Anglican moral theology today

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Abstract
Anglican moral theology is a genealogy, in MacIntyre’s use of this concept. It is a tradition that is handed on from one generation to another, practically and theoretically. Moral theology is part of the tradition of moral virtue, practiced by Christians, in local communities, families, and of course the church. What is distinctive in Anglicanism was that after 1580 there emerged an Anglican tradition of moral enquiry, which recognized the Protestant emphasis on scripture and a quite different role for the clergy, alongside a deep appreciation of the old, pre-Reformation tradition of moral theology. Today, the Anglican exemplary tradition also incorporates debates on sexuality, gender, and questions of identity. In social ethics, postcolonial voices show both the idolatry of political life and how our common life can be a locus of divine grace. Anglican moral theology is both very vibrant and deeply pluralist today.

Keywords
Anglican moral theology, Catholic, exemplary, genealogy, history, identity, justice, virtue

Defining the field
It is a hard task to write about Anglican moral theology at the present time. This is because its very vitality makes it almost impossible to give an overarching account of its current state. On the one hand, there is the vibrancy of the latest academic studies in Christian ethics or moral theology (I discuss the choice of terms below). On the other hand, there are many studies written for clergy and laity as part of a pastoral and spiritual strategy. Finally, there are many expressions of the need for social justice. In terms of what might be called theology written by university academics, these works accept the pluralism of a postsecular world and set out a renewed humanism where the creativity of human beings as agents enables a vision of the person as inhabiting and creating a world of meaning, desire, and love. Such a metaphysic would be true of Anglican moral theologians on both sides of the Atlantic (such as Michael Banner, Nigel Biggar, Sarah Coakley, Oliver O’Donovan, Charles Mathewes, Eugene Rogers, Kathryn Tanner, and Rowan Williams), where the modernist assumptions of fifty years ago, when religion seemed to be on an inevitable decline to
complete social and cultural marginalization, are refuted decisively.¹ There is an alternative Anglican, academic tradition in the founders of Radical Orthodoxy, including John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward.² Radical Orthodoxy itself is an academic school which is ecumenical. More recent writers would include Josh Hordern, Elizabeth Phillips, and Paul Dominiak.³ Both Phillips and Hordern are lay theologians. Phillips explores ethnography and eschatology in her theology. Hordern writes on both political affections and health care.⁴ He is one of the very few theologians who combines moral theology with interfaith dialogue. Dominiak writes about Richard Hooker and metaphysics.

So, the question arises: Are these theologies to be called “Anglican”? Anglicanism is notoriously a difficult concept to define, and there have been several discussions in recent years about the use of the term.⁵ Nevertheless, there is a growing awareness of its dynamic vitality in recent years by many theologians. One of the most acute observers of this renaissance in theology has been Rupert Shortt, using a series of brief works, a biography of Rowan Williams, and pages in his house journal, where he worked for many years, the Times Literary Supplement. Shortt is aware that not all the theologians he describes are Anglican, but many are. Shortt sums up these thinkers as follows: “complementary expressions of ‘humane’ philosophy—an approach to the subject involving holistic visions taking in desire, affect, embodiment and other elements previously dismissed as too subjective by some.”⁶

¹ Oliver O’Donovan, Ethics as Theology (3 vols, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012-2016); Charles T. Mathewes, A Theology of Public Life (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Nigel Biggar, Behaving in Public: How to Do Christian Ethics (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011); Michael Banner, The Ethics of Everyday Life: Moral Theology, Social Anthropology, and the Imagination of the Human (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Rowan Williams, Faith in the Public Square (London: Bloomsbury, 2012); Kathryn Tanner, Christianity, and the New Spirit of Capitalism (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019); Sarah Coakley, The New Asceticism: Sexuality, Gender and the Quest for God (London: Bloomsbury, 2015); Eugene F. Rogers, Jr., Sexuality, and the Christian Body: Their Way into the Triune God (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999).

² John Milbank and Adrian Pabst, The Politics of Virtue: Post-Liberalism and the Human Future (London: Rowan & Littlefield, 2016); Graham Ward, How the Light Gets In: Ethical Life I (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Catherine Pickstock, After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998).

³ Elizabeth Phillips, Political Theology: A Guide for the Perplexed (London: Bloomsbury, 2012); Paul Anthony Dominiak, Richard Hooker: The Architecture of Participation (London: T&T Clark, 2020); Joshua Hordern, Political Affections: Civic Participation and Moral Theology (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁴ Afifi al-Akiti and Joshua Hordern, “New Conversations in Islamic and Christian Political Thought,” Studies in Christian Ethics 29 (2016): 131-34.

⁵ Peter H. Sedgwick, The Origins of Anglican Moral Theology (Boston: Brill, 2019) describes the contemporary debate, including the challenge posed by Stephen Sykes in The Integrity of Anglicanism (London: Mowbray, 1978). See also Paul Avis, The Vocation of Anglicanism (London: Bloomsbury–T&T Clark, 2016).

⁶ Rupert Shortt, “The Return of Religion. The Decade in Review: Metaphysics, Not Just a Candle in the Wind,” Times Literary Supplement, 20-27 December 2019; Rupert Shortt, Rowan’s Rule, 2nd ed. (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2014).
One theologian who did much to set the context for contemporary Anglican moral theology was Dan Hardy, who died in 2007. Hardy was deeply influenced by Samuel Taylor Coleridge in his search for wisdom. Coleridge was concerned with transcendentals, such as truth, goodness, and beauty. They are the fundamental features of creation. What was to be so determinative for moral theology was the concept of the Spirit, or wisdom, being present in this creation, and nourishing those transcendentals, with the church embodying that presence in the divine intensity of love. Two things in particular resonate with the emphases of this article. First, the church as an ecclesial community is intrinsically part of creation and human society, and its vocation is to discern that “sociality” in all its fullness, thus recalling the world to its true nature. There are echoes here too of Richard Hooker. Finally, one could mention F. D. Maurice, another theologian inspired by Coleridge. Coleridge remains a seminal influence today.

