



## On Becoming Anglican: Emerging Anglican Thought in the Works of Thomas Traherne

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### ABSTRACT

The writings of Thomas Traherne (1637–74) are explored as a source of and model for the idea of Anglicanism. In his concern for a middle way between Roman Catholicism and reformed Protestantism (including interest in Calvin as well as the Fathers), his concern for a national Church, and in emphasizing the importance of a common liturgy, Traherne anticipates what has characterized the later global Anglican Communion and important aspects of what has been seen as characteristic Anglican theology.

KEYWORDS: Thomas Traherne, Anglicanism, Scripture, tradition, reason, Church of England, Puritanism

Thomas Traherne (1637–74) would not have called himself an Anglican as we understand the term today, though it should perhaps be observed at the outset that it is perhaps more contested in today's church than it has ever been. There are those who today lay exclusive claim to be 'true' Anglicans, both in the Church of England and the Anglican Communion, generally wanting to distinguish themselves from their more liberal fellow Anglicans. However, the questions about which they are concerned were unknown in Traherne's day, by any definition. Although the term has early antecedents – *ecclesia anglicana* appearing as early as 1246 to denote the English Church – 'Anglican' meaning an adherent of 'Anglicanism' did not come into common parlance until the nineteenth century. The term has for generations

1. Denise Inge (d. 2014) was an Honorary Senior Fellow in Early Modern Studies at the University of Worcester and renowned scholar of Thomas Traherne who left this article substantially complete. It has been prepared for publication with the assistance of her husband, Bishop John Inge.

rightly included not only the Church of England but the liturgical and theological traditions of the whole Anglican Communion, its mainstream churches as well as those smaller breakaway branches of continuing Anglican practice, none of which could have been envisaged by divines of the seventeenth century. So it is safe to say that Traherne was not, nor was anyone else in his era, an Anglican as anyone would now think of the term. However, I shall argue that what he was becoming in his last years most resembles that into which the Church of England has evolved, out of which the broader Anglican tradition has in turn grown. I shall further argue that his writings bear the hallmarks of what we now call Anglicanism.

Traherne left no diaries, letters or journals – the kinds of writing in which it is sometimes possible to trace changes and exchanges of view. Comparatively little is known of his biography and what is known gives confusing messages.<sup>2</sup> He was born in Hereford around 1637, into an apparently Royalist family – his father was fined for serving in the local Royalist militia. His boyhood years spanned the period during which Hereford was a besieged city. When he went to university at Oxford, however, he went to a Puritan college, Brasenose, at the height of its Puritan heyday when Greenwood was Master of the College and all students were given a sound daily dose of Scripture and sermons. It is difficult to say whether he went there because he already held Puritan views or whether he was influenced by his time there, but upon leaving he must have been deemed Puritan enough, for he was sponsored for his first clerical appointment by a band of four Puritan preachers (William Voyle, William Lowe, Samuel Smith and George Primrose) so staunch as to prefer expulsion to conforming to the Act of Uniformity that required all clergy to use the *Book of Common Prayer* and adhere to prescribed sacraments and rites in 1662, a decision which effectively ended their ministries.<sup>3</sup> Among Traherne's other Puritan friends were Herefordshire dignitaries like Lady Brilliana Harley who had campaigned for the abolition of church hierarchy, comparing bishops to the Old Testament villain Haman, enemy of God's chosen people: 'I believe that the hierarchy must be down and I hope now ... I am glad that the bishops begin to fall, and

2. See J. Smith, 'Thomas Traherne', *Dictionary of National Biography*, vol. 55, p. 205; D. Inge, *Thomas Traherne: Poetry and Prose* (London: SPCK, 2002); D. Inge, *Happiness and Holiness: Thomas Traherne and his Writings* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2008); and D. Inge, *Wanting Like a God: Desire and Freedom in the Works of Thomas Traherne* (London: SCM Press, 2009).

3. See Smith, 'Thomas Traherne', p. 205.

I hope that it will be with them as it was with Haman; when he began to fall, he fell indeed', and who rejoiced at the reading of the 'root and branch' Bill that called for Parliament to abolish 'archbishops, and lord bishops, dean and archdeacon etc ... with dependencies, roots and branches'.<sup>4</sup>

Traherne began to distance himself from such Puritanism, though: not only did he subscribe, unlike some of his sponsors, to the Act of Uniformity, he also chose to be episcopally ordained, and he sought ordination two years in advance of it being required by law, travelling all the way to Launton in Oxfordshire to be ordained by Robert Skinner, the see of Hereford being vacant.<sup>5</sup> Of course, when the Act of Uniformity came two years later, he subscribed. It could be that this was merely an act of self-preservation – if so he would not have been the first cleric to save his career by changing his views. However, this does not seem to be the case, because by the time he was writing *A Sober View of Dr Twisse* he was using not only Scripture but also the *Book of Common Prayer* and the Thirty-Nine Articles as a kind of litmus test of orthodoxy, judging the 'rightness' of other authors according to the degree to which they adhere to these normative Anglican liturgies and doctrines,<sup>6</sup> and in his *Church's Year-book* we find the commemoration of fast days and feast days, celebrations of Rogation, All Saints' Day and Pentecost, and even a hymn to Mary that do not come across as at all Puritan.<sup>7</sup> An anonymous friend described him a quarter of a century after his death as a priest who 'tho he had the misfortune to come abroad into the World, in the late disordered Times when the Foundations were cast down, and this excellent Church laid in the dust, and dissolved into Confusion and Enthusiasme; yet ... he became much in love with the beautiful order and Primitive Devotions of this our excellent Church.'<sup>8</sup>

4. T.T. Lewis (ed.), *Letters of the Lady Brilliana Harley* (London: Camden Society, 1854), pp. 111, 119, 132–33.

5. Register entry for ordination, 20 October 1660, Oxon. RO, Oxford diocesan papers, d. 106.

6. See 'A Sober View of Dr Twisse', particularly sect. VI and VII, in J. Ross (ed.), *The Works of Thomas Traherne I* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2005), pp. 77–86.

