The Corrupted Church: A Comment on the Pragmatism of *To Set Our Hope On Christ*

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David Brooks has called this the "Hobbesian Decade". Looking at all the social, international, and natural disordering of lives in the present, and the responses we have collectively offered in return, he sees these years we are living in a special way as the throbbing image of our desperate and brutal humanity. It isn't exactly clear why some decades deserve such characterization more than others. As I close in on fifty years, perhaps age has simply made such distinctions less obvious to me. And this is why also I may secretly seek alternative hopes. Who doesn't?

With such a private wish, to be honest, I like "To Set Our Hope On Christ". The paper was commissioned by the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, Frank Griswold and written up by a group of distinguished Episcopal theologians. It was presented to the Anglican Consultative Council in June, 2005 as a response to the Primates' request (following the Windsor Report) that ECUSA give its reasons for the actions of General Convention that admitted partnered gay clergy into the episcopacy and that accepted the blessing of gay unions. The paper didn't get much press when it was presented. A kind of non-event, it was brushed aside by most participants at the meeting, overshadowed by the politics surrounding the symbolic unseating of ECUSA from the Council. Since the ACC has met, furthermore, the essay has barely garnered a reading, and apart from a few commentaries, its arguments have been acknowledged and dismissed as both old-hat and unpersuasive.

This judgment may be accurate. But I still like the paper. Not only is "To Set Our Hope On Christ" (TSOH) well-written, but it appeals to me, especially in these dark times. Its tone is gentle and unaggressive. Its arguments flow with a modest reasonableness. The word "humility" comes to mind – and in fact the authors of TSOH turn to this reality again and again, especially in their introduction, which they found upon this very virtue: "we set our hope on Christ because we know how weak and fallible we are as your fellow servants" (1.1). And so they unfold their work, focusing over and over on "humility", "mutual humility", and the "humility of Christ" (1.1-1.4). I believe that the authors are sincere in this concern. For within my own desires, this is how I too would like the world to posture itself as we confront our differences: open, calm, willing to lay out one's thoughts deliberately, ready to have them taken up, and tomorrow picking up the conversation anew, always with a sense of our deep and common readiness to listen.

I wish we could talk this way to one another. I would like it to be so. But deeper still, I sense it cannot be. To be honest, again, I would have to admit that I have found human beings to be, not calm and deliberate in their thinking, but completely confused and disordered. For all the good shown in hearts disclosed and offered, there seems planted within us some other dark and obscuring evil, untethered by a teetering world. I admit that I cannot trust another person in anything that is theirs alone – their claims, their

promises, their gifts, their hearts even; I wish I could. At best, however, I can have confidence in what has been given them from somewhere else, something they have not manipulated. That, it turns out, is a good deal; more than is imaginable. But it is not the kind of openness TSOH envisages.

So, TSOH places itself squarely *against* my abiding and grudging fear about humanity's true form, and grabs those other wishes that I harbor. In its tone and manner, at least, it claims this other world. Its world contains a range of elements. They are all, I say, winsome. And I speak here not of theological arguments *per se* – the arguments we have heard before -- but of a kind of invitation the paper gives to a way of looking at reality. From such a way, of course, come the particular arguments. But these elements of a world view are what is more basic, and to these elements I turn.

1. ***Human fallibility***: The pursuit of humility that characterizes the desires expressed early on in TSOH is grounded in a basic sense that we are all "fallible" creatures: "we know how weak and fallible we are as your fellow servants". There is a welcome sense here simply that "we could be wrong" in what we have to say and say before a somewhat hostile and at least skeptical Communion. But there is more than this at work here. Fallibility becomes, for the essay, an actual philosophy of the Christian life. It informs the very nature of ecclesial decision-making, driving matters at hand to the local level in order to limit overreaching by the error-prone. As a result, fallibility becomes the basis upon which common life, for the authors, must operate within mutual space-giving, tolerance, even permission (we permit what we cannot be certain about, for the sake at least of charity).

Theologically, TSOH's governing emphasis on *human* fallibility is grounded in its assertion of converse *divine* profundity, the "unfathomable" Mystery that is too deep for human comprehension in any one mode or from any one stance (cf. 2:23-28). We are fallible because of our finite limitations in the face of the limitless mystery of God. Any claim we make and effort we affirm must always give way to something greater that is yet to be grasped. Erecting human constructs, of institutional, intellectual, or behavioral form, must, by definition, always involve us in the misplaced short-circuiting of our understanding, whose proper dynamic is always to be drawn into the "ever-deepening" mystery of God's own "action and grace". We are fallible because God's life eludes us.

2. ***Plurality of human effort*:** The fallibility of human assertions, according to TSOH, must give rise, in the pursuit of what is true and good and of what is *real*, to multiple attempts at searching for this reality. And such a search must take place within a space where our attempts are granted broad room to maneuver.

TSOH repeatedly refers to the give and take of identity-groups, cultures, and epochs even in the course of apprehending the Truth. The world is filled with diverse claims and commitments, spawned by the movement of human beings who are drawn through time into the limitless mystery of God. This is what history describes: difference-as-the-way-to-reconciliation. And thus, the historical existence of both Israel and the Christian Church (and we may assume, of all religious groups) is ordered by diverse sub-groups

and attitudes that continually come up against one another. Someone has noted that religion and society, for TSOH, resemble nothing so much as the purported sources of J, D, E, and P in the Penteteuch, bustling about with and against one another within a choppy narrative. This *is* the "real".

Hence, divine life in time – what theologians have called "revelation" and in specific Christian terms, the Word "spoken and incarnate" – is, according to TSOH, intrinsically received as a collection of contestable apprehensions, because fallibly received and thereby multiplied in their genuine search for something truer. The authors place much emphasis, for example, on "contested and contesting biblical interpretations", "rival accounts" "countering" positions within Scripture and the Christian tradition. This is how it *must* be. And the focal point of revelatory form, Scripture itself, is described as the "forum where God and humanity engage one another, seeking truth in the process of resolving difficulties" (2:4ff.). God and humanity in the world is constituted – *is* – a plurality of unresolved encounters and affirmations. And if this is so, the Church is a "forum of engagement" in a very focused way.