Second, Hardy’s fascination with the way history forms and shapes communities, depositing one layer upon another of social practices, customs, and meanings, meant that Hardy’s vision of the present vocation of the church in its engagement with the world and moral action was always a vocation in dialogue with its own history. This history could be one of good or evil, but we are the creatures of our history. This is strikingly resonant with Richard Hooker, and his search for a divine order in church and society, where the transcendental marks of God’s work are shown. Like Hooker, for Hardy the Eucharist is where we participate in that divine order and are renewed to engage again with the moral vocation which God places upon us.

Commenting on Michael Ramsey’s The Gospel and the Catholic Church (1936) as one of the most remarkable English theological works of the twentieth century, Hardy offered his own definition of catholicity. The social ordering of humanity is dependent on the action of God, and the dynamics of human nature and social life is a grace-given universality which is the work of God:

That is the full meaning of catholicity in its Christian sense, the universality in which we live by the grace of God . . . [A]s we enhance the interrelatedness of these dimensions, we are within the universality of the graceful work of God.

7 Daniel W. Hardy, God’s Ways with the World: Thinking and Practising Christian Faith (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 190, referring to Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Aids to Reflection in the Formation of a Manly Character (London: Taylor & Hessey, 1825).
8 Peter H. Sedgwick, “On Anglican Polity,” in Essentials of Christian Community: Essays for Daniel W. Hardy, eds David F. Ford and Dennis L. Stamps (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 202-203, discusses Hooker’s influence on Coleridge. Dominiak’s study also shows Hooker’s concern with transcendentals.
9 Daniel W. Hardy, Finding the Church: The Dynamic Truth of Anglicanism (London: SCM, 2001), 242; Richard Hooker, Of the Lawes of Ecclesiastical Polity, V.67.2; Timothy F. Sedgwick, Sacramental Ethics: Paschal Identity and the Christian Life (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1987), 42; Timothy F. Sedgwick, “The New Shape of Anglican Identity,” Anglican Theological Review’ 77 (1995): 190.
10 Hardy, Finding the Church, 84.
Hardy identifies why it is that it is so hard to achieve the formation of Christian, or even secular, moral character. The

displacement of accepted authorities in truth and morals; plurality and fragmentation of meaning systems; social fragmentation through economics and marketing; [and] isolation of the individual as one who brings coherence of meaning lead to dilemmas in seeking to lead a life under God’s purposes . . . To motivate people requires something strong enough to lift them from their lethargy.11

Hardy sees the major task of Western theological education today is to respond to this agenda. We have to be formed in such a way that our common life is shaped by God’s wisdom, truth, and holiness. His vision, which has so shaped later expressions of Anglican moral theology, was one where

the infinitely intense identity of the Lord is found in the Lord’s active, directed embracing of humanity—with all its possibilities, limitations and failures—in Jesus Christ, and the enduring movement of love and care which flows through and from that in the Holy Spirit.12

There are, however, two further aspects of Anglican moral theology today beyond that of university theology. First, there are those who write, teach, and preach for ordinands, clergy, and their congregations. Central to this world is the rediscovery of “the Anglican exemplary tradition,” to quote the title of one of Timothy Sedgwick’s (no relation) articles.13 Other such writers would be Jason Fout, Christopher Jones, Ross Kane, Benjamin King, Elisabeth Kincaid, Samuel Wells, and scholar-bishops, such as Thomas E. Breidenthal or John Inge. Two who died tragically in the last decade well before their time would be John Hughes and Daniel Westberg, both broadly in the Anglo-Catholic tradition. This is far from an exhaustive list. This group does not make up a school, but its overarching purpose is to enable the riches of the Anglican tradition to be set out afresh for the church as it grapples with the profound and difficult ethical issues of late modernity. Some are parish priests, some work in universities, some in seminaries, some are lay, and some ordained. As decisions about sexuality, technology, and a host of other issues impinge on both the church and the individual moral agent, the continuing relevance of the Anglican tradition is demonstrated once more.

A variant on this would be the “Anglican evangelical tradition,” which again is represented today by many scholars, parish clergy, and bishops. Among them would be Bishops George Sumner, Christopher Cocksworth (and his son Ashley), and N. T. (Tom) Wright, alongside academics such as O’Donovan, the leading voice among evangelical Anglicans in this area, John Goldingay, Phil Turner, and the lay theologians Jonathan Chaplin, Robert Song, and Andrew Goddard.14 Central to this school would

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11 Hardy, Finding the Church, 175-76.
12 Daniel W. Hardy, The Archbishops’ Council, and the Church of England: Considering the Polity (unpublished paper, 2004, reprinted by permission).
13 Timothy F. Sedgwick, “The Anglican Exemplary Tradition,” Anglican Theological Review 94 (2012): 207-31.
14 Robert Song, Covenant and Calling: Towards a Theology of Same-Sex Relationships (London: SCM, 2014).
be hermeneutics and the correct interpretation of scripture, a concern for holiness, an awareness of the ambiguous power of technology and the media, and sometimes an alliance with some Roman Catholic scholars in adopting a countercultural ethic for the church today. Again, the description is too broad-brush, and some would understandably resist labels such as “evangelical” being given to them.

