The Sources and Structures of Authority in the Church

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An Anglican paper for the second Anglican/Oriental Orthodox Forum at the Monastery of St. Bishoy, Wadi El Natrun, near Cairo, Egypt, March 12-18, 1990.

OVER THE PAST SEVERAL centuries of the history of Christianity in the West, there have been three major Christian answers to the question of "authority," all of which have had some following within the Anglican tradition as it has sought the proper and appropriate source in which Christian authority may be grounded. The first approach has been to locate authority within the Holy Scripture, as if the truth contained therein were univocally obvious to anyone who reads it. A second approach has been to find the source of authority within the individual testimony of the Holy Spirit as perceived by each true believer in prayer, who is in this way supposedly enabled by private guidance to distinguish among contradictory interpretations. And a third approach has resorted to the calm certainty afforded by the institutional church, which is thought by those who follow it to offer a collective wisdom that is presumably more objective.

Variations on each of these approaches have been numerous, and the one most commonly cited as "Anglican" is most frequently labeled by the triad of scripture, tradition, and reason. The major discussion of authority in the reports to the Lambeth Conference of 1988 is based on it (pp. 99-105). In the Anglican use of this triad, holy scripture is generally understood as the fundamental source of Christian revelation, the new testament complementing and completing the old, then tradition as the gradual unfolding of the scriptural truth throughout the pages of history, and finally reason (including experience) as the most satisfactory way in which the former two sources can be appropriately evaluated and measured. And yet Anglicans would be reluctant to rely upon any one of these three sources by itself, for scripture alone, devoid of the collective and developing interpretation of the church, might result in an individualistic and unhistorical fundamentalism; while tradition by itself could easily result in an uncritical conservatism and reason on its own can end in the sheer rationalism of private judgment. Nonetheless, even if this triad as such cannot be proven to have originated with the great Anglican

divine Richard Hooker (the evidence for it in St. Thomas Aquinas is every bit as clear and convincing), it does have the advantage of attempting to combine, in a way, all three of the approaches to the problem cited in the first paragraph above, locating the individual testimony of the Holy Spirit in reason and the collective wisdom of the church in tradition.[1]

Of course, this triad still does not solve the problem of contradictory interpretations, and it assumes that the one truth will always emerge from the differing conclusions of scholarly enquiry—which is often not the case, no matter how much authority Anglicans may accord to rigorous scholarship that they believe will become self-authenticating. Moreover, this triad does not provide a *magisterium* that can deal with the complexity of doctrinal development, and for this reason in Western church history it is sometimes contrasted with what is claimed to be the more typically Roman Catholic triad of scripture, tradition, and authority (replacing reason), the last term being understood as the papacy itself in both its primatial and infallible roles. Sometimes this contrast is even colloquially caricatured by the assertion that to Roman Catholics it seems Anglicans can believe anything they like and that to Anglicans it seems Roman Catholics are not allowed to think! Thus, when asked for an authoritative answer to a direct question of religious belief the Anglican may reply that the Bible says so-and-so, Christian theologians in various periods of history have said such-and-such, and now he or she has reached a conclusion by the application of reason to the foregoing data; whereas the typical Roman Catholic may be more likely to reply that the church teaches authoritatively only one answer, or that the pope of Rome has spoken and settled the matter. Caricatures, of course, have only a limited purpose, but this one does at least point towards the difficulties about authority that are experienced differently by Anglicans and by their larger sister church in the West, the Roman Catholic Church. Speaking generally, it may be said that Anglicans and Roman Catholics reached a limited agreement about authority in the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission's Final Report (1982), even on the principle of some sort of constitutionally limited papal primacy, but not on the question of papal infallibility. And the official Roman Catholic response

[1] See the essays on Scripture, Tradition, and Reason in *The Study of Anglicanism*, ed. Stephen Sykes and John Booty (SPCK, London; Fortress, Philadelphia, 1988), pp. 79-117; as well as Paul Avis, *Anglicanism and the Christian Church* (T & T Clark, Edinburgh, 1989), chapter 17.