3. ***Experimental knowledge***: History, however, is not meaningless to TSOH. Rather, it is a "movement", one drawn by the Holy Spirit. But as a collection of contestable apprehensions, history's positive movement can only be defined in terms of the progress of partial insights that emerge from these contested encounters. This can be seen in what TSOH calls "discernment" through "experience". Quoting (in 2.24) from the *Virginia Report* (3:11), the essay lays out its general principle of theological method: "The experience of the Church as it is lived in different places has something to contribute to the discernment of the mind of Christ for the Church. No one culture, no one period of history has a monopoly of insight into the truth of the Gospel. It is essential for the fullest apprehension of truth that context is in dialogue with context. Sometimes the lived experience of a particular community enables Christian truth to be perceived afresh for the whole community". In fact, this is precisely where the nub of the essay's specific theological argument in favor of ECUSA's embrace of same-sex unions and partnered gay clergy is located: we have learned, they say, through the *experience* of gay couples and leaders – their experiences of life and the church's experience of their lives in her midst – that God's grace and holiness abides with them (esp. Part II; 2.1; 2.25; 2.31; 3.0).

TSOH extends this "learning through [plural] experience" to cover an entire ecclesiology: the principle of "subsidiarity", for instance, (whereby decisions are made at the most local level possible and permissible) is argued for, in part, on the basis of the Church's need to give liberty to "experimentation" (i.e. critical experience) for the sake of learning the Holy Spirit's direction.[1] Although not using this exact language, the Church-as-

[1]Cf. Endnote 2, citing the 2000 General Convention Blue Book (also cited in the Appendix). This particular argument trades on irresolvable disagreement as the basis upon which decisions devolve upon local bodies, in this case dioceses, where more intimate relationships among people can better express the nature of discernment amid diversity. Permitting this local discernment is viewed, on the issue of same-sex blessings, as a matter of "charity": a local decision, however at variance with another locality's, is better than no decision at all where the real struggles of individuals are involved. One assumption here is that making a decision, even if wrong, is preferable to refraining from decision-making. And this makes sense

Experiment is a theme that runs through the essay as a whole, and finally informs its comprehensive definition of Christian unity itself.

4. ***Engagement of difference*:** From its opening paragraphs, TSOH expresses a desire that the Anglican Communion remain together. The paper, after all, was written to explain the coherence, if only hoped for, of ECUSA's actions with the Communion's identity. This desire for the Communion's continuance, however, is couched in particular terms: human learning that takes place within an organization of tolerated differences. These are terms, I have noted, that characterize the essay's overall world-view. The point is that TSOH actually comes close to defining "communion" itself in just these terms: continued *engagement* among disagreeing parties. (Part III, on "Unity-in-Difference" is the key portion).

Disagreement itself is not, according to TSOH, a contradiction of Christian unity. Rather, true unity in Christ, as expressed in Jesus' prayer of John 17, is embodied through the committed and continued engagement of *disputing* Christian groups (see esp. 3:21). "Unity can mean […] not consensus but the willingness to abide in love with ongoing differences of belief" (4.15). This is because such engagement is seen as representing, among Christians, a hope in the fundamental reconciling act of Jesus *already* accomplished. Disputes themselves cannot undermine this act. In fact, as we have seen, disputes actually constitute the reality of the larger and "fathomless" character of the act itself. It is almost as if a *lack* of dispute among Christians must even be a kind of betrayal of Christ's work, because, in this life anyway, it would mark an acceptance in the Church of a definition of truth inferior to the dynamic expansion of Truth's apprehension that Christ's reconciliation in fact entails. The *faithful* Christian is the Christian engaged in disagreement with other Christians, unwilling to settle for a false consensus (as all consensus must be this side of Paradise) or for an eschatologically premature disengagement. This mirrors, in some sense, the unity apparent in the apostolic Church (Corinth's bickering becomes the exemplar of ecclesial reality) and, more fundamentally, the "unity-in-difference" of the Trinity itself.

The Christian Pragmatism of "To Set Our Hope On Christ"

How shall we summarize this overall vision? "Because there are no uncontested decision procedures for adjudicating the claims of rival […] orientations, it is always a *task* to seek out commonalities and points of difference and conflict. The *achievement* of a 'we' – where 'we' are locked in argument with others – is a fragile and temporary achievement […] There is little reason to believe that "we" […] will ever achieve any substantive permanent consensus, and there are many good reasons for questioning the desirability of such a consensus. What matters, however, is how we respond to conflict, [… whether] we genuinely seek to achieve a mutual reciprocal understanding – an understanding that does not preclude disagreement".

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only in a context in which diverse decisions, in all their fallibility, are viewed somehow as a *necessary* part of a larger process of apprehension.

These words do not come from TSOH. They actually form the culmination to a description given by the American philosopher Richard Bernstein of what constitutes the "pragmatist" vision of a vital and truthful civil intellectual society.[2] But the words' complete coherence with TSOH's overall world-view points exactly to why the latter's rhetoric is so comfortably appealing to someone like myself: TSOH is, in almost every element noted above, an articulated Christianization of the democratic pluralist vision of American culture in which most of us in ECUSA, by virtue of our public education and civil engagement, have been nourished. Incrementally informed by popularized and institutionalized principles drawn from William James, John Dewey, and contemporary American Pragmatists, most Americans have unconsciously assimilated the basic outlines of something like Bernstein's full definition, which includes the following elements: "anti-foundationalism", "thorough-going fallibilism", the "nurture of communities of critical inquirers", the ever "open" universe of unknown contingencies, and finally, "pluralism".[3] Within this kind of society, oriented to this way of seeing things, the search for truth takes place within the ever-engaged critical reflection upon multiple experiences, as that reflection moves endlessly into the future. In Charles Pierce's famous definition, "The opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate, is what we mean by the truth, and the object represented in this opinion is the real". Here "fate" means simply what a "long enough", even endless, investigation will yield, even if such results are, in historical terms, "hopelessly beyond the reach of our

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[2]The citation comes from Bernstein's essay "Pragmatism, Pluralism, and the Healing of Wounds", in his *The New Constellation: The Ethical-Political Horizons of Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), reprinted in Louis Menand (ed.), *Pragmatism: A Reader* (New York: Vintage/Random House Inc., 1997), p. 398. Menand's is a helpful and illuminating collection of classic Pragmatist texts, including contemporary ones. Subsequent works cited in this paper can be found in this anthology.