Third, there would be those who articulate the experience of individuals and groups who have been marginalized. Such a wide-ranging description inevitably runs the risk of giving offense, for those who have encountered oppression over sexuality, gender, ethnicity, or class are not to be swept into a neat catch-all category. Some of those who express the justified anger of those groups are themselves part of a marginalized humanity. Others, like the lay theologian Luke Bretherton, have worked for years in community organizing on behalf of such persons before moving into academic life, and there is a close connection between his own experiences and what he writes. His work unites a close attention to the experience of the oppressed and a commitment to community organizing, alongside a deep knowledge of Christian ethics as found in Oliver O’Donovan and Karl Barth.\textsuperscript{15} That would also be true of John Atherton, who died in 2016, and whose father was an English labor organizer (trade unionist). He wrote about economic marginalization in Manchester and its hinterland, achieving an international theological reputation.\textsuperscript{16} A similar figure was Ken Leech, who also died in 2016. He wrote from an explicitly socialist and Anglo-Catholic tradition while also engaging in a wide range of topics: drugs, race, and urban life, all of which were contained within a prophetic spirituality.\textsuperscript{17}

There has then been a renaissance in moral theology. Increasingly, it is written and practiced by those who are not ordained, often by women and those outside the British–U.S. axis. One of the great tensions in Anglican moral theology is also therefore an opportunity. There are many, such as Libby Gibson who is a parish priest in the Episcopal Church, who point to the counternarrative of Anglican ethics, or moral theology, from postcolonial, feminist, and LBGT+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender/transsexual plus) scholars.\textsuperscript{18} For her, and for many others, the issue is not whether moral theology or Christian ethics is the term, but whose voices will be heard in the debate. Later in this article, I put the absolute necessity of listening to “ethics from the other side” (the title of Gibson’s article) alongside Alasdair MacIntyre’s account of genealogy and suggest that this is one of the fundamental challenges to contemporary Anglican moral theology.

My own experience in ecumenical dialogue reflects this. The Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC), which I have belonged to for a decade, is now discussing how the church discerns “right ethical teaching.” My Roman Catholic colleagues

\textsuperscript{15} Luke Bretherton, \textit{Christ and the Common Life: Political Theology and the Case for Democracy} (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2019).

\textsuperscript{16} John Atherton, \textit{Transfiguring Capitalism: An Enquiry into Religion and Global Change} (London: SCM, 2008).

\textsuperscript{17} Kenneth Leech, \textit{The Sky is Red: Discerning the Signs of the Times}, 2nd ed. (London: Darton Longman & Todd, 2003).

\textsuperscript{18} Libby Gibson, “Ethics from the Other Side: Postcolonial, Lay, and Feminist Contributions to Anglican Ethics,” \textit{Anglican Theological Review} 94 (2012): 639-63.
include Sigrid Müller, who is an Austrian laywoman and a senior academic in bioethics; Vimal Tirumanna, who is a Sri Lankan Redemptorist priest teaching in Rome and Sri Lanka; and Al Barrera, a Dominican priest from the Philippines who teaches in the United States. On the Anglican side, I am joined, among others, by Moeawa Callaghan, a Maori laywoman, and Garth Minott, an Anglican priest who is a Jamaican moral theologian. It would be central to many of these scholars that the history of colonial and patriarchal oppression should be heard and reflected in what we write but is often ignored.

However, even allowing for this tension between contextual, postcolonial viewpoints and a traditional understanding of moral theology, what is striking is the degree of convergence in the members from our two traditions, Anglican and Roman Catholic. Common to us both is an emphasis on the provisionality of moral judgment, the role of conscience guided by the Holy Spirit, the place of experience, and the instinct of all the baptized for what is pastorally and morally appropriate (the term *sensus fidelium* is the technical phrase). Both sets of moral theologians in this dialogue value the tradition, which was common up to the Reformation and then diverged, but above all, both know that moral theology is a discipline to guide the baptized in the complex and tricky waters of debate on many vexed and heated areas: sexuality, justice for the poor, bioethics and end-of-life issues, climate change—the list could be extended further.

There is no simple way to articulate an overarching description of such a fractured, if vibrant, reality as the current state of Anglican moral theology, faced as it is with two overwhelming forces. One is the speed of social, economic, technological, and cultural change. The other is the degree of brokenness within the Anglican Communion on issues such as sexuality, gender, and race, which has repeatedly threatened to break apart the Communion into a schism which cannot be repaired. The *Anglican Theological Review* has a unique role in providing a place where all three groups—academics, those concerned with pastoral ministry, and those struggling for justice—can be heard. Yet despite this, there remains much confusion. This is a common concern today among ethicists.

As one example out of many, Mathewes writes,

>Certainly, the gradual inclusion of a truly diverse range of voices and perspectives has enormously enriched theological discussion. But the expansion of the field to embrace new voices and perspectives has not really transformed theological-ethical discourse, but only metastasized new subfields, each with its distinct dialect, in which parallel projects are often pursued, typically in (minimally) verbally respectful independence from one another . . . These fields produce manifold insights about the churches, the world, human being, and God, but rarely does anyone try to bring those insights and voices together. Contemporary theology is less a Pentecost than a Babel of voices, with everyone speaking and no one listening.19

That would certainly be true of Anglican moral theology at all levels, from academic discourse to debates in parishes. Nevertheless, in all this confusion, there is an enthusiasm and liveliness that should be respected. It is far from a slow decline into an irrelevant discipline with platitudes being uttered on all sides.

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19 Charles Mathewes, “A Response to Oliver O’Donovan’s *Ethics as Theology* Trilogy,” *Modern Theology* 36 (2020): 166.
Even the divisions given so far are much too simple. One further point should be noted. A few people, such as myself, have crossed these divides, by teaching in universities, working as a parish priest, and running a seminary while also being involved in social responsibility (for eight years I was the Church of England’s policy officer on criminal justice, briefing bishops in the House of Lords, visiting prisons, and working with grassroots coalitions on a wide range of issues from abuse and racism to domestic violence). Yet the degree of divergence between the different voices in Anglican moral theology is such that it may rather be better to stay in one area, such as academia, as Sarah Coakley has done, and reach out to other people elsewhere.²⁰ At the end of a working life, one can only look back and say that is what one has done and offer some vantage point. In retirement, I am both writing a multivolume history of Anglican moral theology and living on a deprived estate where my wife is the parish priest and where I help to run a charity for destitute asylum seekers.

The approach of this article will be to look at the difference between the terms “moral theology” and “Christian ethics,” and then to offer a genealogical account of Anglican moral theology. This is then contrasted with the rigorous approach of those scholars, such as O’Donovan, who use the tradition but are strongly opposed both to any reliance on a historicism that sees the tradition as constantly evolving and is critical of virtue ethics. I then turn to the exemplary tradition, in terms of both its practice of moral discernment and casuistry, and its spirituality. Finally, I consider the issue of justice, both in the Anglican tradition and in the Communion today. One interesting development is that both Atherton and Bretherton have constructed their social ethics as a triad, moving first to giving close attention to contemporary social and political experience in which they personally were deeply involved, second placing the use of modern theology alongside the social sciences, and third articulating their own evaluation of the Anglican social ethics tradition.

