel” precisely by multiplying and supporting the formal and apostolically “genuine” standards articulated by people like Beveridge.

The crucial elements of distinction were not, in the end, missionary desire in any case, but the location of apostolic authenticity: for conforming Anglicans it lay in the usage of the Prayer Book and in the dynamics of that “fellowship” or “communion” that lived within the Prayerbook’s molding parameters. In the eyes of 18<sup>th</sup>-century Anglican theorists, the Prayerbook’s framework -- and its effective imposition on society was part of its own character -- in itself worked the gears of apostolic formation, and the society of the larger Church acted as the very arena wherein “holy living” was necessarily embodied through the virtues and crucible demanded by the very process of “conformity”.

Finally, if this sketch of the matter is accurate, it seems to cohere with a consistent Anglican “ethos” that stretches from the 16<sup>th</sup> century through much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is this ethos that defines the “organs of obedience” and that thereby points to the character of authoritative witness and ministry that I would argue has marked the Episcopal Church, until recently anyway. And so let me now attempt to define it more broadly.

***3. Cranmer’s founding ethos of Formative Scripturalism***

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. his sermon (102) on “The Exemplary Holiness of the Primitive Christians”, found in his *Theological Works* (Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1844), vol. 4, pp. 441ff.. Cf. Robert D. Cornwall, “The Search for the Primitive Church: The Use of Early Church Fathers in the High Church Anglican Tradition, 1680-1745”, in *Anglican and Episcopal History* (59:3, September 1990), pp. 303-329.

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If we turn to what is widely acknowledged to be one of the main pillars of the Anglican ethos, the Book of Common Prayer, we find that its theological rationale as articulated by Cranmer was fundamentally explicated in terms of the corporate formative powers so clearly presupposed still by the 18<sup>th</sup>-century renewal groups of the Religious Societies. Cranmer, however, describes that power in a particular and important way as the force of specifically *Scriptural* immersion by a people. Indeed, this represents the 16<sup>th</sup>-century value of the “primitive”, if you will, in contrast to the more institutional elements identified by 17<sup>th</sup>- and 18<sup>th</sup>-century Anglican divines. Nonetheless, we can see the continuity of interest here.

Right at the opening of the 1549 BCP’s Preface, Cranmer seeks to display the Scriptural basis and goal of his revision in the practice of the early church: “the common prayers in the Church”, he writes, have their “firste originall and ground”, as far as their purpose is concerned, displayed in the practice of the “auncient fathers”. It was they, Cranmer goes on to explain, who first “so ordered the matter that all the whole Bible (or the greatest parte thereof) should be read over once in the year”, by both clergy and people. Indeed, throughout the Preface and the essay “Of Ceremonies”, the “auncient fathers”, the “olde fathers”, and “antyquitye” are used as groundings for the specifically Scriptural (not doctrinal) revisions the new Prayer Book attempts.

This appeal to *antiquity*, stated so forthrightly by Cranmer, was not, however a simple desire to “return to the sources” in the way that later primitivists, and certainly that modern liturgical scholars have sought to govern their researches. The authority of “antiquity”, for Cranmer, in fact lay elsewhere. He appeals to the “olde fathers”, not for liturgical forms or even for doctrinal substance within the liturgy, but only because the early Church (in Cranmer’s mind) offers a faithful model of Scriptural exposition within the “divine service” of clergy and people. We could call the authority of antiquity in this case a matter of “pragmatic exemplarism”, the historically proven virtue of Scriptural conformance. This is a far cry from “antiquarianism”, because Cranmer was not actually interested in the forms of public prayer from the early Church. Nor does he appeal to the past, liturgically, as to a theological “tradition” which bears the weight of authority because of some intrinsic continuity it holds with apostolic truth. If the past deserved to be followed, it was only because the past had read the Scriptures, presented them in whole to the people, and practiced their formative powers in an ordered and effective manner. If Anglicanism has a take on “sanctity”, it lies in this discernment of formal historical providence.