[3] Where the enumeration of these elements rightly fits in terms of "world-view" is perhaps debatable. They cohere with what many today identify as "post-modern" attitudes. I make the distinction – and I believe it is generally a clear one – between American "Pragmatism" and "post-modernism" largely on the basis of positive or negative hopes regarding the pursuit of "truth". American Pragmatists, by and large, have had a rather optimistic take on this matter; they have tended to be "progressives", in the sense of believing that the pluralistic interaction of viewpoints, within a critical and tolerant context, can in fact get us closer to the "truth" of a matter, even if such movement forward is necessarily always partial, often mistaken, and never complete. And even among those Pragmatists who may have doubts about the very existence of "the truth" (e.g. Rorty), there is a firm conviction that this way of pursuing its hope is "better", happier, healthier, and more peaceable than other ways. "Keep the conversation going!" (The notion that "the truth is what is useful", from which the term "pragmatism" arises, has been so variously interpreted that, in itself, it is not perhaps the most "useful" idea upon which to gauge the movement's common meaning.) Post-modernists, especially those (even among Americans) aligned with the movement's Continental (often Nietzschian) tradition, tend to be suspicious of "truth"-seeking altogether. They assume that it represents the delusional or deliberate masking of personal or group interests, whose pursuit inevitably uses illusory constructions of the "truth" as a way of justifying the exercise and abuse of power. The authors of TSOH seem to be "hopeful pragmatists", according to this general distinction, not post-modernists. Indeed, a little more suspicious post-modernism on their part might help them realize that the picture of democratic interchange of contestable ideas which they urge – especially given the starkly homogeneous (i.e. *un*diverse) make-up of ECUSA's membership vis-à-vis American Christianity as a whole – masks its own subterranean and self-deceiving power-projections. Such critical post-modernism might be useful to apply to ECUSA conservatives as well!

knowledge".[4] TSOH is a biological child of this cultural vision, down to the color of its eyes and hair, the shape of its nose and lips. Its Christian "hope" is a translation of John 14:1ff – in my Father's house are many rooms – into the terms of William James' "manyness-in-oneness", "many homes" whose holding together somehow is our only "home".

To grasp this genealogy is not simply to play the game of "find the hidden idea in the picture". The pragmatist notions of TSOH are hidden because they are *ours*, as *American* Christians. And they are, for this reason alone, unlikely to be dismantled and forcibly left behind, precisely because we *believe* them and work with them and value them, however much we claim other intellectual allegiances. One of the present theological challenges for American Christians (with Christian theologians elsewhere) is to examine how the Christian Church can indeed assimilate consciously and deliberately the pragmatist values that permit a vital and relatively free society to exist and function, but in a way that is cognizant of the Gospel's often uneasy questioning and sometimes outright repudiation of these same values. The present crisis of the Anglican Communion marks a special moment in this theological vocation, and this is my great complaint about TSOH: given a world stage upon which to exercise critical judgment, the paper chose not to embrace the challenge.

For the simple noting of the pragmatist genealogy of TSOH serves also to disclose the troubled relationship this genealogy holds with the Christian Gospel's larger tradition of explaining the historical character of human social engagement (given, no less, in and by the Church). Americans, after all, sense this too. We have ingrained among us the pragmatist commitments to "engaged fallibilistic pluralism" (Bernstein's shorthand phrase for the pragmatist vision[5]). But we *also* all realize, if only inchoately, how these commitments have been repeatedly subverted by the equally ingrained violence of American life, and by its train of bleak despair in the face of the broken hope of pluralism's humble advance in the Spirit. Every so often, as in the very present moment (indeed, as a perpetual sub-current to our national life), America's diversities disintegrate and devour themselves with the onslaught of human tragedy. Although TSOH rightly acknowledges the great evils of poverty and disease facing much of the world, it never addresses – nor does it have the means to address – the possibility of the Christian Church's actual demise as itself a part of this dynamic of failure, neglect, and suffering, as an aspect of the world's very burdens. Nor does the paper suggest ever that the Anglican Communion may be an exemplar of this creeping decay. The latter claim, however, ought to be an accepted consequence of the Christian tradition's central articulation of the Gospel as the unflinching and simultaneous acknowledgment of human depravity and the divine gift of transformative mercy. While Pragmatists like Charles Pierce viewed the reliance on "fundamentals", the "mysteries of faith", and through them "the explanation of all created things" as reflective of a failed "scholasticism",[6] it is exactly the *formal givenness of human corruption and divine salvation* in these very

[4]This comes from Pierce's most well-known essay, "How to Make Our Ideas Clear" (1878), in Menand, pp. 45-46.
[5] in Menand, p. 397.
[6]See Pierce's "Some Consequences of Four Incapacities" (1868), in Menand, p. 4.

scholastic terms that has characterized the Christian tradition's vision of the world, and from which TSOH's presuppositions resolutely turn away.

