

The Catholic and Protestant Roots of Anglicanism

Saint Barnabas's Church, Falmouth MA

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Class #13: Cooperating/Competing Authority—Scripture, Tradition, Reason, Experience

1. Anglican theology embraces human moral autonomy in our quest to discern divine love and direction for our lives
 - a. Our tradition focuses on scripture, tradition and reason as moral guides
 - b. Richard Hooker (1553 – 1600) revisited
 - i. Scripture teaches fundamental duties, but does not govern whole lives of societies
 - ii. Possession of Scripture does not free us from arduous use of reason in moral and political realms
 - iii. Scripture presupposes—rather than replaces—natural and rational laws
 - iv. Even Christ exercised his reason in argument
 - v. Humanity naturally seeks its perfection: sensual, intellectual, spiritual
 - vi. Scripture remains authoritative but requires human interpretation
 - c. Tradition provides the long view of Christian wisdom and scriptural interpretation
 - i. Trust leaders and councils of Church to develop doctrine and discern flaws in earlier ways of understanding
 - d. Reason is a divine gift that rejects the presumption of natural alienation of the individual from God
 - i. Enlightenment world view: rather than being intimately involved with the creation, God left humanity on its own to be guided in its affairs by reason
 - ii. Reason is capable of knowing God's will: no need for external, divine revelation
 - iii. Reason is capable of probing Scripture without need for divine revelation

2. Pietism and Romanticism reflect receptivity to human feeling/experience as authoritative
 - a. Methodism: intense patterns of holy living include ascetical rigor, and introspection
 - i. Emphasis on preaching for conversion of the heart > doctrinal purity
 - ii. Emphasis on scriptural study and small-group nurturing of faith
 - iii. Wesley places intense emphasis on personal piety and human perfection
 - iv. Infinite may be known through human feeling and imagination
 - v. Personal subjectivity/inward individuality: mirror of divinity or transference?
 - b. Tensions between traditional Protestant orthodoxy and Pietism's subjective moral fervor—each with a critical appeal to Scripture—clash in the nineteenth-century American slave debate
 - c. Kingdom of God and nature of Christ no longer are supernatural but subject to human investigation via biblical scholarship
 - d. Human reason and exploration trumps external divine revelation as source of knowledge and moral authority
 - e. Yet human subjectivity can lead us astray and reflect anthropology > theology

1. By the latter 19th century, Anglican theology embraces two major, competing world views:
 - a. Modern critical awareness of Enlightenment—Latitudinarian or Broad Church
 - i. Use of rational tools to open biblical texts and cast off barriers
 - ii. Critique of superstitious claims in order to liberate the Word of God
 - iii. Employ biblical claims to subvert dominate political agendas (prophetic)
 - iv. Embracing modern critical tools to unlock God's Word
 - v. Jesus transitions from cosmic savior to moral leader
 - b. Inherited Augustinian worldview of Western Church—Evangelical and Orthodoxy
 - i. God reveals God's self according to God's plan, not ours
 - ii. God's revelation is not captive to human manipulation and idolatry

2. Karl Barth (1886-1968) is Swiss Protestant theologian trained in dominant liberal theology of his day, but who later critiques it in movement known as neo-Orthodoxy
 - a. Becomes disenchanted by what he sees as Church's suspending Gospel truth for German war theology
 - b. Rejects "religion"—human musing/speculation—for freedom of God's claiming Word
 - i. Religion = way we position ourselves with regard to what we take to be most important—may or may not conform to God's will
 - ii. Religion invariably is humano-centric, not theo-centric

1. Augustinian neo-Orthodox tradition remains skeptical of naïve modern optimism
 - a. Scripture and the Word of God critique cultural hegemony of modernism
 - b. Christians witness to the historic particularity of gospel and the otherness of Jesus as figure who does not conform to narcissistic anthropology and philosophy of age
 - c. The Word of God conforms the world to itself, not itself to the world
 - d. Rigorous examination of Bible must point to faith—no neutral approach to Scripture
 - e. Karl Barth critiques modern obsession with self and subjective meaning in Bible:
 - i. Holy Scripture interprets itself to us in spite of all our human limitations
 - ii. Bible is not book of human religion, but rather God's free self-revelation
 - iii. The Word of God is not under our human control or foresight
 - iv. Biblical witness contradicts human religion and self-absorption
 - v. Bible critiques our human notions/concepts that are projected onto God
 - vi. Our human self-destruction is condemned and rejected by God's divine love
 - vii. God is greater than our guilt or depression: grace trumps human neurosis
 - viii. God's claims us—not human projection or preoccupation—and grants us freedom and permission to be ourselves