Such an authority is hardly insignificant for Cranmer. The fact that Scriptural prayer has actually been enacted in the past is a gift from God to be seized in the present, and utilized through the continuous submission of the church to its best achievements. Thus, *antiquity* exercises authority in liturgical matters through the church’s present willingness to engage its continuous forms of faithfulness. (This view is articulated formally in Article 34 of the later Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion, “Of the Traditions of the Church”, one of the most useful summaries of a classic Anglican view of the relationship between Scripture and Tradition.) What Cranmer calls *order* essentially orients the

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church's common prayer towards the achieved examples of its past, and asserts an intrinsic conservatism in revision from the start. In theory, after all, *any* form of prayer that built up the people of the church in Scriptural knowledge and practice, would be acceptable as a liturgical framework for the Christian Church. In practice, however, the achievement of Scriptural upbuilding made accessible through continued forms of prayer actually demands embrace out of a humble trust in its reiteration.

In "Of Ceremonies" especially, the dependence of "order" on "antiquity's" achieved Scriptural formation is clearly spelled out: one is to revise only those rites that "confounde and darken" the clarity of Scriptural edification; but other than this, one "oughte rather to have reverence" for past ceremonies. Why? For "theyr antyquitye", whose reiteration, in contrast to all "innovacions and newefangelnesse", necessarily promotes "unitie and concorde". Cranmer uses the phrases "decent ordre" or "quyete dyscyplyne" repeatedly throughout these expositions of liturgical revision, and they refer to far more than the virtues and benefits of political submission within a hierarchical society. "Order" allows for the reception of the past's examples; and these examples grant the pragmatic leverage needed to fulfill the church's mandate to build up her people in Scriptural truth.

Informing all of Cranmer's commitment to the elements of scripture, antiquity, and order in liturgical life is the final purpose of "edification", a word whose cognates and semantic relatives run through the Preface and "Of Ceremonies". For some, this has seemed to mark out Cranmer's over-intellectualized Reformation culture, where "right doctrine" was made the key to salvation. Our own modern term "formation", however, gives a better hint at this purpose's meaning for Cranmer, and we can yet better grasp its fuller sense by perceiving the flow of imagery in something like Ephesians 4:12-16. Here we find a concatenation of words like "building up", "growing into", "maturing", "knowing", "believing together", "measure of fulness" all applied to the process by which the Church, through its mutually accountable life together in ministry and teaching, comes to resemble the image of Christ. A glance at Cranmer's homily on Scripture shows how he imbues the reading of Scripture in general with just these effective virtues. (Cf. the wonderful Collect, for Proper 28 in ECUSA's current Prayer Book, for an example of this essentially and salvifically "formative" understanding of Scripture.) Applied to the liturgical realm of priest and people conjoined, this power of reading and hearing the Word constitutes the central act of "divine service" or "liturgy" for Cranmer, an event whose formative and corporate shape is given in the received ordering of Scripture's public reiteration.

While there is no question, then, that Cranmer's reformation placed Scripture as the supreme "authority" for the Church, how this Scripture was to be received or heard was peculiar, especially in comparison with other well-known Reformation leaders. Cranmer is adamantly opposed to viewing Scripture primarily as a source of right doctrine, and therefore as the object of human reasoning and interpretation; rather it is to act as the practical "organizer of life" for the whole people, and its meaning is accessible only to the "virtuous" who submit to the corporate demands of the Church's (and nation's)

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“body”. His early “Preface to the Bible”, a defense of the 1540 vernacular translation promoted by Henry VIII, provides in this case a kind of hermeneutic mirror to his later Liturgical explications in the Prayer Book prefaces: the Bible is for “all people” as the sole trustworthy guide for their common “edification” for salvation; it provides for the “complete” ordering of life in “all things”, and Scriptural “abuse” is conversely tied to Scriptural applications that induce “disorder” within the Church and commonwealth; the right understanding of Scripture is given only for and to the formation of “pure morals”, and its distortion is most readily provoked through its subjection to the demands of “speculative reason”. The “purest” imposition of Scriptural “authority”, therefore, is an ordered process whereby the people are exposed to the “whole” Scriptures in a regular and socially interconnected way, such that the Bible’s content saturates their common hearing, and from this, their common life. In Cranmer’s terms, this would mark the fulfillment of the Holy Spirit’s particular vocation within the Church.