Here is the place, I believe, where the fundamental direction of ECUSA's official theological commitments and much of the Anglican Communion's have parted ways. The "engaged fallibilistic pluralism" of TSOH cannot, for deep philosophical reasons, accept the central mediating forms of divine life, revealed in Christ Jesus, as basic to the Church's being. "Humility", for TSOH, means letting go of form itself as an essential aspect of the Truth; whereas, in the larger Christian tradition, human corruption demands the intervention of divine form within human existence – Augustine's dominant sense of Christ as "Mediator" – whose self-giving in the flesh *is* the actual temporal expression of divine truth (cf. John 1:17f.). Instead of pragmatist "fallibilism" (the possibility of error), the Christian tradition has asserted human corruption (the intrinsic dissolution of human life). Instead of pragmatist "pluralism" (the Jamesian "multiverse" of varying experimental attempts at apprehending the truth[7]), the Christian tradition has asserted the singular disclosure and intrusion within history of God in the form of Jesus Christ, the Word incarnate. Instead of the pragmatist "engagement" of disagreeing experimenters, the Christian tradition has asserted the power of God to transform human life through the Cross into the "one new Man", which is the single Body of Christ in "one spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism" (Eph. 2:15; 4:3ff.). In the Tradition's terms, corruption altogether ruins our ability to learn the truth; revelation forms the only and necessary basis of the renewal of such learning; and the Incarnation, death, and Resurrection of Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit sovereignly re-creates the human mind and heart so as to comprehend truth given over to the world in Christ's word and flesh.

It is not my intention to argue the incompatibility of TSOH's pragmatism with the Christian Gospel in any final sense. But the profound divergence between the two on a formal level cannot be papered over, and to this I now turn in greater detail.

Corruption or Fallibilism

Pragmatism, according to James, tells us *how* we think, in fact, not "what to think".[8] But is this "how" – expressed in something like Bernstein's "engaged fallibilistic pluralism" – something more than a desire? Pierce himself is well aware that, historically, thinking according to "tenacity" or imposed social "authority" (both of which characterize religious belief) has proved, well, tenacious in the human mind.[9] The application of the experimental method to all of human cogitation, indeed to the entire network of social relation itself, emerges as an historical option only at a late date, and we need not wonder idly if it represents, in its pragmatist form, less a pragmatic discovery of its own than a decidedly American hope for a certain kind of social arrangement by which peace can coexist with difference in a non-constrained and progressive fashion. For there are many

[7] See the selection from James' 1909 Hibbert Lecture "Pluralism and Religion", in Menand, pp. 132-135.
[8] See James' essay "Pragmatism's Conception of Truth", from his 1907 lectures *Pragmatism*, in Menand, pp. 121-131, and Menand's opening comments on p. xi.
[9] See Pierce, "The Fixation of Belief", in Menand, pp. 7-25.

reasons – even ones experimentally gleaned – why the "how" of our thinking might *in fact* be construed in a very different way altogether than the pragmatist model outlines: resentment, anger, habit, lust, cowardice, illness, pain – "thinking" is a product of all these things. And this is where the desires of the pragmatist are evaluated by the traditional Christian Gospel as fanstastic, however much cherished. "I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. […] I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin which dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am!" (Romans 7:21-24). Even a pragmatic account of Paul's discussion of the slavery of sin might, as James does in *Varieties of Religious Experience*, grant it a basic kind of (non-metaphysical) plausibility, opening up nonetheless the very kind of religious struggle we now see within our churches.

But the struggle *does* take place on the level of basic conviction. The Christian tradition asserts, fundamentally, that we *cannot* think rightly and judge rightly, nor can we even grasp the mechanisms of our own thinking so as to understand motivation and clarity as some kind of template for methodical self-evaluation. We cannot do so, because we are creatures who are instrinsically deformed, in every respect. It is this conviction regarding human sinfulness that marks the primary divergence between the pragmatic vision of TSOH's attitudes and the rest of the Anglican Communion. We are not merely "fallible", the Christian tradition has maintained; we are corrupted. We are not merely "liable to error"; we are "rotten" in the sense of having lost something of ourselves, and in not only in a static sense: we are in the process of losing all of ourselves.

Athanasius states this first order assertion of classic Christian faith: "The race of man was perishing… the image of God disappearing… the handiwork of God was in the process of dissolution" (Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 6; see also 5.). It is important to see this assertion, not merely as a description of circumstance, but as the very framework for understanding the reality of the Incarnation of the Word itself. For Athanasius, it articulates the Gospel as given in the Scriptural testimony: a human race that is "dead", and whose death is transformed to life as the very manifestation of God's being. "The Son of Man came to save the lost" -- that is, those "perishing" and "dying" (Mt. 18:11; cf. Titus 3:3-8; Eph. 2:1-5). And such we were and, in some real way, remain apart from Christ. Christ stands, in the actual profile of his being within time, in basic relation to this reality of human corruption, which is itself tied to a universe – *uni*verse, in the sense of the "whole creation" without distinction – that is "in bondage to corruption" (Romans 8:21). "Who will deliver me from this body of death?" This is not something to be "talked out", to be discovered through the experimental process of give and take, managing difference and re-correcting error. Rather, "thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (Rom. 7:25).

It is crucial to see this intractable Christological link with the classical assertion of human corruption. For we are not dealing here with some invention, either of a wildly pessimistic Augustine or a cruelly haughty Calvinism. Rather, the link has been intrinsic to the articulation of who Christ is from the Church's beginning, and hence is essential to the Christian religion in its traditional form, in Anglicanism as much as anywhere. Richard Hooker gives what seems almost a presuppositional aside, to the effect that we

are "drowned and swallowed up in misery " by sin and guilt via our first ancestor [*Laws,* I:11:5,6]), as if this were obvious to all. Indeed, the "evidence" of this weight of putrification is given in the record of the world's testimony before God and humanity together: "Help me, Lord, for there is no godly one left; the faithful have vanished from among us. Everyone speaks falsely with his neighbor; with a smooth tongue they speak from a double heart" (Ps. 12:1-2); "The Lord looks down from heaven upon us all, to see if there is any who is wise, if there is one who seeks after God. Everyone has proved fiathfless; all alike have turned bad; there is none who does good; no, not one" (Ps. 14:2-3). Whatever the metaphysical shape of its explication, corruption has always represented simply the "historical reality of sin", the descriptor of time, it's condition in human life as a kind of "current" of experience and term, the fact that creation shares in a defect of internal dissolution (cf, Athanasius, 6). In this light, Augustine's more explicit delineations of the matter are hardly exceptional, and stand in basic accord with the witness of the Eastern and Western traditions together: all people "corrupted" in Adam, "steeped and wallowing in misery", "subjected to the penalty of death", "tainted" with "original sin", "drawn through diverse errors and sufferings" to endless punishment (*Enchiridion* 26, 27).