7. See 'Rogation', 'Poem for Pentecost', 'Prayer for All Saints Day', 'A Prayer of Thanks for Mary', in Inge (ed.), *Happiness and Holiness*, pp. 297–303.

8. 'To the Reader', introduction to *A Serious and Pathetical Contemplation of the Mercies of GOD in Several Most Devout and Sublime Thanksgivings for the Same*, first

One can look at his friendships and see a range of seventeenth-century churchmanship represented there – from Susannah Hopton who converted to Roman Catholicism in order to avoid Puritanism, then switched back to being Church of England after the Puritan regime had passed, to Edward Harley, eldest son of Robert Harley of Brampton Bryan, the deeply Puritan iconoclast who chaired the Committee for the destruction of monuments of superstition and idolatry in 1643 but who nevertheless refused to countenance regicide,<sup>9</sup> to Sir Orlando Bridgeman, Traherne's late patron, a lover of latitude and comprehension, who fell out of favour with Charles II because of Charles's catholic sympathies. There is no single party affiliation indicated by these friendships; what one can say by looking at them is that Traherne seems to have felt an affinity to people who were willing to take risks for their beliefs and who were also willing to change allegiance if their beliefs required it, or if their beliefs altered. Susanna Hopton defended herself on this very point in her 'Letter' to Father Turberville in 1660, in which she berates those 'who allow not their Disciples, when once reconciled, any farther use of their Reason' claiming that she was 'of an inquisitive Temper', which led her to enquire into the grounds and causes of things since, she writes, 'it was against my nature to believe implicitly'.<sup>10</sup> In these vacillations Traherne's friends show attempts to find and then to steer a middle way between Roman Catholicism and Reformed Protestantism that is not dissimilar from the attempts Traherne was making and were being made by the nation as a whole.

It is often observed of Anglican identity, rightly in my view, that it is a church that is both catholic and reformed. The Church in England incorporated change, adapting its governance, and revising its teaching and worship in the light of the protestant reformation

(*F* note continued)

published by Hicks, 1699, in J. Ross (ed.), *The Works of Thomas Traherne IV* (Cambridge: Brewer, 2009), p. 318.

9. See J. Eales, *Puritans and Roundheads: The Harleys of Brampton Bryan and the Outbreak of the English Civil War* (Glasgow: Hardinge Simpole, 2002), pp. 182, 192–93; and the anonymous *A True and Full Relation of the Officers' and Armies' Forcible Seizing of Divers Eminent Members of the Commons House, December 6 and 7 1648* (London, 1648), Thomason Tracts E476 (14) 3–11.

10. 'A LETTER Written by a LADY to a Romish PRIEST upon her Return from the Church of Rome to the Church of England', in J. Smith (ed.), *The Early Modern Englishwoman: A Facsimile Library of Essential Works Series II, Part 4 Volume 7: Susanna Hopton I* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2010), p. 124.

without loss of the riches of its catholic inheritance. This Anglican way is evidenced in particularly clear colours in the intense scrutiny Traherne gave to Calvinist teachings and the equal attention he gave to the Church Fathers. That the nation as a whole was charting a similar course is manifest in the way it had treated its monarchy: if the restoration of King Charles II in 1660 following the demise of Cromwell's Puritan regime ensured that England was not going to become entirely Protestant, the expulsion of James II in 1688 ensured that neither was it going to become entirely Catholic. It was in this decisive period, during which Traherne was living, ministering and writing, that the church in England made the historic choices that ensured that its faith avoided either extreme and steered a *via media* in a way that has not happened in any other denomination. Interestingly, there was only one work that Traherne saw to publication in his lifetime: *Roman Forgeries*, a fiercely anti-papist polemic. He dedicated the book to his patron Orlando Bridgeman, despite the fact that Bridgeman was incurring Charles's displeasure because of his disapproval of the latter's Roman Catholic sympathies (Bridgeman was very soon thereafter removed from his role as Lord Keeper of the Seal by Charles II, because he refused to seal the King's Act of Indulgence which gave limited freedom to Roman Catholics as well as protestant dissenters). This suggests that Traherne was making his own small contribution to the defence of the middle ground as the natural place for the Church of England to occupy. He had welcomed the Restoration, and with it the end of Cromwellian Puritanism, but though loyal to Charles II, he did not count a king's displeasure to be a greater threat than a return to Roman Catholicism.

What this being both catholic and reformed has meant as it has played out in the formation of Anglican identity is that we have a church that is catholic in order and reformed in its emphasis on Scripture and preaching. This is precisely the kind of church Traherne seems to have inhabited. The testimony of his churchwardens that he 'doth duly ... instruct the youth' and that he was 'well Learned ... and a good Preacher of gods word'<sup>11</sup> suggests that he put a strong emphasis on preaching and teaching. Whereas we often think of poetry as a means of self-expression, Julia Smith, who discovered his fragmentary poem *The Ceremonial Law* in 1997, sees this poem as a teaching tool, noting in it a strong sense of the didactic purpose of art.<sup>12</sup> He wrote to lead his readers