**Christian ethics or moral theology?**

Why use the term “Anglican moral theology”? Moral reasoning within the Christian church can be described in terms of either Christian ethics or moral theology. Christian ethics is the more familiar Protestant term and is concerned with defining concepts of right and wrong, obligation, intention, and the nature of a moral act from a Christian perspective. The discipline of Christian ethics would draw on the Bible, the Christian tradition, philosophical principles and methods, the natural and social sciences as sources of knowledge about the world, and human experience. It is the biblical narrative that is the predominant source of ethical reasoning, as many contemporary Christian ethicists would attest.

If that is how Christian ethics is defined, what then of moral theology? It has also been used by Anglicans since the seventeenth century to indicate the close relationship between moral theology and other aspects of theology, doctrinal, spiritual, and pastoral.

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²⁰ Samuel Wells and Sarah Coakley, eds, *Praying for England: Priestly Presence in Contemporary Culture* (London: Continuum, 2008) is one attempt to bridge the worlds of academia, parish, and social justice.
The distinctive feature of moral theology is that the study of Christian moral behavior cannot be separated from the search for God in spirituality and the centrality of corporate prayer. The presence of the Holy Spirit within a person’s inner being, or guiding the deliberations of a church body, has to be related to moral reasoning. So, spirituality and moral theology are inevitably closely related.

There is also a strong argument against the term. It has been seen as clerical and elitist. Jeremy Taylor, who was perhaps the greatest Anglican moral theologian until his early death in 1667 and who shaped moral theology thereafter up to the present, was greatly indebted to Roman Catholic moral theology in the seventeenth century, but he also insisted that “the laws of Jesus Christ are the measures of the Spirit and are always to be extended by a spiritual signification.” Furthermore, Taylor wrote, “Humane laws can exact but the outward action; they neither can command the understanding, nor judge the will.”

Taylor could be critical of Catholic legalism. He also sought to instruct lay people not simply in what they should do, but how to reason for themselves. He engaged, in one of his many letters, with a woman who may well have discussed her same-sex attraction. Before he left for Ireland, Taylor had a large number of people who visited him for advice, followed by extensive correspondence. A second argument against the use of the term moral theology is that the discipline has suffered greatly from being a specialist practice, using archaic Aristotelian terminology, which those not trained in found hard to understand.

How then can the term “moral theology” be redeemed? In all of this, what must be held together is the need to appreciate how first we discern what is true, good, and right and also our formation into this through being formed into the “mind of Christ.” Second, however, there is a deep realization that again and again those who have practiced this tradition have, whether consciously or not, privileged their own views over those who were different from them: those who have been ignored have been women, those of different sexual orientation and/or race, or simply those who were poor. This leaves two great challenges. First, how does the tradition incorporate “the other,” and second, can the Anglican moral tradition retain its meaning if it changes in such a dramatic manner? There are no easy answers to these questions.

The term Anglican moral theology in this article has two meanings. First, it is theological ethics, or moral theology, which is practiced by Anglicans. This is developed further below in the discussion of genealogy. Second, it denotes a certain type of moral theology,
which is pastoral, open, and concerned with both holiness and human flourishing. John Booty emphasized Hooker’s belief that God reveals the laws that lead to perfect happiness for human beings.24 Ellen Charry in The Vocation of Anglican Theology has a chapter on “The Beauty of Holiness: Practical Divinity.” She includes texts from the writings of Hooker, Taylor, Newman, and Temple, as well as from the 1547 Book of Homilies.25 The list of such surveys could be extended at length, but the point is surely made.

Anglican moral theology is pastoral rather than juridical. It is not about determining the right decisions in the administration of the sacrament of penance, or confession, as in much Roman Catholic moral theology since the Reformation. Nor is it primarily about obedience to the Word of God, as in Calvinism and Lutheranism. Instead, it presupposes a community in which Anglican moral theology will be exercised, a priest or pastor who will lead that community and an awareness that living together in community throws up difficult and searching questions, in terms both of social justice and of personal morality.26

Moral theology as a genealogy

Anglican moral theology is a tradition that is handed on from one generation to another. In the last few decades, principally through the work of Alasdair MacIntyre, philosophers and theologians have come to see how ideas are part of a living community that embodies a tradition and passes it on.27 This is absolutely true of Anglican moral theology. But it is not a smooth ride. MacIntyre’s work shows how traditions encounter new realities, adapt, split from their parent body, and sometimes die. Genealogy is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as “ancestry, descent, lineage, line of descent.” Every genealogy has an origin or origins. It is where one tradition breaks down and gives birth to another.

A tradition is both theoretical and practical. The philosopher must ask, “What is the good specific to human beings?” However, the good for human beings consists in the practice of moral knowledge, the practice of the virtues, and the experience of the virtues directing one’s will. This practical activity leads to what Aquinas calls knowledge by “connaturality.” This means that one comes to know the good by taking part in local communities, the church, and one’s own household without ever asking explicit philosophical questions. Each of these communities, if they are coherent and hold together, can be described as a tradition.

In MacIntyre’s terms, moral theology is part of the tradition of moral virtue, practiced by Christians, in local communities, families, and, of course, the church. In terms of connaturality, Aquinas gives an example from observing sexual morality. Aquinas wrote,

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24 John Booty, Reflections on the Theology of Richard Hooker: An Elizabethan Addresses Modern Anglicanism (Sewanee, TN: University of the South Press, 1998), 178. See also Dominiak, Richard Hooker, 35-61.
25 Ellen Charry, “The Beauty of Holiness: Practical Divinity,” in The Vocation of Anglican Theology, ed. Ralph McMichael (London: SCM, 2014), 196-243.
26 Sedgwick, Origins, 11.
27 Alasdair MacIntyre, Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), 128-29.
Thus, about matters of chastity, a man after inquiring with his reason forms a right judgment, if he has learnt the science of morals, while he who has the habit of chastity judges of such matters by a kind of connaturality.