But for Augustine, as for Athanasius, this concatenation of devolving ills serves also, and in the ultimate sense, to unveil the work of Christ more than anything else. Jesus Christ is the "Mediator" who steps into the midst of time and dissolution, who brings God into the midst of what is dying, and who, in this "giving over" of himself to death itself makes light what was a gathering darkness. What was assuredly hurtling into nothingness, is wrenched back into life by the singular intervention of God in the flesh, given on the Cross. "Fallibilism" simply cannot do justice to a divine mediator who dies as a sacrifice for sin. For in the case of a humanity prone to error – and here Augustine's struggle with Pelagius and his "fallibilist" disciples can be seen for what it is, a *Christological* controversy – where weakness and ignorance more than anything sully the clear waters of human relationship, what is needed is a corrective and an example, not a death, unique, unheard of, awful in its origin and scope, redeeming in its love. But with a mediating offering that is the crucified Savior who comes from outside our experience – from outside the human creature's own initiative and grasp – there is a new creation, with all its forms and figures given breath and life as "reality" renewed.

Revelation or Pluralism

The matter of "form and figure" is critical here. Medieval commentators, in an example of the way that "allegory" can rightly merge with narrative typology, often interpreted Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan in terms of the effect of human sin. The "stripping" of the traveler, in this reading, marked the soul "despoiled" of its original grace-giving intimacy with God; the beating of the man marked the "wounding" of the very body or being of the human creature itself, leaving humanity with a debilitating ailment, "half-dead" in mind and spirit, and listing into death physically. The Samaritan Christ – a stranger, but one with a definite character and appearance – comes to save and to heal what is otherwise lying beside the road, helpless, bleeding, drifting away, awaiting death's approach in the face of a transient world that passes by to its own

demise. The stranger picks him up, leads him to a place of rest, and pays good money for his care. There are coins that sound as they pass from hand to hand. Salvation comes through the encounter in time and within the landscape of articulated matter with the flesh of God.

Jesus' own words regarding the "impossibility" of salvation (Mark 10:23-27), or the expansive breadth of human demise (Luke 13:22-30), or the interior rot of the human heart (Mark 7:21-23) are therefore not general principles upholding the need for intellectual honesty and for the reliance we must have, in our limitations, upon a kind of "negative" knowledge of God, pursued in the give and take of our diversified engagements. They pertain to the actual work of God in the world, identifiable to the dying soul, touching mortality through temporal means, outlining the disclosed path of God's coming and leading. "Lo, we have left everything and followed you", cries Peter in the face of the "impossible" salvation that is only God's to give. Jesus answers him, "Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life" (Mk. 10:28-30). Corruption is thus met with the earthly form of God, who provides a definable "way" to "follow", which carries with it the forms and consequences that are described in the words of the Gospel.

The contrast of TSOH's vision is instructive on just this score. There has certainly been a kind of "apophaticism" that has permeated much ECUSA theology over the past decades – claims regarding the inadequacy of finite human language to speak of God accurately. Some of this has been driven by feminist discussions in the 1970's regarding Scriptural and traditional "imagery" used for God, and has applied principles gathered from various mystical sources within the Church, both from the East (Dionysius) and the West (Eckhart). Rowan Williams himself, in his early work, seemed to have tended in this direction. But Williams was mainly motivated by a perceived ethical imperative to strip human claims before the Crucified God of any means of appropriating divine authority for *inevitably perverted* personal and ecclesial use. To be sure, this led him (e.g. in his early book *Resurrection*) to marginalize the "mediating revelation" even of the Scriptures – a position from which he has since moved.[10] Still, Williams argument was based even

[10] The clearest expression of the problem comes near the end of the book, where he allows himself to read Paul as somehow excising the "mediating revelation of the Torah" from Jesus' own self-disclosure as the Father's Son. See Rowan Williams, *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1982/4), p. 94. A more supple and (to my mind) substantive approach to Scripture's integrated status within Christ's self-revelation, however, can be seen developing in Williams' more recent writing. See, for instance, his essay "Historical Criticism and Sacred Text" in *Reading Texts, Seeking Wisdom: Scripture and Theology* (eds. David F. Ford and Graham Stanton, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2004), pp. 217-228. In this essay, Williams interacts with, among others, Christopher Seitz' probing questioning of historical-critical reductions of Scripture to "religious history". (See Seitz' essay "Scripture Becomes Religion(s)", in his *Figured Out: Typology and Providence in Christian Scripture* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001], pp. 13-33.) An interesting study would seek to trace how the Hegelian dialectic of 19th-century Continental historical criticism of the Bible was transformed by American biblical critics a century later into a model of bourgeois pluralistic debate within the text. In any case, the Pragmatist pull seems to have been transfiguring.

in this instance, traditionally, on the profound and ever-distorting *sinfulness* of human life as it has corrupted human knowing and doing. In any case, the traditional location of apophatic theology has been within the ascetic context of mortification, the subduing of and abandonment of human "passions" through self-denial. And in this light, it is clear that TSOH displays neither a "mystical" theology of human finiteness demanding the subjection of the "flesh", nor a theology of radical human sin. Rather, it moves in a direction of relativizing the given "forms" and "figures" of Christian life -- Scripturally articulated and granted authority within the temporal realm of the Christian "way" – largely because it sees knowledge as a matter of experiment within an arena of fundamental "contestability". This is literally about the social construction of knowledge rightly pursued within a democratic setting of progressive argument.