11. Hereford County RO, registrar's files, 1673/488 and 1667/349.

12. J. Smith, 'The Ceremonial Law', *PN Review* 25.2 (1998), pp. 22-28.

in a particular direction,<sup>13</sup> to convince and to teach. His writings, both poetry and prose, are laced with Scripture: not only does he open specific passages for exegesis, he also slips in and out of Scripture much in the way he slips in and out of Latin. It is as if the words of Scripture are so familiar to him that they have become a permanent part of his psyche so that the cadences of the Bible, its words and phrases, appear seamlessly woven into the body of his thought. At no point, though, does he suggest that Scripture alone should be his guide. In fact, he relies heavily on Church Fathers such as Irenaeus, Gregory the Great, Augustine, Gregory of Nyssa, and wise writers from Antiquity such as Aristotle, Plato and Hermes Trismegistus. He also consults and engages with his theological contemporaries, seeing the development of his thought as necessarily surrounded by the experience of others as an ongoing thread within a tradition. Little is recorded of the liturgies he used in his parish, though having subscribed to the Act of Uniformity, it would have been highly unlikely that he would have departed from the *Book of Common Prayer*. A friend described him as someone who, having fallen in love with the Church of England, ‘never failed any one day either publickly or in his private Closet, to make use of her publick Offices’.<sup>14</sup> It seems that Traherne kept his promise taken at ordination faithfully to say the offices of Morning and Evening Prayer, in his use of liturgy, as in his desire for episcopal ordination, adhering to the essentially catholic shape of this reformed church.

Traherne’s ideal church is a national church. For him the salvation of the person and the salvation of a people are inextricably linked: ‘Save this Nation, Spare thy People’,<sup>15</sup> he writes, and he rails against those who would destroy the unity of a national church. ‘But O the wickedness of Ignorant Zealots! who contemn thy mercies and Despise the union the Beautifull union of my Nationall church!’<sup>16</sup>

Oh prodigious and unreasonable men! And do you think that it is unlawfull that she should be united! Must we all be Independent, And cannot we Live, unless we pluck up her roots, and pull down her Hedges? Do you verily beleiv it unlawfull for kings and parliaments

13. See, for instance, the introduction to *Christian Ethicks* in which Traherne promises to ‘lead his reader into the way of Blessedness’, or the title page of *Commentaries of Heaven* written for the ‘Satisfaction of Atheists and the Consolation of Christians’.

14. ‘To the Reader’, p. 319.

15. ‘Select Meditations’, I.82, in J. Ross (ed.), *The Works of Thomas Traherne V* (Cambridge: Brewer, 2013), p. 255.

16. ‘Select Meditations’, I.85; *The Works of Thomas Traherne V*, p. 258.

and Elders in a National manner to covenant with God that they will be his People, and Employ their Power and Authority for his Glory.<sup>17</sup>

Given his background in the religious and civil turmoil of the Civil War and his particular experiences of childhood in a besieged city, it is not surprising that he sees in a national church a useful tool for sustaining a new and fragile peace. But his embrace of a national church is not merely an answer to the ubiquitous post-Commonwealth need for peace and stability. He does want everyone to come under one umbrella, but his 'national' church is not only *for* the nation, it is to be governed *by* the nation. One senses in his writings a deep suspicion of centralization, and a belief that localized authority is more accountable and less prone to corruption. He is offended by the Roman Catholic tendency to require new and additional doctrines, writing in *Commentaries of Heaven* 'As the Cuckow laieth Eggs in other Birds nests, so doth the Pope new Articles of faith in the Church of GOD.'<sup>18</sup>

But what he condemns in *Roman Forgeries* even more than the extraneous doctrines of the Roman church is what he sees as the 'usurpation' and centralization of power by Rome. He contends that the 'Roman Chair' was 'lifted to the utmost Height' by a combination of secret councils, power plays and the luxury and idleness of the churches of western Christendom, and it was secured there when 'there came out a collection of Councils and Decretal Epistles, in the Name of *Isidore*, Bishop of *Hispalis*, about the year 790. In which book there are neatly interwoven a great company of forged Evidences, or feigned Records, tending all to the advancement of the Popes Chair, in a very various copious and Elaborate manner.'<sup>19</sup> From the beginning, from the time of the Church Fathers, or what he calls the Primitive Church, it was not so. 'For the Christian Churches received their beginning from *Jerusalem*, before the Church of *Rome* had any Being',<sup>20</sup> he writes, with 'church' in the plural. There is at the same time across his work a strong sense that congregations should not be isolated units each going their own way towards individualistic truth but that there are central tenants of faith by which one's orthodoxy might be tested, and that unity mattered.

17. 'Select Meditations', III.25; *The Works of Thomas Traherne V*, pp. 310–11.

18. 'Article' in J. Ross (ed.), *The Works of Thomas Traherne III* (Cambridge: Brewer, 2007), p. 233.

19. *Roman Forgeries, or, A true account of false records: discovering the impostures and counterfeit antiquities of the Church of Rome, by a faithful son of the Church of England* (London: Printed by S. & B. Griffin for Jonathan Edwin, 1673), p. 28.

20. *Roman Forgeries*, p. 108.



Not only does his reliance on liturgy, on creeds, and on the Thirty-Nine Articles suggest this, it is also apparent in his abhorrence of dissenters and independents. His debates with the 'heretical' minister John Tombes of Leominster leap from the neat columns of *Commentaries of Heaven* like a live wire; his criticisms of Anabaptists and Quakers have been noted,<sup>21</sup> as have his vicious attack on the Socinians.<sup>22</sup> Of all these dissenters or independents none were as fiercely attached to the *sola scriptura* tradition as were the Socinians, and the particular passion with which he addresses them reflects his real fear of such a position and of the extremes of interpretation to which it can lead its adherents. The 'churches' to which he refers in *Roman Forgeries* are clearly not individualistic sects, but broad reaching national churches, such as *ecclesia anglicana*. While his passion for a national church is plain, that does not in itself necessarily suggest that he is Anglican in temperament; Presbyterians wanted a national church too. What seems 'Anglican' about his desire for a national church is the way in which it reflects the direction in which Anglicanism has developed globally in the centuries that have followed.