to the measure of agreement that was reached is still, at the time of this present writing, still awaited from the Vatican.[2]

Still another way in which Anglicans often express their understanding of the sources of authority is by the so-called Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral, a statement of the authoritative basis upon which since 1886-1888 the Anglican Communion has been willing to enter conversations about unity with other churches. Originating in a book, *The Church-Idea*, published in 1870 by William Reed Huntington, an Anglican priest of the Episcopal Church in the USA, then endorsed in slightly different form by the House of Bishops of the Episcopal Church at its Chicago meeting of 1886, then canonized in a slightly different form by the bishops of the Anglican Communion meeting at the Lambeth Conference of 1888, and considered as binding for the Episcopal Church in the USA since its General Convention of 1895, the Quadrilateral is founded upon these four points:

> '{1} The Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, as "containing all things necessary to salvation," and as being the rule and ultimate standard of faith.
> '{2} The Apostles' Creed, as the Baptismal Symbol; and the Nicene Creed, as the sufficient statement of the Christian faith.
> '{3} The two Sacraments ordained by Christ Himself—Baptism and the Supper of the Lord—ministered with unfailing use of Christ's words of Institution, and of the elements ordained by Him.
> '{4} The Historic Episcopate, locally adapted in the methods of its administration to the varying needs of the nations and peoples called of God into the Unity of His Church.'

Far from being only a device of authority constructed in the later nineteenth century, it is important to note that the roots of this "quadrilateral" are found in the so-called "catholic institutions" that many later historians have discerned to be developing sources of authority in the early Christian church as it sought to preserve its unity and define its identity over against the spread of Gnosticism. For the purpose of this brief survey, we may say that the Gnostic movement of the second and third centuries A.D. taught that salvation is *from* the world by means of knowledge that is secret and self-centered, rather than *of* the world, from sin, by means of faith. Against this movement, such early Christian writers as Justin Martyr, Tertullian, Hippolytus, and especially Irenaeus of Lyons developed a Christian "orthodoxy" that centered for the most part

[2] In general see J. Robert Wright, "An Anglican Comment on Papal Authority in the Light of Recent Developments," in *Authority in the Anglican Communion*, ed. Stephen W. Sykes (Anglican Book Centre, Toronto, 1987), pp. 236-263.

around four points that happen to be quite similar to those of the Quadrilateral: 1) Scriptures. Against the Gnostic view of a lesser or different God at work in the Old Testament, Irenaeus and others asserted the continuity of salvation history as seen in the unity of the scriptural canon, or list of approved books, whereby they asserted that creation in the Old Testament and redemption in the New Testament are both the work of the same one God, who summed up all things in Christ. 2) Creeds. The doctrine which the apostles taught and which their successors still openly teach, these early Christian writers asserted, is uniform throughout the whole Christian world, congruent both with Scripture and with the "Rule of Faith," an embryonic sort of creed that is found in some of their writings. 3) Sacraments. Against the Gnostic view that matter was inherently evil, they affirmed the essential goodness of the material creation, developing a sacramental view of the universe that affirmed a connection of the outward and inward, of material and spiritual: just as Christ was baptized and turned water into wine and loaves into bread for the multitude, so water is used for baptism and in the Eucharist the cup of the vine taken from material creation becomes his own Blood and the bread of creation his Body. 4) Ministry of Historic Episcopate. Against the Gnostic understanding of knowledge as secret and known only to a few, they appealed to the existence of a succession of office-holders in churches of apostolic foundation, openly teaching the same catholic doctrine that the apostles had entrusted to their successors in the principal episcopal sees. Thus the four points of the Quadrilateral ground the Anglican sources of authority deep in the patristic period. Even so, though, they are regarded by Anglicans today as merely a *terminus a quo* for unity discussions with other churches, although that are at times misunderstood as being a *terminus ad quem*. There have also been many attempts at various levels, both official and unofficial, to re-formulate one or more of these four points, the last point being always the most controversial.[3]