I stress this matter emphatically because, I believe, it represents a key to understanding the peculiarly *American* character that informs so much of ECUSA's uneasy relations within the Anglican Communion. Moving to the topic of the Scriptures themselves, we can see that it is not the case that ECUSA, as TSOH has to some extent properly argued, "doesn't take Scripture seriously". Surely they take the Bible quite seriously indeed. The Bible is an *essential* aspect of the "progressive argument"; it is the substance of that argument, the "material" from which Truth is forged receptively. It is rather the case that, in TSOH's view, Scripture does *not* stand in some fundamental way "outside" the human argument altogether, an active agent in overpowering the reasonings of "engaged" participants. This latter understanding of Scripture's role in the Church's discernment is, after all, an aspect of the doctrine of Revelation that has long upheld the place of Scripture's authority within the Church. And this aspect of the doctrine of Revelation is inextricably tied, of course, to the Christian assertion of human corruption and divine salvation. Such corruption, if in fact redeemed by God, logically demands a revelation that can speak, both in judgment and mercy, to the needs of human helplessness with the voice of God. Any discussion of Scriptural authority, within the context of the Christian tradition, must begin here; and any investigation of the mechanics of such divine speech can only presume its overpowering enunciation.

This authority is exercised primarily through the *forms* of Scripture's instructions and narratives, which provide a mediating influence and directive to human life and discernment. Hooker himself has been read as standing in Reason's breach against a Puritan theology intent on demolishing any human capacity to think through social challenges "for itself". And in this reading – common enough within ECUSA – Hooker is seen as fending off whole areas of human life from the oppressive incursions of Scripture's rapacious control. Perused in general outside the context of Hooker's own reception of the larger Christian tradition, I suppose there could be some basis for thinking this about him. But in fact, this reading of Hooker is quite wrong. Hooker held to the same general notions of human corruption as his contemporaries. And as a result, he held to the same general perspectives on the divine power of the Scriptures to illuminate, reorient, and even supplant human reason and its decision-making tasks within the social discourse of the Church (and State) as his Puritan adversaries. "How should our festered sores be cured, but that God hath delivered a law as sharp as the two-edged sword, piercing the very closest and most unreachable corners of the heart, which

the law of Nature hardly, human laws by no means possible, reach unto?" (*Laws*, I: 12). The Scripture provides, among other things, "positive supernatural law" that actually tells an otherwise confused and blinded human mind and heart what is true. "The natural understanding of whole nations [has] been darkened, that they have not discerned […] gross iniquity to be sin" (ibid.), he writes, pointing out that whole peoples and cultures require the external guidance of God to recognize right and wrong.

The issue separating Hooker and the Puritans lay, not in this directly revelatory role of Scripture, but in the proper context in which the mediating forms of Scripture would take their place, and would find themselves rightly organized in their arrangement. Thus, Scripture must always "trump" reason in Hooker's eyes: "Scripture with Christian men being received as the Word of God; that for which we have probable, yea, that which we have necessary reason for, yea, that which we see with our eyes, is not thought so sure as that which the Scripture of God teacheth; because we hold that his speech revealeth there what himself seeth, and therefore the strongest proof of all, and the most necessarily assented by us is the Scripture" (II.vii.5). Furthermore, Scripture must be the final adjudicator of disputed questions, even among "Fathers or councils" (II.vii.6; III.iii.3). However, the actual interpretation of Scripture is, by necessity, given into the resources of human reason, whose communal deliberations and consensus (which Hooker often summarizes simply by the term "reason") rightly constitute (though in no ultimately final way) the "authoritative" application of Scripture's supernatural sanction within any given moment of demanded discernment.

For TSOH, however, communal "consensus" is clearly not something either sought after or even metaphysically possible: truth emerges through the continual process of diversified engagements, and the reception of consensus, by implication, is actually dangerous, because it represents a halt to necessary demand for continued contestation (cf. 1.7, where "differences" and disagreements somehow become themselves "signs" of reconciliation). "Pluralism", for TSOH, is – as with the developed pragmatism of contemporary social ordering in America – not simply a cultural given, worth valuing as a fact of the world, but an essential condition for truth-seeking. And in this search, there cannot be, by definition, any settled interpretation, let alone imposed directive that Scripture could possibly provide. The truth always lies beyond us, an expanding horizon, and we are faithful to it ("truthful") only as we never claim a place of rest or achievement. Theological inquiry, then, is always "*on* the advance"; it is never resolved in a given present. Note how different this is from someone like Pope Benedict's definition that "[what] is *peculiar to theology*, [is] that it *turns to something we ourselves have not devised* and that is able to be the foundation of our life, in that it *goes before us and supports us*; that is to say, it is greater than our own through. The path of theology is indicated by the saying, 'Credo ut intelligam': I accept *what is given in advance*".[11]

Transformation or Engagement

[11]"What In Fact Is Theology?", in Ratzinger, Joseph Cardinal, *Pilgrim Fellowship of Faith: The Church as Communion* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), p. 31.

What is "given *in* advance" is obviously something being contested within the present struggles of the Church. TSOH can speak of the obvious evils of "abuse" and "violence" within human sexual relations. But there is little attempt to assess the nature of this kind of easy presupposition, and one is left with the sense that these evident evils are known mainly through their status as "vices of engagement", rather than as injunctions spoken to a twisted heart and mind from the mouth of God. For questions of human life and behavior are clearly a potential part of what might be "given" in the revealed positive law of the Scriptures, and it is even this possibility that seems repelled *a priori* by the advocates of gay inclusion, including TSOH. When the poet Robert Lowell writes that "I am a Catholic because I am a wanton"[12], he is stating that human corruption in the very forms taken by his desire ("wanton" being a wonderful word that bespeaks disappearance and dissolution, and not only loose living) requires of him a change of life from beyond himself, "given in advance" in its very demand, judgment, and grace. Such a confession seems natural to a fallen creature, indeed the only "natural" religious exclamation possible. And so too, then, might we expect that "holiness" would also be something both revealed and provided *ab extra*, and, as Merton writes, tied to the full range of divine gifts that are given in the forms of the Christian tradition itself, the Church. "Beyond our natural powers", holiness is something defined and infused from outside ourselves, and wholly coherent with all the forms of revelation God's self-giving has offered the world through the Church.[13]

Certainly, the Christian tradition has always placed sexuality, in terms of sexual desire and self-expression, within the realm of human corruption's constraints and experience. What we "feel" is not to be trusted, but assumed even to be somehow intrinsically distorted. The nature of the "curse" as detailed in Genesis 3 and Romans 1 is a standard basis for the Christian conviction that has viewed *all* human desire with the skeptical suspicion of selfishness (and therefore the contested presence or absence of a contemporarily understood notion of "gay" identity in these and similar texts is not really central to the assumption that such a "felt" identity ought, "in advance", to be distrusted). Although no one today would write a treatise like the 17th-century classic by Bossuet, *On Concupiscence*, it is worth re-reading its thorough outline of the integrated problematic that human desire and its expression, in every particular, in fact represents. And if so, the divine directives for this problem's resolution are necessarily just those that an eager, and penitent soul would seek to identify and embrace.