It is the practice of what Aquinas calls “a habit” that leads to the daily practice of a way of life, often unthinkingly. Actions realize ends, and those ends build up the good of that community. In turn, those communities as they pass on their good form a tradition. Individual acts can be seen, first as being grouped together as larger acts, such as caring for a family, which are then called “practices”—the practice of child-rearing being one obvious example. In turn, these practices contribute to a larger purpose, such as living the Christian life.

As Timothy Sedgwick writes, any desire to be conformed to the mind of Christ is never exhausted by a particular action. Yet nevertheless, the tradition stresses the need to be faithful, to repeat actions, and to grow in one’s practices. As noted above, much of this can be done without specific reasons or deliberation being given, except by those whose purpose is to reflect on the tradition. Such people were the moral theologians. However, as Nicholas Healy says, that reflection was not theoretical, for its own sake. In the Christian tradition, theology was done to train people in preaching the Gospel and forming others into being followers of Christ.

Theoretical questions only arise for all the members of a tradition (community, family, church) when situations of great change arise. In such situations, we are forced back to ask new theoretical questions. So, what of Protestantism, and what can be called with hindsight Anglicanism? (Again, I write with a full awareness of its contested origins in the seventeenth century and then becoming a self-description of the Anglican Communion in the nineteenth century.) One of the greatest crises in the history of Western thought occurred at the Reformation. This was no theoretical debate. At every level, from the local church to the emerging nation-state, there were violent clashes, including the destruction of the monasteries throughout what was to become Protestant Europe, with their tradition of moral theology.

This break in theological and philosophical development led to an abandonment in the new Protestant churches of received ideas of the church, the role of clergy, and the practice of moral virtue. Nominalism, which was already present in the fifteenth century, became dominant in the Reformers and led to the end of the understanding of God and human beings as part of a single, intelligible world, where moral virtue could be a path that led one back to God. This was replaced by an emphasis on divine commands, the gulf between God and humanity, and the omnipresence of sin. It is also the case that some Reformers continued to work within a Thomist-virtue ethics understanding of the moral life, but the emphasis was increasingly on the fallenness of humanity.

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28 Sedgwick, “Exemplary Tradition,” 210.

29 Nicholas M. Healy, *Thomas Aquinas: Theologian of the Christian Life* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), 47.

30 Alec Ryrie, “The Reformation in Anglicanism,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Anglican Studies*, eds Mark D. Chapman, Sathianathan Clarke, and Martyn Percy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 34-45.
This could have led to the abandonment of moral theology, and it did so in much of Protestant Europe. What is distinctive in Anglicanism was that after 1580 there emerged an Anglican tradition of moral enquiry, which recognized both the Protestant emphasis on scripture and a quite different role for the clergy, alongside a deep appreciation of the old, pre-Reformation tradition of moral theology, including Aquinas. This understanding developed because of the turn by Anglican theologians to the sources—scriptural, patristic, and medieval—which shaped that understanding. In MacIntyre’s account of a genealogy, Anglicanism holds the two traditions of medieval (and patristic) theology and Protestantism together in tension and unites them by its emphasis on worship and pastoral care. The tension, however, always remains. This is the Anglican exemplary tradition.

That understanding of moral theology from 1590 to 1690 itself developed over time and has determined what it means to speak of Anglican moral theology. Anglican moral theology in William Perkins, Robert Sanderson, Hooker, and Taylor somehow held together the insights of the Reformation with the older medieval and patristic tradition. What was more, these theologians shaped generations both of clergy and of laity in the practice of moral theology. It was biblical, rejected a view of the clergy as primarily there to celebrate the Mass and offer priestly absolution, and more positively emphasized the pastoral and spiritual role of the clergy in guiding their congregations.

If MacIntyre’s argument is to be accepted, then what matters is that this Anglican tradition is of intrinsic value, embodied in acts and in the creation of institutions. In other words, we need accounts of local church history where the church is seen in its full social context and where the tradition of moral action (the pursuit of virtue) can be studied in depth. This is not simply a focus on ecclesiastical life, but rather on the church with its religious faith interacting with a local community. The emphasis on liturgy, especially the sacraments, as shaping those who participate in it is striking. Hooker, above all, lays emphasis on this, and this has resonated throughout the history of Anglicanism.31 What is required are historical accounts of the local church as it expresses its faith and beliefs in daily life. There was, however, an implicit, and sometimes explicit, hostility to religious practice among historians in the 1960s, when I first studied history at Cambridge, and a reluctance to take religious belief on its own terms. The belief then among historians was that religious practice was simply something to be interpreted, with the underlying reality being class struggle or political conflict.

That argument would be rejected today by most, if not all, historians. It now seems an argument which is misguided and biased against religious faith. It is important to realize the extent to which historians now see previous religious practice as having been vibrant and innovatory. There has been outstanding work done in the last fifty years on how religious belief shaped the lives of local communities, individual lives, and, of course, the churches. The reevaluation of the churches and of historical theology by historians has been especially marked in the United States.32 In the work of many historians writing

31 Richard Hooker, Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity, V.67.2. Sedgwick, “The New Shape of Anglican Identity,” 188-91.
32 William J. Bulman, Anglican Enlightenment: Orientalism, Religion and Politics in England and its Empire, 1648–1715 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).
today, the churches are seen as having contributed much to human civilization. Because of this, we can see how MacIntyre’s account of how traditions grow and develop over long periods of time can be instantiated in historical accounts. The relationship of moral theology to history is that moral discernment investigates how one might act, and local history records the outcome.