2. Barth's *Strange New World Within the Bible* (1916):

- a. Bible reveals strange new world that, insofar as it has reality at all, creates us, we don't create it
- b. Revelation is not determined by our individual experience, but individual experience is determined by God's free self-revelation
- c. God breaks into our here-and-now world and claims us in love
- d. Grace grasps us not in ways we expect, but from behind
- e. God's in-breaking love, not human judgments, transforms prevailing wisdom
- f. We don't fix world, but we wait and witness to God's in-breaking initiative
- g. Church is otherwise ragtag group who become signals—instantiations—of new world that has caught us
- h. We should approach scripture as strange and alien, not domesticated morality
- i. The river of scripture carries us away from self-centered preoccupation
- j. Bible's chief consideration is not the doings of humanity but the doings of God
- k. God's freedom does not fit into our anthropological categories
- l. Bible disallows our conforming God to our human categories
- m. The Word of God comes through our experience but does not derive from it
- n. Grace is new every morning, and God's freedom is beyond our control
- o. God refuses to acquiesce in our tendencies toward self-destruction
- p. God actively chooses to share creation with humanity in love
- q. A Trinitarian God did not need to have creation in order to have relationship
- r. God claims us in love and elects never to live in eternal life without us
- s. Moral authority stems from human responsibility in light of the Gospel
- t. Our ethical action comes in response to God's claiming us in love
- u. Revelation is not determined by our individual experience, but individual experience is determined by God's free self-revelation
- v. Biblical witness contradicts human religion and self-absorption
- w. Bible critiques our human notions/concepts that are projected onto God

3. Adding 'experience' to scripture, tradition and reason stems from the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, a framework for theological reflection that stems from John Wesley's teachings
 - a. Bible, both Old and New Testaments, provide the foundation for what we believe, since the written Word of God is superior to all other human authority
 - b. Yet Scripture alone rarely resolves current moral dilemmas or understandings of God's hand at work in the world
 - c. Tradition provides an extended narrative of engaging and transforming Scripture, strengthening our understanding by generations of interpretation and sound teaching
 - d. The various Creeds would be obvious examples of building upon biblical faith, but key theologians and councils of the Church over the centuries add depth and perspective
 - e. Reason does not add new content but provides a method by which we evaluate competing arguments or engage intra-biblical debates
 - f. Reason empowers us to make sense of Scripture and tradition, making sense of contrary arguments or competing interpretations
 - g. Experience deepens our faith as we encounter the living God, tapping into the power of the Holy Spirit—powerful hymnody would be an obvious example of experiential faith
 - h. Experience brings personal authenticity and connection to living faith
 - i. Yet personal experience can jerk us around, leading us into emotional rabbit holes that are not of God—just ask John Calvin or Sigmund Freud
 - j. How do we distinguish mysticism from intense everyday experience?
 - k. More traditional or conservative theologians would critique experience as a flawed basis for moral authority, since experience is wildly subjective and lies in the heart of the beholder, and largely immune to dialogue and faithful critique regarding what constitutes God's will for this world
 - l. The extreme example of subjectivity would be *fideism*

AI on Fideism

Fideism is the view that religious belief rests on faith rather than reason, evidence, or intellectual justification. It argues that rational arguments cannot prove transcendent truths, making faith independent of—or contrary to—reason. Key proponents, often including Kierkegaard and Pascal, hold that faith is a subjective, personal commitment.

Key Claims and Characteristics

- Independence of Faith: Religion is a self-contained, often expressive, system of thought, separate from scientific or rational scrutiny
- Limitation of Reason: Fideists argue that human reason is inadequate to understand or prove the fundamental truths of metaphysics, morality, and religion.
- Subjectivity: Truth is found inwardly and subjectively, often described as a commitment "in the heart" rather than a logical conclusion.
- "Believing Against the Understanding": While not necessarily endorsing total nonsense, some fideists, like Kierkegaard, argue that faith requires embracing the incomprehensible, which can seem irrational to ordinary understanding.

Arguments and Rationale for Fideism

- Transcendence: The belief that God is fundamentally beyond the grasp of finite human intellect.
- Defensive Mechanism: It shields religious belief from shifting rational arguments and scientific skepticism.
- Existential Commitment: Emphasizes that personal commitment is more profound than theoretical, intellectual assent.
- Pascal's Wager: While technically using practical reason, it suggests that believing in God is a pragmatic, beneficial choice rather than a strictly evidential one.

Role of Reason in Fideism

- Minimal or Negative: Reason is either completely bypassed, seen as irrelevant, or even identified as an obstacle to true faith.
- Boundary Setter: In some forms, reason is used only to demonstrate its own limits—showing *why* reason cannot reach divine truth.

Critiques of Fideism

- Lack of Grounding: Fideism can lead to a precarious faith that relies solely on changing emotions or personal will.
- Arbitrariness: Critics argue that without reason, one cannot distinguish between genuine faith and blind superstition or arbitrary belief.
- Incommensurability: By isolating faith from reason, it makes interfaith dialogue or apologetics challenging.