Traherne's seventeenth-century vision of a national church concerned only the church in England, and if we understand his yearning for a national church not only in terms of monopoly, but also in terms of autonomy (as his protestations in *Roman Forgeries* invite us to) we may see that the Anglican model he proposes reaches far beyond the Church in England. In fact, national identity and autonomy has become so much part of being Anglican that seeing modern Anglicanism primarily through the lens of 'Englishness' is misleading. A cursory glance at the names Anglicans use to describe themselves underscores this point with 'national' and 'episcopal' identity being stronger than any reference to 'Englishness'. As Samuel Wells notes in his book *What Anglicans Believe*, only 16 of the 38 provinces of the Anglican Communion use the term 'Anglican' in their name, preferring instead the term 'Episcopal' or 'The Church of...' (England, Ireland, Pakistan, Uganda), or 'The Church in...' as in 'The Church in Wales' and 'The Anglican Episcopal Church in Japan'.<sup>23</sup> This sense of national identity began very early and is enshrined in Article XXXIV of the Thirty-nine Articles which states 'It is not necessary that Traditions and Ceremonies be in all places one, or

21. Nabil Matar, 'A Note on Thomas Traherne and the Quakers', *Notes & Queries* 28.1 (1981), pp. 46–47.

22. D. Inge, 'Thomas Traherne and the Socinian Heresy in *Commentaries of Heaven*', *Notes & Queries* 54.4 (2007), pp. 412–16.

23. S. Wells, *What Anglicans Believe* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2011).



utterly like ... Every particular or national Church hath authority to ordain, change, and abolish, Ceremonies or Rites of the Church ordained only by man's authority, so that all things be done to the edifying.'

In Traherne's day, and in his view, this was a necessary reaction to the overbearing authority of Rome. But the desire for autonomy has become much more than this. It has panned out in the growth of Anglicanism, for example in the difference between the Church of England being established, with bishops sitting in the House of Lords, and pretty much all other manifestations of Anglicanism in which church and state are completely separate. Maintaining unity while encouraging national identity and autonomy has always been a challenge for Anglicanism, not least in the sexuality and women's ordination debates of our day. In the face of threatened division it would be easy for Anglicans to wish for a more centralized authority but cooperation rather than coercion has always been the Anglican model. In recent years when the American Episcopal Church has seemed to be steering its own course, it is easy to forget the significant role that the latter church played in 1968 in the formation of the Anglican Consultative Council, one of the four 'instruments of communion' of the Anglican Communion. Such a model of cooperating national churches whose bishops operate as equals with no one bishop having infallible authority or power to command is exactly the model Traherne conceived the early church as having, the departure from which, in the centralization of power in Rome, is the fault of the Roman Catholic Church most fiercely condemned by him in *Roman Forgeries*.

So what is it that unifies Anglicans? What holds them together? Never has this question been more apposite than it is today. Anglicans have no creed except the Nicene and Apostles' creeds that have received universal acceptance among all Christians. In the absence of a Luther or a Calvin, a Wesley or a Menno Simons, and in the absence of a single error against which Anglicans may define themselves, Anglicans have formed themselves mainly by practice. It is a joke that Anglicans often tell of themselves that while there may be 'devout' Catholics and 'staunch' Methodists and 'strict' Baptists, all Anglicans ever are is 'practicising', and yet there is some truth in that old jibe. It is in many ways the practices that Anglicans follow that make them Anglican since Anglican identity lies more in prayer and worship than in doctrinal statement or formulae.

Although there are many other newer forms of worship, Anglicans have always and still do gather round *The Book of Common Prayer*.

*The Book of Common Prayer*, including as it does rites for the ordination of bishops, priests and deacons as well as the sacraments of baptism and eucharist, serves as a statement of faith and a crucible for doctrine and practice since it is out of this common worship that the shape of faith emerges. Its title *Common Prayer* is significant since for Anglicans public prayer is normative; it is what they have in common – the prayer of all. As Wells notes:

We have no founder, no pivotal item of doctrine, no egregious error of another group of Christians against which we are ever to be defined, and no pivotal interpreter through whose definitive interpretation of scripture all must be evaluated. There was never a crucial time when we have felt we could simply take up the New Testament and begin anew. Instead we have a tradition of common prayer, a general commitment to the well-being of all, including non-members of the Church, and a desire to seek a faith that can be shared by a wide diversity of temperaments and classes of people. ... Anglicans are notable for the way their doctrine and ethics emerge from the crucible of corporate prayer.<sup>24</sup>

This approach correlates with Traherne's claim that what Anglicans believe is to be found not only in their Articles, but also in their practice and common liturgy: 'What the Doctrine of the Ch. of England is, appeareth by her Judgement in the 39 Articles, and her practice in the Liturgie and Common prayer.'<sup>25</sup>

As well as finding identity in being both catholic and reformed, and in a shared liturgy and corporate prayer, Anglican identity rests on the creative interplay of Scripture, tradition and reason. This creative interplay can be best expressed, I think, as the interpretation of Scripture through the living tradition of the Church. The relationship between the three is often – and much less felicitously – likened to the three legs of a milking stool, which are said to hold the Anglican Church in balance. They do, at least, operate together in a creative fashion, looking backwards and forwards at the same time, Scripture holding what might be seen as the excesses of Roman Catholicism in

24. *What Anglicans Believe*, p. xvi.