However, things are not that simple. The importance of religious belief and practice in history remains despite the recent emphasis (as mentioned above) on how racist, sexist, and oppressive much past culture and hegemony actually were. Given that the church was part of local culture, it is right to uncover the distortions in practicing the moral life. The work of those like Willie James Jennings in showing the genealogy of racism in the churches is crucial to a reexamination of that tradition.33

MacIntyre gives a helpful account of how conflicting traditions can learn the language of each other’s traditions and move to a stage where each protagonist can recognize what is of value in each other’s standpoint. This is certainly the situation in ecumenical dialogue, but if the challenge from postcolonial, feminist, and other moral theologians can also make up an alternative tradition, even one that is not a unified whole, then accepting their criteria of evaluation becomes crucial. As Bretherton says, this is a way of taking down “the defensive walls between one’s tradition and that of another so as to engage in dialogue.” Bretherton notes that this moves beyond tolerance. It is surely the way forward for Anglican moral theology.34

The moral self

Let me turn aside from this account to give some indication of one of the greatest achievements in the last decade in Anglican moral theology. Oliver O’Donovan has been the leading Anglican ethicist for more than thirty years. Now aged seventy-five, he is the author of two series of volumes, as well as countless studies on topics ranging from bioethics and Just War theory, through to sexuality. He has also been a dedicated contributor to Anglican working parties, whether in the Church of England or the Anglican Communion. The first series of books ran from 1986 to 2005. The first is a volume on the objectivity of the created order in the light of both the resurrection of Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit. The other two volumes fashion a political theology, critical of modernity and liberalism, while affirming the centrality of political institutions. The second series is a trilogy, Ethics as Theology. The first volume of this trilogy outlines the moral life, the self as agent, and the necessity of response to the world we inhabit. O’Donovan believes that objective reality is constantly evaluated both descriptively and prescriptively, in the search to discover objective moral truth. Nevertheless, we are fallen, limited creatures who know only in part. Our subjectivity bodies forth in “faith,” as we receive intuitions from outside ourselves. We live in hope as we are oriented to the pursuit of future and finite goods that will bless us. We also live in love for the world that we

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33 Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011).
34 Bretherton, *Christ and the Common Life*, 275-76.
receive as a gift from God. Faith, hope, and love are therefore virtues which O’Donovan correlates with self, time, and the world.

The third volume, *Entering into Rest* (2017), is a study of love. O’Donovan claims that the eschatological orientation of moral theology can provide a future judgment on our actions, with the promise of fulfillment. This claim is set by O’Donovan over against secular ethics, whether deontological, virtue-based, or utilitarian. This gospel-normed ethic allows the experience of the everyday world, where Christianity no longer speaks, to be transformed in a neo-Augustinian ethic that holds out to the church the reality and promise of sanctification in God’s glory. There is a deep meditation on suffering and death.35

In a highly perceptive review of the third volume of *Ethics as Theology*, James Orr draws attention to O’Donovan’s view of moral theology as a “conversation” between past and present, a metaphor much favored also by Rowan Williams:

> As a method, it is well-suited to Anglican moral theology, which from the Caroline Divines to Joseph Butler and Kenneth Kirk has been suspicious of the prescriptive formalism of the Reformed tradition, while at the same time lacking the ballast of magisterial authority or the cumulative coherence of the encyclical tradition that sustains Catholic moral theology.36

Does this mean that O’Donovan wishes to be called an Anglican theologian? There is certainly a defense of Hooker’s understanding of reason, but O’Donovan is cautious overall:37

> If Anglican theologians today are more inclined to such projects than they once were . . . that may reflect the loss of a characteristic Anglican confidence that practice, not theory, was what sustained the tradition. *Ethics as Theology* does not wear its Anglican identity on its sleeve, but it shares the dilemma of contemporary Anglican theology about its starting points. Fragmenting liturgies and broken relationships have put Anglican theologians back where they were in the sixteenth century before there was a tradition to sustain. The orderly arrangement and derivation of topics will now be more of a goal than a preconceived design . . . It confronts the breaking wave of practical novelty and may sometimes be permitted to address the wave prophetically.38

O’Donovan expresses a concern here about the speed of liturgical change and the deep fractures within the Anglican Communion.

**The Anglican exemplary tradition**

My argument is that in the genealogy of Anglican moral theology, one tradition is central, which is the exemplary one. This tradition is about the expression of piety, the

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35 Oliver O’Donovan, *Entering into Rest: Ethics as Theology, Volume 3* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017), 200ff.
36 James Orr, “Morality of Love: The Common Sense of Christian Communication,” *Times Literary Supplement*, 20 April 2018.
37 Oliver O’Donovan, *Self, World, and Time: Ethics as Theology, Volume 1* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013), 77.
38 Oliver O’Donovan, “Some Reactions from the Ground,” *Modern Theology* 36 (2020): 193.
search for a life of virtue, and the channeling of desire. The great masters of the Anglican virtue ethics tradition are Jeremy Taylor, Joseph Butler, F. D. Maurice, and Kenneth Kirk. The tradition goes back to the seventeenth century. Taylor wrote *Holy Living* (1650) to demonstrate the moral implications of “the new covenant” established by Christ. This divine covenant, sealed by his death, established a relationship of mutual responsibility between God and humanity. Obedience is necessary to enter the new covenant established by Christ: it is not offered to us without cost.

Another of his books was an account of the life of “the holy Jesus,” entitled *The Great Exemplar* (1649). The Christian moral life was an imitation of the apostles. It was therefore a very biblically centered moral theology. Jesus was “the great exemplar.” Taylor not only stressed the reality and gravity of sin, but also underlined the need for structure and direction to become holy people. Our life is to be one of holiness, where our intentions are transformed by grace. The covenant begins at baptism and is realized in the remainder of our life, nourished by the Eucharist. The illustrations of this life are there in the Gospels, especially but not only in the Sermon on the Mount (the Beatitudes). The Eucharist reenacts the pattern of Jesus’ death and makes it effective in our own lives.