The search after truth for the "engaged fallibilistic pluralist" is, however, something different at root than a "searching of the Scriptures". For TSOH, the search requires a kind of space and modesty for experimental assay and approbation. And gay "unions" actually provide the epitome of this kind of inquisitive virtue: order, respect, fidelity, and so on – all contrasted with promiscuity and abuse – become the fertile soil in which "holiness" emerges, visible to those whose own lives are themselves maintained by the virtues of engagement (hence the call for the Anglican Communion to remain somehow "together", a "we", so that the experimental outcome can be seen and validated). But if

[12]"The Army of the Duke of Nemours", in *History*, 1973, in *Collected Poems* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2003), p. 453.
[13]Thomas Merton, *Life and Holiness* (New York: Doubleday, 1964), pp. 17-21).

the "experiment" itself is suspect "in advance" – for why would we presume that a modest space for human desire's expression could be anything but self-defeating? -- then this method founders.

For the tradition of human corruption and salvation, the "search" for the resolving divine directives will gear itself towards the identification of that redeemed goal for humanity by which redemption itself is noted in the Redeemer's promises and form. Again, traditionally, this has been given in the created figure of "male and female", and in the nuptial consummation of Christ and the Church that human marriage and its counterpart of preparatory celibate virginity both embody prophetically. This figure, marred in historical experience though it must inevitably be, is precisely what the Scriptures "reveal" in prophet, apostle, and Messiah as the form of salvation. Human life, including sexuality, *necessarily* demands, even pleads for, transformation and healing in this light, a refashioning into a "new" human creature. And marriage as a "mystery", in Paul's terminology, is made a central hinge within the outplaying of history, especially within the Scriptural shape of the Church's life. In a dying world – at least as seen by the Christian tradition of Fall and Redemption – how could any of this be placed to the side as a matter of "*adiaphora*" or "indifference"? The only object with which "engagement" makes sense is the form of this one "New Man" articulated and explicated through his living words and history. Holiness does not "emerge" progressively from the contest of rival claims; it is given and suffered, according the forms that God has revealed in the Son and has often imposed upon an otherwise reluctant and diminishing human heart.

The Subjected Church

I would imagine that these contrasts might appear, within the context of TSOH's argument, to be little more than an interesting display of disagreement in itself. The real challenge to which the paper responds, after all, is the experience of conflict within the Communion's churches. Simply "asserting" a given "tradition" regarding the Christian faith is not an effective resolution of plural commitments. Does not TSOH's account of the ecclesial reality of the present provide a more cogent description of where we are – and also a more hopeful one – than the stark claims made by traditionalists that "ECUSA is wrong, and that's that"? Should we not *desire* TSOH's vision to be applicable to the present situation, *just because the divisions of the Communion are destroying us*? To treat ecclesial communities like individuals, as "fallible" yet in their fallibility capable of perseverent "engagement" across lines of diversity of belief, seems a reasonable and attractive hope, given the alternative of warfare and division. And more than that, as TSOH emphasizes again and again, surely the hope is given not merely in a human delusion but in Christ Jesus'own desire for our reconciliation?

The challenge to traditionalists on this score is what to do with human corruption as it touches upon the life of the Church herself. One response, after all, has been to treat the Church, in some way or another, as a part simply of the "givenness" of God's salvific intervention "from outside", that is as in some sense "indefectible" or even "*in*fallible". This is not a path, however, that Anglicans have ever wished to follow, and TSOH's stress upon fallibility, even ecclesial fallibility, seems more in line both with

Anglicanism's consistent understanding of the Church and with the Church's historical actions. If the response to the Christian tradition's assertion of human corruption is an uncorruptible Church, TSOH's version of things must seem, especially to Americans, preferable. They can rightly point to the 21st of the Articles of Religion as congruent with their modesty and with their suspicion regarding ecclesial claims: "And when [General Councils] be gathered together , (forasmuch as they be an assembly of men, whereof all be not governed with Spirit and Word of God), they may err, and sometimes have erred, even in things pertaining unto God". If traditionalists, who wonder whether these ecclesial suspicions have simply been used to relativize Gospel standards, now believe the suspicions themselves must simply be left behind because of their tendency to paralyze the demands and pursuit of unity-in-truth, they have themselves perhaps abandoned a central aspect of their Anglican ecclesiology. Primates Meetings and Lambeth Conferences, by any Anglican account, are not inerrant authorities of evangelical enunciation, and should not be treated as such.

But Anglicanism's traditional rejection of ecclesial infallibility has never been aimed at destabilizing the surety of revealed truth. Just the opposite: admitting and taking stock of ecclesial fallibility was an important part of the original Anglican effort to uphold the Gospel's claim to God's truth in the face of acknowledged human corruption. The 21st Article cited above, after all, enshrines coherence with "holy Scripture" as the only authoritative template for the Church, and Articles 20 and 34 especially focus on this matter explicitly. More importantly, the overall shape of the Articles makes clear that to which the Church's innate fallibility ought to be subject: the great reality of the Incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, exposed in Scripture's Old and New Testaments together, and responsive to the "corruption of the Nature of every man" whereby each is "inclined to evil" (Art. 9) but for the "grace of God by Christ preventing us" (Art. 10). The Church's very fallibility, in this classic *Anglican* reading, is not only contained by but actually *serves* a power and truth beyond the Church's control.