Outside these parameters of Scriptural practice, the “reformed” Cranmer exhibited an astonishing looseness of concern with the details of patristic testimony, dogmatic systems, and even the theological bases for ecclesiastical and sacramental forms. The latter – including the vaunted Anglican commitments to episcopacy and a particular shape to the “Holy Communion” – had “authoritative” value for a mixture of reasons (mostly social order and the efficacy of “edifying” exposition and historical experience) that only *indirectly* derived from Scripture. Indeed, Cranmer’s personal subordination of the actual form of the “historic episcopacy” to the needs of social policy is notorious, and when the late 17<sup>th</sup>-century bishop Gilbert Burnet published (for his own Whig purposes) until then unseen records demonstrating Cranmer’s willingness, under certain circumstances, even to jettison the episcopacy altogether, it caused a sensation.<sup>14</sup>

***4. “Scripture-in-Communion” as a conciliar reality: the evolution of the Anglican Communion***

This looseness, however, was not the same as voiding the notion of the “authoritative” itself. Rather, it tended to solidify its center within the corporate practices of the “Scriptural liturgy”, and enhance – “authoritatively”, in a secondary sense -- those elements of common life that supported, regularized, and protected these practices. And while Cranmer himself hardly constitutes the *fons sapientiae* of the Anglican tradition, the framework he bequeathed to the Church of England in fact remained fairly firm, and provided the basis for subsequent theological articulations of “authority” for the Church in just such a way that the 18<sup>th</sup>-century Religious Societies fell almost imperceptibly within their ordering reach.

What became a rather more pedestrian form of authoritative “standard” or formulary, viz. the Thirty-Nine Articles (whose demanded subscription by Anglican clergy has, around the world, been gradually relaxed or wholly abandoned), was in any case an

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<sup>14</sup>Cranmer’s remarks, recorded in the course of a royal Commission’s conversations, can be found in the volume of “Records and Original Papers” in Burnet’s *The History of the Reformation of the Church of England* (1714).

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outworking of this more basic authoritative ethos of “formative scripturalism”. Unlike most other Protestant “confessions”, the Articles adopt a simple and creedal narrative approach to the doctrine of God, ending with an exposition of the “sufficiency” of Scripture for the explication of the “faith”, and then moving on to a short list of controverted dogmatic questions (following a mild, though largely Protestant slant on these matters). The bulk of the remaining articles, however, are devoted to church order and social relations. These reflect a strong Augustinian ecclesiology, especially in their emphasis upon the realities of the *corpus permixtum* of the visible Body of Christ, and of the entailed demand for the virtues of corporate order within this historical object of tension between sin and grace.

To this degree, the Articles stand in complete coherence with the organs of formation and reception that Cranmer had so carefully outlined: a people corporately formed by the whole Scripture, whose doctrinal identity was to be circumscribed by protections against dogmatic interpretation and detail (generally thought to be Roman Catholic vices, and later attached to forms of Puritanism). And the Elizabethan Church which edited the original Articles from Cranmer’s hand did so with a quite deliberate view to founding Cranmer’s formative vision upon theological rationales, like Augustine’s, that explained “antiquity, order, and edification” in terms of the pressures exerted by the call to national evangelical reconciliation within the realm of fallen individual passions. Elizabeth’s Archbishop Whitgift, in particular, provided the theological tools for this argument in his defences of the Prayer Book and ministerial order of the Church of England against the growing Puritan movement.<sup>15</sup>

What came to be called “conformity” in this context was therefore far more than a political program, but a broad theological argument about the nature of the Christian Church’s authoritative witness within a “communion of the Scripturally-molded”, whose contours lay in the practices of a people’s common worship and order rather than in the definitions of an institution’s or an individual’s confession, and in the virtues of a person’s Scripturally-infused social relationships (“duties”) rather than in the dogmatic integrity of a person’s discourse. The paradox to which this later gave rise – that individual conscience is provided latitude precisely in its strict subjection to the boundaries of the ordered corporate hearing (and praying) of Scripture – is one that remains as puzzling to contemporary individualists as it did to 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup>-century dogmatists and to 18<sup>th</sup>-century pilgrims of the “sincere”.