Taylor united intense devotion with moral guidance. What is needed in the Christian is a meditation on one’s actions. By so doing, intent and desire can be transformed. Timothy Sedgwick, who has done much to bring Taylor to the attention of the contemporary church, writes,

> Through prayers of examination and repentance, praise and thanksgiving, intercession and petition, intentions are formed and transformed. As a Christian, theocentric vision, an exemplary ethic has the specific task of developing the meditations that form the minds of individuals so that they deepen their sense of the presence of God in their lives.39

The Anglican tradition developed after 1690 to include in the eighteenth century Butler’s work on the emotions and the objectivity of the moral order, and in the nineteenth century both the Anglican Newman’s (before his conversion to Rome), in his sermons, and Maurice’s account of how baptism reveals a sacramental vision of our common humanity. In the twentieth century, we find Kirk’s account of casuistry, alongside William Temple’s writings on John’s gospel, social justice, and the Christian moral vision. Another writer who stressed the incarnation and social justice at the end of the nineteenth century was Bishop Brooke Foss Westcott. In all of this, the tradition continued to develop. Furthermore, it was embodied in churches, social action, and political life. This is central to the validity of its continuing relevance.

There is, however, also a way in which the virtue ethics tradition can destroy itself. Throughout Anglican moral theology, there has been a concern that the freedom of the Christian gospel can be turned from a message of promise to one of law. The Anglican theologian Kenneth Kirk, who was also Bishop of Oxford from 1937 to 1954, wrote his major work, *The Vision of God*, in 1931. He traced the struggle in the church with what he called formalism and rigorism. Formalism meant a regard for Christian teaching, as enshrined in the church’s laws, which obeyed the church’s authority out of fear of

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39 Sedgwick, “Exemplary Tradition,” 217.
punishment. The minimum of obedience was therefore given by those who sought to avoid discipline. Not only did this collapse when the church lost both legal and moral authority, it was also inadequate to a life of virtue. Formalism also reduced ethical practice to a set of prohibitions and rules, losing the interaction of the practice of conscience and immersion in worship which alone could produce sanctity. Worse still, formalism led those outside the church to see the Gospel as punitive and judgmental.

Rigorism led to a concern with exactitude of behavior. Kirk quoted Peter’s speech at Jerusalem (Acts 15:10): “Why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear?” Rigorism led to an overemphasis on asceticism. Finally, Kirk identified institutionalism or the issue of corporate discipline as another constant issue in the encouragement of sanctity. Today, nearly a century later, there is both continuity and discontinuity. The continuity is that the issues remain pressing, especially in terms of sexuality. An overreliance on biblical literalism can both threaten the unity of the Anglican Communion and damage the integrity of ecclesial relationships.

This leaves a profoundly difficult issue. If the lifestyle required by the gospel can issue in demands which indeed seem punitive and overconcerned with the exactitude of behavior, how then should corporate discipline be expressed? Above all, what demands should a Christian make of themselves? Such questions have threatened to divide the Anglican Communion. The vast majority of the writers surveyed here would not see sexuality as being a dividing issue, but there would be certainly be opposition to this view. Kirk’s concerns have been reformulated by Timothy Sedgwick. Today, the challenges are the forming of conscience; the question of catholicity and indigenization; and mission in a post-Christian, secular world. “Indigenization” should be broadened to include the voice of “the other,” from postcolonial theology to theologies of personal identity.

Finally, there is much contemporary writing on the interrelationship of the spiritual life and moral discernment. As mentioned above, the Christian moral life is shaped by its encounter with worship, and in particular the sacramental life of the church. One could point to such Anglican theologians as Timothy Sedgwick, Rowan Williams, David Brown, and Sarah Coakley on the importance of the spiritual life and the practice of individual and corporate prayer for moral discernment. These writers discuss how our moral judgment can be purified and strengthened by purgation and contemplation, and they also refer to such writers as Jeremy Taylor in the Anglican tradition.

Justice

Finally, there is the church’s contribution to the pursuit of justice, whether at the global level or in the life of the local parish. This is perhaps where the greatest change has been

40 Kenneth E. Kirk, *The Vision of God: The Christian Doctrine of the Summum Bonum* (London: Longmans, Green, 1931).

41 Kathryn Tanner, “Hooker and the New Puritans,” in *Authorizing Marriage? Canon, Tradition, and Critique in the Blessing of Same-Sex Unions*, ed. Mark D. Jordan (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 121-38, is a classic use of Hooker to deny that the issue of sexuality should be church dividing.

42 Sedgwick, “The New Shape of Anglican Identity,” 193.
in the last fifty years. From 1945 until the 1970s, the foundation of the modern, prosperous, Western democratic order was laid in society and economics. The Anglican Communion accepted cautiously the use of contraception at the 1930 Lambeth Conference and strengthened this decision in 1958. 43 William Temple’s *Christianity and Social Order* (1942) was influential in preparing the way for the acceptance of the welfare state in 1945. It called for the provision of universal access to health care, education, decent housing, proper working conditions, and democratic representation. Otto Nolde, a Lutheran theologian from Philadelphia, helped draft the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which the United Nations accepted in 1948. So, there was a feeling in the 1950s and 1960s that many major ethical decisions had been made and embodied a Christian moral outlook, except perhaps divorce.

The remaining issues included whether Just War could include nuclear weapons; the environment, including decisions on nuclear power; and medical ethics. Theologians of the caliber of John Habgood, Archbishop of York, worked with the World Council of Churches on these topics. Others in the United Kingdom included Ronald Preston, who stood in the Temple tradition. Bishop Richard Harries and Robin Gill specialized in medical ethics. Speaking personally, this is where I began writing as a moral theologian in the 1980s. The strength of this tradition is threefold. First, it is deeply concerned with the flourishing of civil society through the service of others. What matters is how institutions help both individuals and communities to become what God created them to be. Second, the churches have a long and distinguished record of working with those who bear great responsibility in their particular field. Third, the transformation of institutions takes time. Patient engagement was necessary. One example would be Mike Higton’s *A Theology of Higher Education*, with its second part being about “An Anglican Theology of Learning,” which is spelled out in subsequent chapters in terms of virtue, goodness, and sociability. 44

This world changed dramatically in the 1970s. By the 1980s, three things were very evident. First, the welfare consensus had broken down politically with Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan. The opposition to the Vietnam War, where William Stringfellow was prominent in the United States as a lay Anglican theologian, had now resulted in a general disengagement from the idea of nuclear deterrence, especially in the writings and campaigning of Rowan Williams. John Atherton and others began to argue that issues of poverty and marginalization remained endemic in Western democracies. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, Luke Bretherton provided the most articulate voice in Anglican social ethics, engaging with a whole range of theologies, including classical Anglican texts, O’Donovan, Pentecostalism, black and womanist theologies, as well as the context of community organizing, where he began his own campaigning. 45 The concern was that the older tradition was elitist and complicit, in Stanley Hauerwas’ view, with a dominant cultural liberalism. He and others called for a return to the life of the local church, with worship and communal identity being central.