25. J. Ross (ed.), *The Works of Thomas Traherne I*, p. 78. It should be noted that Traherne has, in the past, been dismissed by some as a 'poet of felicity' who had a very thin conception of sin. This is a thesis which certainly could be argued persuasively from some of his writings – notably the *Centuries*. However, the large corpus of work discovered in 1999 makes clear that this is a very inadequate reading of Traherne. See 'Sin and Salvation', in D. Inge, *Happiness and Holiness*, pp. 144–52.

check, attention to tradition holding the excesses of the *sola scriptura* position in check and reason enabling both the latter while, at the same time, making space to respond to the challenges of the Enlightenment as the church looks towards the future. The nineteenth-century Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard once wrote that ‘we only understand life backwards, but we must live forwards’. This is how we may see the Church, writes Christopher Cocksorth, because the Church lives forward towards the Kingdom as it understands itself backwards in salvation history.<sup>26</sup> For Anglicans, Scripture, tradition and reason play a significant role in this way of seeing oneself as church. Born out of the particular crises of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, these three formularies nevertheless have shaped and continue to shape the ongoing and emerging forms of global Anglicanism. As Wells notes:

Placing scripture first in the threefold formula is a significant gesture to the Protestant side of this Reformation debate. But by following scripture with tradition, Anglicans make a similar nod in a catholic direction. Just as the Reformation made it problematic to assert tradition over scripture, so the Enlightenment severely criticized inherited authority (and thus both scripture and tradition), preferring to prize reason above all things. By including reason in their threefold formula, Anglicans acknowledge the challenge of the Enlightenment but make a statement that there is no reason that arises in the abstract: every question, every critical enquiry arises out of some kind of tradition.<sup>27</sup>

I now turn to look at the first of these three, Scripture, in relation to Traherne. As we have seen, in *A Sober View of Dr Twisse* Traherne declares the Thirty-Nine Articles to be his litmus test of orthodoxy, and Article VI that ‘Holy Scripture contains all things necessary to salvation’ would have been no stranger to him. At first glance this seems to support the *sola scriptura* tradition and fly in the face of a threefold balance of Scripture, tradition and reason. However, Anglicans have always held that this Article is not suggesting that only Scripture is necessary, but that nothing can be deemed or made necessary that is not in Scripture. It is a statement of the sufficiency of Scripture that was intended as a reaction and safeguard against the additions and impositions of Roman Catholic dogma. Anglicans believe that there is nothing missing from Scripture that needs to be added. Tradition and reason may amplify or clarify but not add to or contradict what is said in Scripture. This was Traherne’s view. Three hundred years after

26. C. Cocksorth, *Holding Together* (London: Canterbury Press, 2008), p. 228 and pp. 240–41.

27. Wells, *What Anglicans Believe*, p. 46.

Traherne, this Article was revisited by Anglicans on a global scale when the Lambeth Conference of 1888 passed a resolution also called the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral in which the sufficiency of Scripture was reiterated, making this a central tenant of Anglicanism to this day.

In Traherne's day the sufficiency of Scripture was not only an anchor for the faithful, but also a rebuttal of the excesses of Rome. What it means in modern Anglicanism is less to do with defending oneself from Rome and more to do with confidence in the ongoing inspiration of Scripture. When the Bible is used in ethical debates it is seldom thought that it will provide a prescriptive voice. There is no precise formula for answers to do with politics, genetics, social justice, sexuality, ecology, no chapter and verse that will erase the need for thought or discussion. Yet the expectation is that the witness of Scripture interpreted through the minds of its readers and the tradition of the church will provide what believers need in order to arrive at the answers they seek.

We have already seen the importance and ubiquity of Scripture in Traherne's work. That Scripture mattered hugely to him and that it informed all he wrote is evident. It needs only to be added that Traherne's view of Scripture bears a striking resemblance to the prevailing view in mainstream Anglicanism today. Although he saw it as containing all that was necessary, he did not see it primarily as a place for finding simple answers. It was not something merely to be understood, if by 'understood' we mean something mastered. It was the living Word of God. It was bigger than one's mind could grasp – to imagine one could comprehend all that lay therein was ignorance on a grand scale, for this book lived and spoke in divine and mysterious ways. It was to be approached not with arrogance but with reverence, as he makes clear in this poem from a Latin notebook:

On the Bible

1

When Thou dost take  
 this sacred Book into thy hand;  
 Think not that Thou  
 th'included sence dost understand.

2

It is a signe  
 thou wantest sound Intelligence;  
 If that Thou think  
 thy selfe to understand the Sence.

3

Bee not deceived  
 Thou then on it in vain mayst gaze

The way is intricate  
that leads into a Maze.

4

Heer's nought but whats Mysterious  
to an Understanding Eye:  
Where Reverence alone stands Ope,  
and Sence stands By.<sup>28</sup>

Turning next to tradition, it might be best to begin with the question of exactly what we mean when we use the word? First, there is the inherited Christian tradition which runs back to the early Church Fathers – what Traherne calls the primitive church with its primitive devotions, which carries on through the ages to Traherne's own day to include theologians, like Calvin and Luther, to whom Traherne may not have felt he owed allegiance but whose writings had influenced the emerging tradition of which he is a part. Then there is the living tradition of worship and prayer – the feast days and fast days, the times and seasons of the church.