A particular document that has been highly authoritative for Anglicans in past centuries but is less so today, and yet is frequently discussed in Anglican ecumenical dialogues with the Eastern Orthodox churches, is the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion (1563-71). For well over 300 years since the time of the Reformation there was little question about the authoritative status that these Articles held for Anglicans as the official standard of doctrine for both clergy and laity. An act of the English Parliament under Queen Elizabeth I in 1571 provided by statute law,

[3] J. Robert Wright, "Heritage and Vision: The Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral," in *Quadrilateral at One Hundred*, ed. J. Robert Wright (Cincinnati, Forward Movement Publications; London and Oxford, Mowbray, 1988), pp. vi-ix, 8-46.

which was reinforced by supplementary act of Convocation, that for the future the Thirty-Nine Articles were to be 'subscribed' by all candidates for ordination as well as by any person admitted to any church benefice having cure of souls. The form of subscription to these Articles was set in 1584 and in 1604 and with only minor variants was retained until 1865 when a less stringent declaration of 'assent' was approved by the Convocations of the Church of England and confirmed under royal letters patent. More recent alteration has weakened considerably even this 'assent,' but most (though not all) churches of the Anglican Communion still retain the Articles in their constitutions and many of them still require some form of ministerial assent or subscription either explicit or implicit. (As of 1968, the only provinces of the Anglican Communion that had actually revised the Articles were in New Zealand and the USA.) The ancient universities of Oxford and Cambridge, moreover, as bodies of ecclesiastical foundation, also required subscription to them of all members well into the nineteenth century. Thus for some three centuries, from the later sixteenth to at least the later nineteenth, the Thirty-Nine Articles defined the authorized doctrinal standard for the Church of England and implicitly for much of the rest of the Anglican Communion, even though there were recurring disputes about their correct interpretation. Today, however, their authoritative status is much more problematic.[4]

One other Anglican statement about authority that has caught the attention of, and has been given a place of prominence by, some Anglican theologians over the last ten to fifteen years is a portion of one of the reports prepared for the Lambeth Conference of 1948. It states that for Anglicans authority is derived from a single Divine source, but is "distributed among Scripture, Tradition, Creeds, the Ministry of the Word and Sacraments, the witness of saints, and the *consensus fidelium*, which is the continuing experience of the Holy Spirit through His faithful people in the Church. It is thus a dispersed rather than a centralized authority having many elements which combine, interact with, and check each other." Continuing its explication, the report states that the Christian religious experience is "*described* in Scripture, ... *defined* in Creeds and in continuous theological study, ... *mediated* in the Ministry of the Word and Sacraments, ... (and) *verified* in the witness of saints and in the *consensus fidelium*." Although never endorsed by resolution of the 1948 or any subsequent Lambeth Conference, this report is nonetheless useful in that it can provide the transition from our consideration of the sources of

[4] J. Robert Wright, "The Authority of Chalcedon for Anglicans," in *Christian Authority*, ed. G.R. Evans (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1988), pp. 233-234.

authority for Anglicans to an examination of its structures. Some of the elements described by the report are more properly described as sources, others as structures, although all of them are described as "distributed" and "dispersed." This report has at times been hailed as the origin of the phrase 'dispersed authority' as a characteristic of Anglicanism, although it may be wondered whether in Anglicanism either the sources of authority or the structures for the exercise of authority are really any more 'dispersed' than they are in other churches.[5]