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43 Peter Sedgwick, “The Lambeth Conferences on Contraception, 1908–68,” *Theology* 123 (2020): 95-103.
44 Mike Higton, *A Theology of Higher Education* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).
45 Luke Bretherton, *Christianity and Contemporary Politics: The Conditions and Possibilities of Faithful Witness* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2010).
Second, personal ethics became far more concerned with debates on sexuality, gender, and questions of identity. This had simply been a minority interest of Anglican theologians from the 1940s until the late 1960s, but this changed dramatically by the late 1970s. Here, the issue also became ecclesiological, with questions of the ordination first of women and then of LGBT+ people. At the same time, the whole concept of marriage and personal relationships was rethought, with feminism, gender, and queer theories being central. This debate has of course been ongoing in the Anglican Communion for over forty years, with the *Anglican Theological Review* hosting debates on sexuality in its pages.46

Third, there is the articulation of postcolonial voices. A number of those were women, such as Esther Mombo in Uganda, Jenny Te Paa Daniel in New Zealand, and Kwok Pui-lan, who is originally from Hong Kong but now teaches in the United States.47 Others would include D. H. Kortright Davis, who was on ARCIC II, and his expression of a Caribbean liberation theology.48 Some of my colleagues on ARCIC would certainly identify with this expression of contextual ethics and liberation theology. Gary Dorrien has charted the multifaceted expression of social ethics today in his recent book.49

This does not mean that the previous account of social justice has ceased to exist. As the examples of Higton and Gill show clearly, it continues in many diverse ways. In the Church of England, Malcolm Brown has carried it forward with great skill as a church official, while Mathewes reflects on public life in the United States.50 Another highly prolific writer is Sam Wells, with his focus on empowering people to regain control of their lives. He seeks a move away from providing welfare to local church action and creativity.51 In a similar way, Mathewes is concerned with “how one’s religious community might understand its own participation and speak out of that participation in a way that invites others to see it from one’s own perspective.”52 All three are highly informed by conversations with economists, sociologists, and psychologists. Mathewes puts it well in an interview:

So by talking about the liturgy of citizenship what I’m really trying to talk about is the idea that political life has dangerous temptations toward idolatry, but also, in a way, it can be a locus of grace. It can be not only iconic but . . . sacramental, a way in which God’s presence is visibly and palpably experienced.53

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46 See, for example, its thematic issue devoted to “Same-Sex Relationships in the Life of the Church,” *Anglican Theological Review* 93 (Winter 2011).
47 Kwok Pui-lan, *Introducing Asian Feminist Theology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000).
48 D. H. Kortright Davis, *Emancipation Still Comin’: Explorations in Caribbean Emancipatory Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2008); “Anglican Vintage, Values, and Virtues with Vitality,” *Anglican Theological Review* 94 (2012): 671-78.
49 Gary Dorrien, *Social Democracy in the Making: Political and Religious Roots of European Socialism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019); “Economic Democracy as Political Theology: The British Anglican Socialist Tradition,” *Anglican Theological Review* 102 (2020): 539-73.
50 Malcolm Brown, *Anglican Social Theology: Renewing the Vision Today* (London: Church House, 2014).
51 Samuel Wells, *For Good: The Church and the Future of Welfare* (Norwich: Canterbury, 2017).
52 *The Boisi Center Interviews* 13, Boisi Center for Religion and American Public Life, Boston College (11 October 2007): 2, https://www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/centers/boisi/pdf/f07/13%20Matthewes%20interview.pdf.
Conclusion

The contemporary vitality of Anglican moral theology is as evident as its fragmentation. Some theologians, such as Coakley, Mathewes, and Bretherton, attempt the difficult task of placing themselves in the Anglican tradition while attempting three further tasks. First, they write at the highest reaches of academic theology. Second, they also engage with the pastoral tradition in Anglicanism, which is, as I have sought to show above, most clearly found in the exemplary tradition. Third, they also seek to be open to those who campaign from an awareness of feminism, race, and poverty.

When Kirk gave the Bampton lectures in 1928 which became *The Vision of God* (undoubtedly the greatest work of Anglican moral theology in the first half of the twentieth century), he was deeply aware that the Church of England had lost its social and cultural hegemony. It spoke to an increasingly non-Christian society. Yet he stood firmly in a received tradition and never doubted its validity. Today, the pluralism of the tradition is a central feature of Anglican moral theology.

Two issues, therefore, are a fitting note to end on. First, can the fragmentation in Anglican moral theology be healed, without sacrificing the vitality of any of its constituent parts? The Communion has extraordinary theological vitality and yet is deeply threatened in its very being. That is a deeply paradoxical position. The ARCIC report *Walking Together on the Way* has sought to address this very point.°4 Second, and in one way the same question, can there be the reconciliation of views which Bretherton and others have put forward as the answer to the conflict in the tradition which is Anglican moral theology? The tradition of Anglican moral theology is immensely full of promise and creativity today, but there are enormous tensions within the tradition on the very meaning of justice. The challenge remains. “For the Lord is righteous; he loves justice. The just will see his face.”°55

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53 Boist Center Interviews, 7.
54 Third Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission, *Walking Together on the Way: Learning to Be the Church—Local, Regional, Universal* (London: SPCK, 2018).
55 Psalms 11:7.