

# CHRISTIAN LIFE AND FAITH: PART V

## MORAL DECISION MAKING

### OUTLINE

#### **I. Introduction**

*Religion draws humanity into closer relationship with the Divine. As humanity grows in understanding of God, the ways of God become more comprehensible, and human behavior accepts these ways as standards. We call such shaping standards religion's morals. In this section we will examine moral decision-making in the Anglican and Episcopal tradition.*

#### **II. Illumination**

- A. Richard Hooker's The Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity
- B. Scripture as the primary source
- C. Importance of reading in community
- D. The importance of tradition
- E. "Enlightened reason"

#### **III. Reflection—Using "A Theological Reflection Method"**

- A. Step I: Identifying clearly the subject for reflection
- B. Step II: Engaging the light of Scripture
- C. Step III: Engaging the light of Tradition
- D. Step IV: Engaging the light of prayer for discernment
- E. Step V: Living our theology in public life

## CHRISTIAN FAITH AND LIFE: PART V

### MORAL DECISION MAKING

#### I. Gathering

##### Hymn

- God who stretched the spangled heavens, *The Hymnal 1982* #580

##### Collect of the Day

Direct us, O Lord, in all our doings with thy most gracious favor, and further us with thy continual help; that in all our works begun, continued, and ended in thee, we may glorify thy holy Name, and finally, by thy mercy, obtain everlasting life; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

#### II. Illumination

The influence of Richard Hooker looms large in moral decision making within the Anglican Communion. Common reference is made to Richard Hooker's "three-legged Stool" of Scripture, tradition, and reason as the sources for moral decision-making.

Hooker referenced these three sources of authority in his formative book, *The Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*. As some people have properly pointed out, nowhere does Hooker use the metaphor of the three-legged stool with respect to the relation between these elements of moral decision-making.

If, however, we do not have a ready metaphor to describe the interrelationships between Scripture, tradition, and reason, we must search for some model that effectively represents the reality, and in order to be of the most help to the individuals and communities seeking to make moral decisions within the Anglican Church, we must try to describe a process that would utilize these three sources of moral authority.

A. Scripture is the primary source, but not the sole source, in moral reasoning. The use of Scripture in moral reasoning asks that the reading of scripture be continuous, that is, that the reader is immersed in the scripture as part of daily life. Thus, moral reasoning is broadly and deeply informed by Scripture, and does not fall prey to contextualized interpretations.

B. It is also desirable that Scripture be read in community. Anglican decision making, including moral reasoning, is conciliar in shape. Additionally, the Anglican Church maintains the hopes of the early Reformers, such as Erasmus, that each Christian would have available in her own language the Scriptures to inform daily life. The availability of the scriptures in vernacular languages is a gift that was won by great effort and sacrifice; we of the current generation might respond to that gift by continued reading of scripture in community.

C. As part of the catholic Church, Anglicans understand the important role of tradition in moral reasoning. We recognize that the very Canon of the Bible is a product of the Church. The use of the Church's tradition in moral reasoning draws upon the idea of the Communion of Saints. As we read the history of the Church, we are looking not for pieces of literature that may sustain positions we have already chosen, but for understanding of sustained thought, embedded in the concrete lives of people who existed within a geography, a culture, a family, undoubtedly different from our own in any number of striking ways. Coming to understand these differences allows us to enter into a kind of relationship with those who came before us, and to be informed by them in our moral reasoning.

D. Our greatest effort is needed in understanding and using the kind of reasoning to which Richard Hooker referred in The Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity. This is because scientific reasoning divorced from spiritual practice and understanding was nascent in Hooker's time, and ascendant, even universal, in ours. To help in this effort, it might be best to call Hooker's reason "enlightened reason." Though Hooker does not use the term, it is clear that he is continuing the thought of the Scholastics, who refer back to Augustine and Jerome on human nature. The Scholastics held that the Imago Dei was never fully erased from human nature by the effects of Original Sin, only marred. This divine spark in human nature was called "synderesis." Its presence in human nature enables humanity to recognize the presence of God, including the presence of God in the teachings of God, what we commonly call God's laws. We recognize these laws to be good because there is that within us of God, which is akin to these laws themselves, in that they and we have a common origin in God the Creator.

E. How might we integrate our reading of scripture, our understanding of Church tradition, and the understandings of enlightened reason to make moral decisions? One good approach is the theological reflection method used by the House of Bishops, a method practiced within community.