It has been rightly recognized that this character of authority, as given Scripturally in “communion and conformity,” is a very “catholic” one, both in a Western and Eastern sense, and as opposed to many Protestant approaches. For it sees Scripture’s interpretation as finding its authoritative expression only as it is discerned and articulated within the unity of the Body of Christ, and enabled through the virtues of communion itself. And once this “catholic” element is recognized (as even many contemporary Anglican evangelicals are increasingly willing to admit), some of the contemporary and

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<sup>15</sup> I follow the splendid argument of Peter Lake in this. Cf. his *Anglicans and Puritans: Presbyterian and Conformist Thought from Whitgift to Hooker* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1988).

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popularly knotty arguments within Anglicanism itself over the authority of human “tradition” and “reason” are eased. Certainly, the 19th-century Tractarians (like Isaac Williams) who lifted the “three-fold cord” of “Scripture, Tradition, and Reason” to a new level of explanatory power understood Hooker, their primary source here, aright when they tied the latter two elements intrinsically to both Scripture’s popular reception and the community within which it is received. “Tradition” in this light is properly understood as the ordered way that Scripture is heard and “reason” is identified with the communal apprehension of the natural law coherent with Scripture.<sup>16</sup>

The thorough-going character of this Anglican reliance upon the formative expression of authority as “Scripture-in-Communion”, however, also makes its catholicism distinct from Roman and Eastern traditions precisely in its formal self-limitations. The late 17<sup>th</sup>- and early 18<sup>th</sup>-century “High Church” program, for instance, more and more identified ecclesial authority with the marks of the episcopacy, the structures of the Holy Communion, and the explicit contours of the Prayer Book. This identification proved a kind of overstatement of particulars in comparison with the “ethos” of Anglican authority that had, by contrast, generally granted primary weight to the communal virtues which these ecclesial elements *historically* deployed (*de facto* rather than *de jure divino*) for the sake both of fulfilling the formative power of Scripture and also embodying its truths in its true object (the Body of Christ). Notions of “primitive” authority like Beveridge’s, then, could reasonably be viewed – and many later Evangelicals did so view them – as a deforming exaggeration.<sup>17</sup>

Of all the treatments of this matter, I would commend the 17<sup>th</sup>-century theologian Herbert Thorndike’s nuanced understanding of the Church as probably constituting the furthest one can and ought to push the “catholic” character of Anglican authority.<sup>18</sup> Thorndike’s creative work as a pre-Restoration High Church Royalist proved, more than any other Anglican thinker’s, the most profound detailer of the commitments already laid in Cranmer’s era that viewed the Church as the historically effective (and historically

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<sup>16</sup> Williams, in his discussion of the “providential” character of the BCP in *Tract 86*, actually replaces “reason” in this triad with “the Sacraments”, a revealing move that implicitly ties forms of prayer with a collective wisdom, whose “nature” is divinely governed by providence. The 1981 “Elucidation” of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission’s Report on Authority tries valiantly (par. 2) to express this essential and hierarchical connection between Scripture and Tradition and Reason, constrained (oddly enough) by its inability to draw clearly the historical implications of its own *koinonia* ecclesiology for Scriptural authority.