All of these form the tradition through which Scripture may be interpreted and on which reason may be brought to bear. For many, Traherne included, the most authoritative part of that tradition is the Church Fathers – especially the pre-Nicene fathers whose writings were very early. These speak with authority because, having lived so close to the time of Christ, they are deemed to be nearest the sources of primitive Christianity who speak from an undivided Church. The Church Fathers were much quoted in Traherne's day, and the Oxford Movement around the 1830s saw a revival of interest in their teachings. For the founders of the Oxford Movement, 'tradition' refers to the teachings of the first five centuries of Christianity. These early Fathers can be grouped into three categories – the Apostolic Fathers, writing around the time of the composition of the New Testament, the Eastern Fathers, writing in Greek (Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Athanasius, Gregory of Nazianzus and Gregory of Nyssa), and the Western Fathers, writing in Latin (Tertullian, Ambrose, Augustine, Gregory the Great). From among these Traherne drew most significantly on Irenaeus, for his concept of humanity and

28. A. Ridler identifies this as coming from Bodleian MS. Lat. Misc. F. 45 in her introduction to *Traherne: Poems, Centuries and Three Thanksgivings* (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. xv. This is a notebook that belonged to Traherne's brother Philip but contained material in Traherne's hand with some poems signed, as was this one, in an uncharacteristic 'T.T.'

the fall and when considering the marks of heresy;<sup>29</sup> but he also refers to Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory Nazianzus, Clement and Athanasius. For Traherne and his contemporaries, as for the later Tractarians and the many who have been influenced by them well into modern times, deferring to the Fathers is not about slavishly following the teachings of these early Christians, who in any case may at points contradict each other or themselves, but about seeking insights from an expression of church which is early, authentic and therefore authoritative.

One of the benefits of tradition is that it can help steer believers through two types of necessary scepticism: one that questions everything that comes from the outside – historicity of biblical events, interpretations of Scripture, cultural and theological discourse, and another that questions what comes from within – motives, the capacity for self-deception, for laziness and pride. The editors of *Love's Redeeming Work: The Anglican Quest for Holiness*, note the positive sides of these two forms of what they see as characteristically Anglican reticence:

We need to understand the difference between two kinds of scepticism, in fact. There is a natural scepticism that has to do with self-protection against being made a fool of: how do I know anything for sure? I am always likely to be deceived, so I do better to reserve my options and commit myself to as little as possible. But there is also a reflective and theological scepticism: I am always ready to deceive myself, because my passions distort clear judgement. I am a fallen being whose mind is readily swayed by selfish concern and idleness or cowardice. The former kind of scepticism is usually revolutionary: let us rise up and destroy the systems that have deceived us, the authorities that have falsely claimed to be able to tell us the truth. The latter is conservative: if I so often deceive myself, I need the presence of history and community to check my self-obsessions. ... this second form of scepticism is very characteristic of much of the Anglican style over the centuries.<sup>30</sup>

Tradition can aid the study of Scripture as believers apply their reason in the questioning and self-questioning that is so typical of much of Anglicanism.

29. On Traherne and sin see n. 24 above and P. Grant, *The Transformation of Sin: Studies in Donne, Herbert, Vaughan and Traherne* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1974); on Traherne, Irenaeus and heresy, see the introduction to *Roman Forgeries*.

30. G. Rowell, K. Stevenson and R. Williams (eds.), *Love's Redeeming Work: The Anglican Quest for Holiness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. xxv.

How did this reticence, this sense that questioning the tradition from within is not only permissible but somehow almost necessary, become a characteristic of Anglicanism? Anglicanism evolved during the political and intellectual upheaval of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in which all forms of authority from the monarchy to the magisterium of the church were called into question. Where the Reformation had made it difficult to assert the authority of tradition over Scripture, so the Enlightenment made it impossible to receive any kind of inherited authority, whether tradition or Scripture, without questioning it. The Enlightenment prized reason above all other means and methods of learning, and the church in England, trying to find its way amidst the political upheaval and the competing claims of Geneva and Rome turned to reason as a guide. Traherne was an enthusiastic supporter of this. In one of his poems he writes:

Our Dreaming understandings must awake  
And in RIGHT REASON satisfy'd must take  
Their Sovereign Delights, ...  
This brings Men home, and feeds them not with lies:  
Teacheth our Duties, and his Laws, to prize:  
And makes Men now in their Inferior State,  
The Joyfull Life of Heaven to Imitate.  
It leads us to a Real Blessedness,  
That we may dayly neer at hand possess:<sup>31</sup>

Traherne's praise of reason is apparent not only in such clearly stated lines, but also, and perhaps more significantly, in those subjects to which he devotes so much of his enthusiastic attention – natural science, biology, atomic theory and astronomy. The telescope and the microscope had revolutionized his world, and we see in his most recently discovered manuscripts a fascination with the most recent revelations science had enabled in his day: the circulation of the blood, the discovery of stars, theories of light, diagrams of the moon, experiments in physics, the use of lenses, mirrors, maps and charts. Even human dissection becomes a vehicle for poetry when in the second stanza of 'The Person' he writes:

The Naked Things  
Are most Sublime, ...  
Their Worth they then do best reveal,  
When we all Metaphores remove,  
For Metaphores conceal,

31. Lines 272-74, 284-89 from the poem at the end of 'The Kingdom of God'; ch. XXII of Ross (ed.), *Works of Thomas Traherne I*, p. 375.



And only Vapours prove.  
 They best are Blazond when we see  
 The Anatomie,  
 Survey the Skin, cut up the Flesh, the Veins  
 Unfold: The Glory there remains.  
 The Muscles, Fibres, Arteries and Bones  
 Are better far then Crowns and precious Stones.<sup>32</sup>