TSOH would claim this ecclesiology problematic and a kind of begging of the question, however, to the degree that it assumes that the Church, fallible as it is, is *capable* of subjecting itself to the revealed truths of God's life in Christ. Cannot the leaders of the Church "err", and have they not in fact erred many times, in the reading and understanding of Scripture? Here is where the present debate cuts most deeply on the level of pastoral relationship and practice. For we would wish to say not only this, but much more: our leaders and our readers of Scripture are not only fallible and error-prone, they are actually *corrupt*. And this is a reality too often forgotten by many traditionalists as well as revisionists, to the sorrow of God's people. It is, like the evidence of the world's travails at the tribunal of history, relatively obvious if one avoids turning one's face from what is repugnant. The corruption – and not merely the error -- of the Christian agent explains, in the present, the long list of political failure, denial, power-grabbing, malice, deceit, bishops masking their own sins, theologians cowering, and debaters abusing … and all the rest of the millstones have beset the actions and relationships of too many "engaged" in the current struggles of ECUSA and the Communion. That is why the present turmoil of Anglicanism is a *scandal*, not simply a discomfort.

But can TSOH's own ecclesiology get beyond any of this itself? As an ecclesiology of pragmatic pluralism, it leaves virtually all contested decisions local, for this is where the engagement of experience permits insights to emerge. While this may eventually allow, as TSOH hopes, for a "mutuality of knowledge" between, for example, "North and South" (1.4), it renders contestable from the start, and therefore vulnerable, the very mediating forms of Christ, including the Scriptures, by which salvation has been generally understood to be granted to a broken world. Can such an ecclesiology ever attain to anything other than a spectral unity, and hence a power for the world's conversion, as Jesus' prayer in John 17 desires? For in what could unity consist in this case, except in a kind of faith in the *in*formal reconciliation of Christ that must, by definition, remain ungrasped historically (for historical form is always contestable according to pragmatist principles), but accepted emotionally by some kind of psychologically internal *fiat*? What an odd unity this is, that is given most fully when it is least recognizable, and that excludes, from the start, Roman Catholicism's and Orthodoxy's rejection of such unrecognizability? In TSOH's terms, Jesus Christ becomes a cipher for the American hope of pluralistic fulfillment, a reality that must remain unknown formally because it can only be approached through permitted and unceasing experimental practice and the process of dialogical encounter.

We must, after all, admit and confess this fact: American hope is not the hope of the Gospel. Yet it is attractive, embedded, and inescapable within the context in which we live. So what shall we do with it? What I would say is this: If ecclesiological arguments like those I and others have frequently made on behalf of conciliarity (a church organized according to a layering of councils) and communion in terms "mutual subjection" are to have any purchase, they simply cannot be seen and evaluated in terms of "managing fallibility". They cannot be, given that fallibility is only the tip of our nature's dread iceberg. Nor can arguments for conciliarity and communion be offered for the sake of avoiding error or even escaping sin. They can only make sense to the degree that they provide an ecclesiology geared towards self-control, the subduing of our propensities, and the opening up of our hearts to God's gift of himself within the forms of history. The American hope need not die locally; but it must be subjected to something outside itself. *Its discernments must be ordered to a context in which the local chooses to give itself away*. "Our wills are ours, to make them Thine", in Tennyson's words ("In Memoriam"), describing the strange congruence of liberty and grace. This stands as the Gospel question posed to ECUSA, and one from which TSOH has stepped away, due, it would seem, to its too-deeply ingrained national predilections. Pragmatism is ultimately a form of denominationalism.

"The grace of God has appeared for the salvation of all people, training us to renounce irreligion and worldly passions, and to live sober, upright, and godly lives in this world, awaiting our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all iniquity and to purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds" (Titus 2:11-14). Unless, that is, our ecclesiology is *ascetic*, in this Pauline sense of being transformative at its root, it can only lapse into the pragmatism by which all things are judged by the standard of their relative uses along the continuum of contestable moments. To live according to the loving, self-

sacrificing subjection of spirit and body to the acknowledged demands of the historical church – the formal realities of the Gospel's articulation of Christ's life and teachings, given in the Old and New Testaments as received by the Church – is a vocation that lies to the side of degrees in fallibility or perfection, for it is about a conformance over time whose shape is not in our power to control, but whose method is granted us as a path to follow.

Conciliarity, in this context, is oriented towards a ladder of subjections whose ordering of ascent, though filled perhaps with wretchedness, is directed "in advance" by the promises of God articulated in the Scriptures. In the present case, the ordering must move in this wise: American Anglicanism subjected to the Communion (through its councils "of unity"); the Communion subjected to its own standards of common life; these standards to the repeated reassertion of Scriptural demand; this reassertion to the reality of dying with Christ for the sake of His life in us; this dying to the hope of God's triumphant truth in Christ. "Subsidiarity" in this ordering is not about seeking the "lowest" level of decision-making – where, in TSOH's view, grass-roots experimentation is best pursued and offered to the community of inquirers. Rather, it is about the lowest level of decision-making ordering itself towards the ascending actions of submission that lead to our final hope. Obviously, at every stage, discernment is necessary in the face of confusion, ignorance, rebellion and assault; that is the nature of historical existence, for the Church as much as for anything. There are choices to be made, at every level, with all the deliberative mechanisms individuals to synods may allow. But there is a goal that draws these decisions beyond themselves, to the ordering of their transfiguration. If the choices are wrongly made, the turmoil erupting from the goal's long and thwarted distance will emerge inescapably, and thus we find ourselves today, still searching for the upward call. The hierarchy of subjection, after all, is ascending, not descending. We are Anglicans in just this significant respect. And our discernments are carried out, therefore, not diversely, but within the actual hierarchy of subjection by which "all things are subjected to [the Son], so that the Son himself will also be subjected to Him who put all things under Him, that God may be all in all" (1 Cor. 15:28).

Is this ordering, that moves from the local to the ultimate, something that "appeals" to me? I cannot answer that question, except to say that, appealing or not, winsome or not, gentle or hard, it is inevitable. The universe is so ordered. "To Set Our Hope On Christ", bound to the image of an American pragmatist society, in the end wants a church on its own terms. But in America and elsewhere that is precisely, and thankfully, what God will not give us.