<sup>17</sup> Although the dictum of the 17<sup>th</sup>-century Anglican apologist Chillingworth, to the effect that “the Bible and the Bible alone is the religion of Protestants” evoked the Tractarians’ ire, its application to Anglicanism is credible if it is understood within the context of the “formative communion” whose stable “catholic” structures are in fact demanded by Scripture’s purpose. Anglo-Catholic hostility towards liberal Protestantism was so great, however, that they latched onto the distortions of High Church primitivism without properly grasping the deeper Scriptural sources of its initial impetus.

<sup>18</sup> The key text is Book I of Part I of his *Epilogue to the Tragedy of the Church of England* (1659), reprinted in Vol. 2 of Thorndike’s *Theological Works* (Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1845). Long consigned to the limited lineage of Tractarian forbears, Thorndike has emerged more recently as a great synthesizer of Anglican theological concerns, on a par with Hooker and even his better in terms of systematic clarity and theoretical creativity.

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accountable and responsible) *culture* of Scriptural formation His masterful exposition of the nature of Christian authority within the reality of human history, wrung from the personal tragedy of Civil War and ecclesial self-destruction, was governed by a sensitivity to the weight of social history’s providential demands upon the Christian vocation. This acuity with regard to historical constraint, which included a sophisticated account of the cultural character of religious knowledge, is what, in turn, allowed him both to maintain the validation of “traditional forms” even while acknowledging their secondary status as servants to the Word’s destiny to give birth to and mature a “new people” in Christ Jesus.

It is not surprising that Thorndike proved the primary exponent of the so-called Vincentian Canon as the authoritative template of ecclesial self-exposition. This summary of the parameters for the Church’s discriminating test in controverted matters – *quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est* (“what has been believed everywhere, always, and by all”)<sup>19</sup> – was more expressive than constructive of a number of Anglican attitudes towards the authoritative constraints upon Scripture’s interpretative rule. It included appeals to the “Primitive” Church of the Fathers (later expressly of the “first four centuries”), the “apostolic deposit” of the “undivided Church”, the respect due to what was coherent with and sustaining of these elements including later Western standards of orthodox Scriptural and doctrinal exposition and liturgical practice, and finally the appeal to the corporate articulations of these various elements in historic ecclesial and catholic council. While Thorndike himself provided a sophisticated set of arguments for drawing together these already embedded Anglican sentiments under the Vincentian Canon’s ordering, he never claimed to be suggesting some new framework of authority, only to be identifying a healthy way of “being the Christian Church” that was already established in the Church’s historical nature. Later Tractarian theologians brought into relief the various elements noted above in explicit ways, and it could be argued that something like the famous “Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral” is itself but an ecumenically-oriented tool for articulating Thorndike’s basic point.

I mention Thorndike, furthermore, less because of his influence (which was slight) as because of the explanatory force of his ecclesiology for experienced Anglicanism, particularly as it took form in a context independent of the particular struggles of England, viz. the American colonies and the nascent United States. The odd theological amalgam that characterized the self-understanding of 18<sup>th</sup>-century Episcopalians<sup>20</sup> is matched only by the ease with which the founding conventions of the Episcopal Church could move from jettisoning creedal articles (and whole creeds themselves!) to restoring their full canonical force in ways that were to enhance their popular authority in comparison with the past.<sup>21</sup> The pragmatic demand was strong, of course, that the young

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<sup>19</sup> Defined by Vincent of Lérins in his *Commonitorium*, II.3.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. the recommended 1804 “reading list” and “library” for ordinands and clergy, which includes a pot-pourri of Restoration High Church writers, Revolutionary Latitudinarians, Patristic scholars and historians, Primitivists (of all stripes), Hutchinsonians, Protestant biblical commentators, and rationalists.

<sup>21</sup> The shape of the *Proposed Book of Common Prayer*, an emended version of 1662 English book edited by William White and William Smith, included the excision of the Athanasian and Nicene Creeds (for both moral and doctrinal reasons), the removal from the Apostles’ Creed of the article on Christ’s Descent into

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Church accede to the strictures of England’s hierarchy on these matters if it were to receive permission to have its own bishops’ consecrated in Britain. But there was more to the topsy-turvy swings back to “uniformity in Doctrine and Discipline” with the Church of England than the savvy politics of Latitudinarianism.