In a fascinating chapter in his wide and ranging study of creation, *The Kingdom of God*, he even posits the possibility of life on other planets or in other realms, describing an imagined visit from someone from an extraterrestrial whom he calls 'the celestial stranger'.<sup>33</sup> But it is not only in his enthusiasm for science (which occasionally runs away with him) that a high regard for reason is apparent. It is present too in Traherne's delight in philosophy, ancient and contemporary. From Plato and Aristotle, Socrates, Pico della Mirandola, and on to the Cambridge Platonists of his day, Traherne was a devotee of philosophy, particularly philosophy that issued in a changed and ordered life. In the *Centuries* he writes: 'Philosophers are not only those that contemplate happiness, but practise virtue. He is a Philosopher that subdues his vices, lives by reason, orders his desires, rules his passions, and submits not to his senses, nor is guided by the customs of this world.'<sup>34</sup> For Traherne, as for the Cambridge Platonists whose works he studied, the 'light of nature' and the 'light of reason' were one, a light that was given by God to all humankind. In his writing, as in much Anglican theology and practice, we see not only the application of the highest or the most intellectualized reason, but also an appeal to and respect for plain common sense, a kind of basic reason or 'reasonableness'. As Stephen Sykes notes in his description of Anglican identity, 'what a plain reader cannot himself find in the text can in no circumstances be required of him as an article of belief'.<sup>35</sup>

So, in early and subsequent forms of Anglicanism we find a strong reliance on reason; but reason alone can never be enough. In fact, it is not clear that reason can even exist 'alone' since reason does not

32. 'The Person', in D. Inge, *Happiness and Holiness*, p. 88.

33. 'The Celestial Stranger', in Inge (ed.), *Thomas Traherne: Poetry and Prose*, pp. 112–14.

34. *Centuries of Meditations*, IV 8; Ross (ed.), *Works of Thomas Traherne V*, p. 144.

35. S. Sykes, *The Identity of Anglicanism* (New York: Seabury, 1978), p. 90, quoted in Wells, *What Anglicans Believe*, p. 61.

arise in the abstract, but exists always and inevitably within an array of cultures; every question that is asked arises out of some kind of tradition. Of course it would be ridiculous to suggest that Anglicanism is the only intelligent or reasonable form of Christianity, but its formative developments during the Enlightenment period have contributed to Anglicanism being known as a thinking person's faith. It engaged in the debates and intellectual developments of Traherne's day, and it has continued to do so. The Episcopal Church Congress of 1874, for instance, was convened to consider major issues of the time: the science-religion debate over evolution, and the social gospel; and global Anglicanism has often led the way in social and intellectual liberties such as the abolition of slavery and the ordination of women despite its significant blind spots in colonialism and the misuse of post-colonial power, and the continuing discrepancies between regions of the Anglican Communion in their views of the ministry of women.

I have considered Scripture, Tradition and Reason as three entities in order to discover Traherne's relationship to each but, as I suggested earlier, in Anglicanism at its best there is a dynamic relationship between the three because, as Christopher Cocksworth writes, 'the self presentation of the saving God is a dynamic process'.<sup>36</sup> That Traherne was aware of such a creative interplay between Scripture, tradition and reason is suggested in his entry 'Article' in *Commentaries of Heaven* in which he writes: 'For that is an Article of Faith which we believe upon the Authoritie of anothers Word [tradition]. It is a Point of Knowledg as we discern it by Reason [reason], An Article of faith as we believe it upon the Testimonie of GOD [Scripture].'<sup>37</sup> Using the same phraseology as the Cambridge Platonists, to whose writing about Reason and the Light of Nature he was much indebted, Traherne writes about how Scripture and reason agree and how they are clarified by the propositions of the church or tradition. In fact for him the light of nature, or reason and the word of God are one:

The Word of GOD is as Authentick a Light, as the Light of Nature.  
The Light of Nature is the Word of GOD.  
They agree in many Things, but contradict in none.  
There is Light enough in Nature left to discern the Word of GOD, to  
acknowledge and receive it

36. Cocksworth, *Holding Together*, p. 45.

37. 'Article' in Ross (ed.), *The Works of Thomas Traherne III*, p. 233. Brackets mine.

Everything is in Scripture, Traherne asserts, just as everything is connected. But sometimes our intellect can best mull over parts of a mystery one at a time:

All the Articles of our faith must now of Necessity lie contained in the H. Scripture; bec. the whole Mystery of Redemption is Discovered: But the Church singlenth them out and proposeth them distinctly to our Understanding.<sup>38</sup>

There are two things more that should be said about Traherne and emerging Anglicanism. The first is that Traherne's concept of church was of an episcopal church. In modern times when episcopal leadership is just one among many forms of church leadership exercised in Christian churches it is easy to forget how crucial this point would have been for Traherne. In his time, and at this critical point in the emergence of Anglicanism, the ordering of bishops, priests, and deacons marked the church clearly as being in its form and constitution within the catholic tradition. While much of Anglicanism has altered as it has spread across the globe, this expression of catholic order has remained a hallmark to the present day.

Secondly, Traherne's ideal church was an inclusive church. In his day this would not have had anything to do with women priests or sexuality but would have had much to do with comprehension, that is to say the seventeenth-century movement to include as many within the umbrella of the Church of England as possible. Traherne's avowal of comprehension is implied not only by the cross-section of friends as we saw at the beginning of this article, but also in the fact that one of the closest friends and allies of his final days, Sir Orlando Bridgeman, was famous for his latitude and comprehension. Hezekiah Burton, who was Traherne's predecessor in Bridgeman's household, once described as 'that great trimmer and latitudinarian',<sup>39</sup> hosted a club to promote comprehension and was associated with John Tillotston and Edward Stillingfleet, Latitudinarians whose sermons Traherne read and noted. In fact, he was adding lines from Stillingfleet to the manuscript of *Roman Forgeries* as it was going to press.<sup>40</sup> All of these men were involved in an abortive attempt to comprehend Presbyterians within the Church of England, and latitude was one of the qualities Bridgeman may have

38. 'Article' in Ross (ed.), *The Works of Thomas Traherne III*, p. 233.

39. Anthony A. Wood, in 'Burton, Hezekiah', *Dictionary of National Biography* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1885–1900).

