

BOOK REVIEW

Scott MacDougall, *The Shape of Anglican Theology: Faith Seeking Wisdom* (Brill, 2022), pp.153. ISBN-13 9789004517851 (pbk), €84.00; ISBN: 9789004517929 (E-Book), €70.00

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Anglicanism is sometimes criticized for not having a definitive core theology from which the issues and challenges of the day can be addressed with clarity and unanimity. Whereas other denominational traditions might have a founding theologian, like Luther or the Augsburg Confession for the Lutheran tradition or John Wesley for Methodism, or a centralized theological secretariat for the Roman Catholic Church, providing a clear body of theology from which to derive applications, Anglicanism does not have this, which makes it vulnerable to the above mentioned criticism.

In this book, Scott MacDougall offers a commentary on Anglican theology (rather than Anglican theologians), which turns the tables on this. The absence of a definitive core theology is presented as more of a strength than a weakness because it causes Anglicans to think through and work out the most appropriate perspective for their own context and moment. Rather than offering a core from which theological content is deduced, the Anglican theological tradition offers a set of methodological principles. This can be used for ‘a corporate and dialogical search for the Christian wisdom needed for good discernment exercised lovingly, carried out in light of its authoritative sources by a judicious and humble application of reason, broadly construed. This will be completed with critical reference to Christian and Anglican tradition, situated in and in dynamic conversation with the various elements of a concrete historical, geographical, and cultural context’. He adopts the phrase *fides quaerens sapientiam* (faith seeking wisdom) to sum up this promising approach.

In a fresh way, the book distinguishes between how the tradition provides boundaries within which such discernment takes place and how it has an interior of distinctive characteristics which its theology tends to embody. So it presents certain boundary markers, including Anglican comprehensiveness and the principle of *via media* (both understood as processes of engagement rather than fixed positions between other extremes), also the appeal to scripture, tradition and reason, and the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral, as demarcating an intellectual space within which Anglican theology is done. MacDougall offers a high view of the last of these,

drawing out the way the Quadrilateral makes certain objects and practices rather than confessional statements the basis of Anglican thinking. But he is very clear that scripture is the primary authority, with reason and tradition offering supportive roles (as in Richard Hooker's famous definition of these three authorities). Memorably he tells us to 'burn the stool', the oft mentioned three-legged stool which gives the three an equal place in guiding Anglican practice, to recover the proper shape of Anglican theology in which scripture is primary. This first half of the book, which sets out these boundaries, is memorably described as a beating of the bounds, which are theological rather than parochial boundaries.

The second half of the book then moves from the general shape of Anglican theological practice to a set of characteristics generally found within that practice, characteristics of the interior, as it were, which also help to define what it is. MacDougall is clear that he is not offering a definitive once-and-for-all set of characteristics but those which have become apparent to him and others at this moment of the tradition's history. Others could emerge in due course. Here he lists Anglican theology being scriptural ('deeply biblical'), how it is conversant with the Christian past and its meanings for the present, how it is non-confessional, critical, primarily pastoral and practical rather than speculative, rooted firmly in prayer and worship, with an emphasis on the incarnation, and responsive to concrete named questions rather than constructive of systematic theological edifices. MacDougall adds that the presence of any single one of these characteristics is insufficient to characterize a theology as Anglican, since none of these characteristics belong to Anglicanism alone. Rather, it is when they are combined and in conversation with each other and with their context that it can be said a typically Anglican theological imagination is at work. Some critics might find this definition too imprecise to be useful; others will see it as helpfully flexible and inclusive. MacDougall introduces the concept of 'characterological analysis', to be applied to a given work as a whole, to determine whether it is Anglican: 'It is only by tasting the entire dish rather than by sampling only one or two of its ingredients that the taster, if they have a palate experienced in discerning its notes, will be able to assess the extent to which the finished work is imbued with the flavour profile of Anglican theology's distinctive spices.' This raises the question of whether such a mix of ingredients can find expression in non-Western and postcolonial contexts. It is noticeable that there are hardly any references to authors beyond the European and North American regions throughout the book, which suggests not, but early in the book the possibility of Anglican theology being produced beyond the 'North Atlantic' is opened up, and, to be fair, MacDougall has been a keen promoter of non-Western Anglican theology in the ongoing Anglicanism seminar at the American Academy of Religion.

The book offers fresh insight on every page. It provides a rich commentary on a topic that resists quick definition. It also includes a good index and a select annotated bibliography that students will find helpful.

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