For what finally asserted itself through all the machinations of denominational self-construction in North America was the underlying drive to “conformity”, in the Anglican sense, that finally came to rest upon the undergirding character and shape of the Prayer Book’s “scriptural worship”. The rationalist master formulator and politician of the Episcopal Church’s origins William White (later a bishop from Philadelphia) was at first no great proponent of doctrinal standards nor of subservience to British ecclesial attitudes (though he later worked hard to reestablish a revised form of the Thirty-Nine Articles for PECUSA<sup>22</sup>). Nonetheless, his framing descriptions of Anglican Christianity in America were given in decidedly “conformist” tones: a church defined by the “ancient habits” and “stated ordinances” that render a church closest to the “form of the religion of the Scriptures”.<sup>23</sup> It was an explanatory vessel into whose hold the practices of the Prayer Book naturally fell, and the doctrinally minimalist face of corporate Scriptural formation was smoothly assumed by the life of the newly birthed Anglican “communion”.

The reality of this “communion” character, already intrinsic to the Church of England’s identification with Scripture’s social formation through conforming worship, took on a concrete political relief: the new Anglican church in America owed its being to and maintained its integrity through its dependence upon corporate accord with the British church, its hierarchy, and the forms of its communal prayer. What was to become the official ground to the “Anglican Communion” that the Lambeth Conferences would enunciate in the later 19<sup>th</sup>- and earlier 20<sup>th</sup>-centuries, was therefore actually enacted before the fact in the mechanisms by which the Episcopal Church was founded – adherence in “uniformity” to England’s “Doctrine and Discipline”, bound by a cohesive episcopate, embodied in a set form of “common prayer”, and open to national variation in matters “inessential” and non-“contradicting” of the “Word of God”, in accordance with the demands of local “civil constitutions”.<sup>24</sup>

In a way that far exceeded the Church of England’s own self-norming, ECUSA thereby adopted a “conciliar” approach to its self-formation, not merely through the structures of its representative “convention”, but more fundamentally through its accepted limitation

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Hell, reference to baptism as “regeneration” and to ministers as “priests”. All of these were restored *in toto* (except that Athanasian Creed) along with some new language regarding ordination vows, upon the objections of Canterbury (not to mention the clamorings of many American Anglicans).

<sup>22</sup> The Articles were indeed restored to the Prayer Book in 1801, edited with an eye mainly to the changed civil structures of America; their subscription, however, was never made mandatory by canon.

<sup>23</sup> From the opening Preface and closing chapter of *The case of the Episcopal Churches in the United States Considered* (1782), reprinted in Robert W. Prichard (ed.), *Readings from the History of the Episcopal Church* (Wilton[CT]: Morehouse-Barlow....), pp. 61 and 79.

<sup>24</sup> These matters, contained in Acts, Resolutions, and convention correspondence with the Archbishop of Canterbury, are detailed in the *Journals* of the first Conventions (ed. William Stevens Perry [Claremont, NH, 1874]).

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by “counsel” (and even permission) with another national church. As a result, no set of “formularies” in themselves, apart from Scripture, could hold legal explanatory force for the faith of ECUSA, and that Scripture’s authority came to bear only in coherence with the common practices and counsel of some “larger” Church.<sup>25</sup> The Church of England can rely upon a canonically established pattern of appeal to certain doctrinal authorities<sup>26</sup>, and the British and American Methodists have even more explicit standards which, among other things, tie Scriptural interpretation directly to Wesley’s own commentary. ECUSA’s only “legal” explicated parameters are found in the “Preamble” to its Constitution and focus, by contrast, less on documented standards, than on the church’s “constituent” membership in the larger Church, both “one, holy, apostolic, and catholic” and defined by the “communion” of other Anglican churches.