### **III. Reflection—Using “A Theological Reflection Method”**

This exercise is an instrument with which groups can engage in critical thinking and theological reflection by holding up a particular issue or question into the light of God's life. Holy Scripture and the Tradition of the Christian faith serve both as sources and as lenses through which to discern the mind of Christ about our issues or questions. Seeing issues and questions in this way brings us to understand them more directly in terms of God's knowing and loving—that is, to catch a glimpse of how we think God understands them. This can be a gift of wisdom for the whole Church.

In the steps that follow, the word “subject” refers to the theological issue, question, or theme that has been selected for reflection.

#### **STEP I: Identifying clearly the subject for reflection**

1. In your groups, identify clearly the question, issue, or theme to be examined.
2. Articulate the subject and any sub-questions or issues in the most precise language that you can.

#### **STEP II: Engaging the light of Scripture**

1. As a group, begin by drawing on your reading of the Bible to set the subject in two or three biblical contexts. Think of scriptural passages that could become a lens for seeing the subject. Some may be directly related to the subject, but others may offer a fruitful metaphor or analogy.
2. As you talk over possible biblical frameworks, settle on one or two that seem most illuminating.
  - What do these help you notice about the subject?
  - Do the passages clarify or modify your usual ways of thought?
  - What does God seem to be saying to you in each passage?
  - How has the Tradition understood or used these passages?

### **STEP III: Engaging the light of the Tradition**

In light of the biblical contexts explored in Step II,

1. What doctrines come to mind around the subject (for example: the Trinity, creation, grace, etc.)? What theologians or theological works come to mind?
2. What is the teaching or doctrine of the Church on the subject and how has it developed? What is your understanding of these doctrines or teachings?
3. What Christian doctrine(s) or teaching(s) seem most illuminating for your thinking?
4. Among the doctrinal lenses that your group identifies, settle on the one or two that seem best for viewing the subject at hand.
5. Now let the doctrines begin to shed light on the subject.
  - What new aspects of the subject do you notice?
  - How might the theology of this doctrine re-shape your own thinking? More general popular thinking?
  - What effect do these new aspects have on your understanding?
  - How do you now see the subject in relation to God?

### **STEP IV: Engaging the light of prayer for discernment**

This step begins with each member working individually and then returning to the small group. Having prepared your minds through the reflections of the previous steps you are invited to draw your theological work more immediately into prayer.

1. First, take at least ten minutes to do something pleasant and peaceful go for a walk, gaze at a tree, read a poem or look at a painting.
2. Now find a quiet place where you will not be disturbed and give yourself 15-20 minutes of silence in the presence of God. Do not read over any notes you have made. Simply hold your theological exercise before God and ask for divine companionship and wisdom in your work. Wait peacefully and patiently, without any sense of urgency or anxiety. Allow God to be present with you, and allow yourself to be present to God. Listen with the ears of your heart.
3. Bring your focused time with God to a close and return to your group. Reflecting on the following questions, each person is asked to say what new sense of the subject may have begun to emerge from the contemplative period:

*Give each person time to speak. Hold your responses and comments until all have spoken.*

- Are there fresh insights? Are there newly perceived restraints for theology or for our *praxis*?
- Pay particular attention to any sense of divine generosity or invitation.
- Where in your reflections about the subject do you sense a possibility of deeper freedom or joy?
- Are there any additional biblical or doctrinal contexts you would like to explore now?
- Is there any sense of being invited to ask new questions?
- How does God seem to be present to you now in relation to the subject?

## **STEP V: Living our Theology in Public Life**

Continuing our work as a group, the focus now shifts to thinking about the public aspect of theology, Episcopal ministry, and the ministry of the Church.

1. How do Scripture and your theological reflection and prayer help you think about the subject in terms of public life (life in the world, your community, your diocese)? How is the subject related to important issues of our day?
2. If you take seriously Scripture and the beliefs, teachings, and doctrines discussed as you go to work, school, a rock concert, sports event, or the movies, where would they come to play? How might they conflict with the operative values, habits, goals, or behaviors of daily life?
3. What new opportunities, constraints, and practices arise from your (new) theological insights or vantage points.?
4. How does this critical thinking and theological reflection inform and shape your ministry? How does it shape our work together, to bring forth and nurture the life of the Church?

**NOTE:** *See Appendix #5 for further reflection on prayer*