At the international or worldwide level, however, none of the principal structures of authority by which the Anglican Communion "works" are mentioned in the 1948 report: the Lambeth Conference of Bishops, the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Anglican Consultative Council, and the Meeting of Primates (all which are noted in the corresponding report to the 1988 conference, p. 110 ff). The Lambeth Conferences are international meetings of most Anglican bishops from around the world that have been held about every ten years, since 1867, at the Archbishop of Canterbury's London palace called Lambeth. The resolutions of Lambeth Conferences carry the authority of the bishops who voted for them; the reports to the Lambeth Conferences no more than the authority of the committees who prepared and submitted them. But although the authority of the Lambeth Conference, even of its resolutions, within particular church provinces of the Anglican Communion is only consultative and advisory, having no legislative force until and unless particular resolutions or resports are endorsed by individual national or regional churches, the Lambeth documents do carry great weight in themselves and at leaast the Lambeth resolutions are regarded by Anglicans as having an authority which is highly normative. [I have shown elsewhere that the study of these Lambeth resolutions and reports demonstrates, with what authority they have, the long history of friendly Anglican relations with the Oriental Orthodox churches, as well as a considerable and progressive growth in theological understanding and a doctrinal convergence especially in Christology.][6]

That the Lambeth Conferences, and indeed the entire Anglican Communion, would have no centralized government at all and no internationally binding authority, was not a foregone conclusion, however,

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[5] Stephen W. Sykes in *Authority in the Anglican Communion*, op. cit., pp. 12-13, 284-286; J. Robert Wright in ibid., pp. 242-243; John M. Flynn, "Authority in Anglicanism," in *Consensus: A Canadian Lutheran Journal of Theology* 12:1 & 2 (1986), pp. 19-29; J. Robert Wright, "The Authority of Lambeth Conferences 1867-1988" in *Anglican and Episcopal History* 58:3 (1989), pp. 287-289.

[6] Wright, "The Authority of Chalcedon for Anglicans," op. cit., pp. 239-246.

at the meeting of the first Lambeth Conference in 1867, and indeed that Conference in its resolution number 4 voted that "Unity in Faith and Discipline will be best maintained among the several branches of the Anglican Communion by due and canonical subordination of the Synods of the several branches to the higher authority of a Synod or Synods above them." This position, or at least the possibility of a "central Council of Reference, to which recourse may be had for advice on questions of doctrine and discipline by the tribunals of the various Provinces of the Anglican Communion," appeared again, with commendation, at the Lambeth Conferences of 1888, 1897, and 1908, but the tide turned in 1920 and by the time of the conference of 1930 it was determined (in resolution number 49) that the Anglican Communion is "bound together not by a central legislative and executive authority, but by mutual loyalty sustained through the common counsel of the Bishops in conference." The 1930 Lambeth committee report even held that the Anglican principle of ecclesiastical organization is "that of regional autonomy within one fellowship," and this position was upheld in the report to the 1948 conference already mentioned.[7] The latter document, already discussed above as the origin of the phrase 'dispersed authority,' did however begin by asking a question: 'Is Anglicanism based on a sufficiently coherent form of authority to form the nucleus of a world-wide fellowship of Churches, or does its comprehensiveness conceal internal divisions which may cause its disruption?"[8]

The present Archbishop of Canterbury at the Lambeth Conference of 1988 endorsed the principle that has been consistently held at least since 1930, stating "The Anglican Communion has always resisted the idea of a pan-Anglican synod." He also spoke against giving any enhanced role to himself, although in a general way it may be said (and was said in a report to the 1988 conference, p. 110) that "Historically [for Anglicans] the Archbishop of Canterbury has been the personal focus of unity and communion at the universal level. ... Being in communion with the See and Archbishop of Canterbury has been a visible sign of the membership of bishops and of their Churches in the Anglican Communion. The Archbishop of Canterbury's task has been described as involving 'in a particular way, that care of all the Churches which is shared by all the bishops,' and also as a task 'not to command, but to gather' the Communion. Clearly, the emphasis is upon service and caring and not upon coercive power." To the foregoing description of the Archbishop's

[7] Wright, "The Authority of Lambeth Conferences," op. cit., p. 280.
[8] Text in *Authority in the Anglican Communion*, ed. Sykes, p. 284.

authority, it may be added that internationally in the Anglican Communion he does have certain powers to appoint and to convene.