The search for documented definitions of these standards, however, has stymied many. The only reference to the “Book of Common Prayer” in this constitutional context is apparently to a generic version ideally shared within the Communion itself, and only insofar as it enunciates something called the “historic Faith and Order”. The “vows” of the ordained in ECUSA require a written affirmation that Scripture is to be identified with “the Word of God”, that it “contains all things necessary for salvation”, and that the ordinand will “conform to the doctrine, discipline, and worship of the Episcopal Church”. What exactly explicates these elements is left unclear, especially when (as in the case of the consecration of bishops) the “guarding of the faith, unity, and discipline of the Church” is something stated in a context in which “the Church” itself seems to be equated with an entity “throughout the world” whose “heritage” far exceeds ECUSA’s own canonical structures.<sup>27</sup>

It is also sociologically odd that, within the self-conscious denominational pluralism of America, ECUSA did not respond to the normal pressures of sectarian exactitude by clarifying its internal standards, but continued instead to exist within a system whose coherence still presupposed the corporate force of normative “conformity” tied to the culture of an alien politics. Furthermore, as the Anglican Communion has evolved, numerically exploding in membership after the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Anglican self-identity has drifted in this same direction as ECUSA’s foundational conciliarism. As the Lambeth Conferences progressively outlined the basis for admission to the Communion, the standards of the formularies were gradually allowed to fall away as necessary conditions (already, the Articles were dropped at Lambeth 1888), leaving in their place something like ECUSA’s dependence upon “Prayer Book” testimony to “historic faith

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<sup>25</sup> Leaving aside the presenting issue of blessing same-sex unions, the recent “Open Opinion on the Authority of General Convention”, written by C. Seitz, P. Turner, R. R. Reno, and P. Zahl, convincingly outlines the nature of the “conciliar economy” that the Episcopal Church adopted through both the process of its formative establishment and the open-endedness of its adjudicating responsibilities within the larger Church. The paper can be accessed on the internet at [www.seadinternational.com](http://www.seadinternational.com).

<sup>26</sup> Cf. the Anglican-Methodist Covenant, paragraphs 104f.. Even here, however, the canons refer to Creeds and “councils” and the “teaching of the Fathers” only insofar as they “agreeable to the Scriptures”, a traditionally loose order of appeal. The “formularies” of the Prayer Book and Ordinal, however, are explicitly noted.

<sup>27</sup> See the 1979 BCP, pp. 513 and 517f..

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and order”, which is practically embodied and adjudicated in episcopal conciliarism (the latter of which was formally articulated finally at Lambeth 1988).

From one perspective one can see this evolution as part of the consistent Anglican refusal to erect as legislatively normative anything beyond a formative Scripturalism whose framework remains grounded in the somewhat fluid reality of conciliar consensus, still embodied primarily in episcopal collegiality. And to this degree, the Communion’s own life can be understood as a continued (if often unintentional) groping after something like Thorndike’s Vincentian Canon. But from another perspective, there is a growing awareness that perhaps the present circumstances of both local and global social fragmentation cannot support either the time or even the theological presuppositions required for this groping. Confusion over Prayer Book revision within various national churches, widening disagreements over the place and even value of normative Scriptural applications among and within various national churches, and the political dynamics that are more and more pitting local and wider conciliar accountabilities against each other are all rendering the very practice of formative corporate Scripturalism something pragmatically and conceptually incoherent for many Anglicans.

Anglican ecumenical discussions, then, take place within an arena of dispute over authority itself – between a historically tethered apprehension of the conciliar authority of “scripture-in-communion”, on the one hand, and the increased contemporary reliance upon various juridical authorities on the other. This latter reliance is perhaps reactive to a sense of despair over the decreased effectiveness of the former. I believe that any ecumenical agreement must be seen in terms of choices made regarding these two perspectives, and they will take the form of commitments to their practical outcomes. Both the theological explorations and rationales, but also the structural proposals of such agreements will necessarily represent potentially divergent movements in relation to Anglicanism’s future. To this extent our conversations now represent not some mere expression of “who we are”, but will demand a resolution of that reality posed as an interrogative: who shall we become?