40. Title page of *Roman Forgeries*.

looked for in a chaplain following in Burton's footsteps. Latitudinarian or not, bringing the whole nation under one umbrella was very much Traherne's ideal. Were he to see global Anglicanism today, the idea of a unified but nationally autonomous church played out across many continents, I wonder how he would expand his idea of comprehension to accommodate the differing calls of inclusion and diversity. Michael Ramsey, Archbishop of Canterbury from 1961 to 1974, had wise words to say about Christian unity:

Our eyes must be helped to distinguish between a synthesis that is superficial and a synthesis that is surely grounded, between arbitrary liberalism and genuine liberality, between facile comprehensiveness and true theological coherence ... Without such coherence the Church's moral witness will appear as piecemeal moralizing, and the majestic unity of the Church's faith will be too faintly made visible.<sup>41</sup>

It has been asserted that 'the typical Anglican of the twenty-first century will be an African under thirty'.<sup>42</sup> What has a voice like Traherne's, allied as it is to the politics of the seventeenth century and to the cultural particularity of England, to offer to such an individual? Some would say that the Anglican Communion should grow beyond its historic ethos, or that it needs to radically reinvent itself. I believe it has within it the kernel of what it needs to adapt, because questioning, a kind of faithful scepticism that allows the possibility of adaptation is part of its essential character. Out of this open faithfulness, I believe, will flow, as it always has done, new ways of speaking and of being church in the world. For Anglicanism is a particular kind of Christian language and 'Christian language began its distinctive life as the speech the community developed for new, shared sense of what was possible for God and humanity.' Anglicanism is well placed to articulate just such new possibilities today.

What has been called the 'skeptical' dimension of Anglican spirituality is still (perhaps more than ever) a necessary contribution to the Christian spectrum. It is the spirit that begins in humility, in the confession that what I see is limited because of my fallen and selfish habits of perception. It is the doctrinal vision itself that teaches this reticence and self-questioning, in other words, the Christian theological world-view is one that, in its very abundance and comprehensiveness, challenges anyone who thinks they have compassed and possessed it in excessively tight formulations.<sup>43</sup>

41. M. Ramsey, *From Gore to Temple* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1960), pp. 169–70.

42. Rowell *et al.*, *Love's Redeeming Work*, p. xxxi.

43. Rowell *et al.*, *Love's Redeeming Work*, p. xxxi.

Anglicanism is not finished. That means that often it is still, as it was in Traherne's day, jagged around the edges, wrangling and wrestling. To its adherents this is an embarrassment; and, although it no comfort to them, it is also a strange sort of strength, for the Anglicanism's gift is its incompleteness, its sense of becoming. Traherne's wrestlings and writings give us a kind of cross-section slice of this – in them we may see not only intimations of what has, since his time, emerged as Anglicanism, incipient Anglicanism if you like, or a historical trail of Anglican thought, but also we may see the *way* in which Anglicans continue to think, the very method or habits of Anglicanism.

Traherne's failure finally to resolve certain issues (such as predestination and free will) in a single pure and perfect doctrine, for instance, or the heated tone and passion of some of his debates, or his insistence on local (by which I mean national as opposed to universal) governance, or his need to hold Scripture, tradition and reason in tension, and his ability to look back to the ancients and ahead to the unknown possibilities of the future and synthesize these disparate and contending voices, all of these features of his work are typical of Anglicanism today. With the bumptious enthusiasm of a boy, Traherne wrote that the doctrine of the Church of England, 'being rightly understood is the most Wholsom and Excellent in the World'.<sup>44</sup> Hundreds of years later Ramsey wrote of the same church, with greater humility but no less love, that although the Anglican church could be proud of its place in history and its balanced witness to the gospel of Christ and to sound learning, its greater vindication lay in its pointing 'through its own history to something of which it is a fragment. Its credentials are its incompleteness, with tension and travail in its soul. It is clumsy and untidy; it baffles neatness and logic. For it is not sent to commend itself as "the best type of Christianity", but by its very brokenness to point to the universal Church wherein all have died.'<sup>45</sup>

That this endearing clumsiness and untidiness carries on into the twenty-first century is not only a sign of brokenness; it is also, to my mind, a sign of hope, for despite the clumsiness of our dealings with one another, the desire for unity remains. While the evangelical arm of the Anglican Communion may emphasize Scripture, the catholic arm tradition, and the liberal arm reason, it is in the balance and interplay

44. Ross, *The Works of Thomas Traherne I*, p. 78.

45. M. Ramsey, *The Gospel and the Catholic Church* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1935), pp. 219–20.

of all that Anglicans believe that revelation is to be found. The greater statement is not that we may disagree, but that we stay together.

Traherne could not have known that the very things he left unresolved, open and unfinished have made him as much of an Anglican as those ideas, works and theories he considered sorted and complete. He loved the Church of England and could not have imagined the eventual rise of global Anglicanism, and yet he was one of those who charted for everyone else, an Anglican way. He loved this way, but he did not arrive at Anglicanism as if it were a neat set of ideas to which he could subscribe. His was a church in transition; faith for him was always a matter of becoming.

All the above having been said, what is really exciting about Traherne is not that he was a 'typical Anglican' but that he was an atypical one. In his poetry and his prose he expands the horizons of all those who read him. He found within nascent Anglicanism a wonderful spaciousness and he adds to that spaciousness in a manner which remains novel and engaging to this day. Traherne was a man of his time but he also opens up questions that concern us now, deep questions about who we are, about what it means to be human, our place in the universe, about our hopes and aspirations, our insatiable demands, our destinies. As David Ford puts it, 'it would be wise for theologians to seek in him a source of the reinvigoration and rejuvenation about which he himself was so perceptive'.<sup>46</sup>

46. D. Ford in Inge, *Wanting Like a God*, p. xii.