In addition to the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Lambeth Conference, the other two international Anglican structures of authority described by the 1988 Lambeth report (p. 111) as "ways by which the autonomous Provinces of the Anglican Communion express their unity and communion and live out their interdependence today," are the Anglican Consultative Council and the Meetings of Primates. The former of these, known as the ACC, in the words of the same 1988 report "was instituted by the agreement of the Provinces on the recommendation of Lambeth 1968. In one sense it is less representative than the Lambeth Conference, where every diocese is represented by its Bishop. The inclusion of lay women and lay men, and of clergy other than bishops, however, gives it a dimension of wider representation. Its greater frequency of meeting gives it more continuity of life and thought. Its role and relationship with other organs of the Communion are still in the process of being worked out."

The latter of these institutional structures of authority, the Meetings of Primates, can again best be described in the words of the 1988 report: "The calling of regular Primates' Meetings was endorsed by Lambeth 1978. This reflected the need for a more effective means of exercising episcopal collegiality through the consultations of the Primates. These meetings, at regular intervals, are a 'meeting of minds' through which individual provincial and international concerns can be tested by collective discussions between acknowledged leaders who will attempt to reach a common mind. The Primates' Meeting has already shown itself to be a flexible instrument of consultation: for example, in dealing with practical questions about authority and the possibility of the consecration of women as bishops in some Provinces."[9] This last point, I now gather, is a subject not to be addressed directly in this paper, but I am sure it will be discussed in the context of the sources and structures of authority that relate to it and particularly in view of the principle of "regional autonomy" that was endorsed in the 1930 Lambeth report and subsequently—which is the very basis upon which some Anglican provinces have proceeded to ordain women while others have not.

Beneath the international structures of Anglicanism, however, at the national and regional levels, the patterns of authority are generally more binding but also more diverse. There are some twenty-eight

[9] *The Truth Shall Make You Free. The Lambeth Conference 1988. The Reports, Resolutions & Pastoral Letters from the Bishops* (London, Anglican Consultative Council, 1988), Report on Dogmatic and Pastoral Concerns, pp. 79-122.

self-governing church provinces for perhaps 60-70 million members distributed through approximately one hundred and sixty-four countries, and it is virtually impossible to offer any further generalizations that will be meaningful in a paper of this brevity. No doubt individual Anglicans will wish to contribute comments on the synodical and consultative structures that operate in their own parts of the Anglican Communion.

The only final comment about authority that may perhaps be ventured is that all of these Anglican church provinces do worship from something called a Book of Common Prayer, of which there are many different species that are traceable to some extent back to the English Prayer Books of 1662 and 1549, and that in some final sense doctrinal authority for Anglicans is largely, although not entirely, derived from the tradition of worship. *Legem credendi lex statuat supplicandi*, or *lex orandi lex credendi*, we would tend to say with St. Prosper of Aquitaine from the fifth century. Challenged recently by the modern Western liturgical movement that has continually widened the scope and content of Anglican unity by producing in the middle and later twentieth century many new Books of Common Prayer for different countries and regions that are increasingly different from one another,[10] authority for Anglicans may nonetheless be said in one sense to find expression in a spirituality that comes from the tradition of this Book in the form authorized for use in each province. Deviations from it or supplements to it are occasionally tolerated in local situations for a limited period of time, but generally we would say that in a basic sense the Book of Common Prayer is authoritative not only for our worship but also for our doctrine and our common life. The sources and structures of authority for Anglicans, therefore, are in the end productive of a spirituality that somehow permeates and unifies the life that Anglicans share in the Body of Christ.

[10] See Arthur A. Vogel, "Authority: The Challenge to Anglicanism," in *Anglican Theological Review* 72:1 (1990), pp. 8-15.