

Discerning the Truth in a Divided Realm: Five Types of Christian Comprehension, Erasmus, Hooker, Chillingworth, Wilkins and Watts

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Abstract

This dissertation aims to examine a group of key and influential theological writers in early modern England on the topic of truth-discernment within the church, and on the relationship of church and civil society in that discernment. The work of the Dutch Christian humanist, Desiderius Erasmus is essential to this examination, and will form the starting point for the study. Erasmus' ideas were adapted and used explicitly by English thinkers Richard Hooker, and William Chillingworth, and had implicit although indirect influence on John Wilkins and Isaac Watts through to the mid-18th century. Each in their own way set a direction of thinking about the way to resolve a basic problem of common life: how Christians could discern the truth within divided and pluralized social bodies of Church and state both. In so doing, they had to grapple with a central social reality: if human discernment is limited, what form of corporate governance could provide space – sufficient freedom and sufficient limit or discipline – to draw or press people to seek and apprehend religious truth? The writings of these key authors are not of merely historical interest. Rather, the pressing dynamics of their context and the answers they gave – as well as the tradition of response they were a part of and developed – remain pointedly

relevant to our own ecclesial situation in 21st century North America, not only among Anglicans but among the myriad of Christian churches trying to reconsider their witness and their relationship to their rapidly complexified civil settings. This is because a central question in early modern and present times is how Christians can discern the truth within fragmented and pluralized social and ecclesiastical bodies.

Both periods have seen the proliferation of social, civil, political, and church divisions as the result of the demand for adherence to absolute claims either to particular doctrines, particular moral positions, or to the sole manifestation of a ‘true Church.’ The danger of divided Churches teaching, preaching and acting autonomously – without the capacity to be challenged, corrected, and potentially prevented from acting – has severe consequences for Christian witness as this work will demonstrate.

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Introduction

This dissertation aims to examine a group of key and influential theological writers in early modern England on the topic of truth-discernment within the church, and on the relationship of church and civil society in that discernment. The work of the Dutch Christian humanist, Desiderius Erasmus is essential to this examination, and will form the starting point for the study. Erasmus' ideas were adapted and used explicitly by English thinkers Richard Hooker, and William Chillingworth, and had implicit although indirect influence on John Wilkins and Isaac Watts through to the mid-eighteenth century.¹ Each in their own way set a direction of thinking about the way to resolve a basic problem of common life: how Christians could discern the truth within divided and pluralized social bodies of Church and state both. In so doing, they had to grapple with a central social reality: if human discernment is limited, what form of corporate governance could provide space – sufficient freedom and sufficient limit or discipline – to draw or press people to seek and apprehend religious truth?

Each thinker, from Erasmus to Watts, was also part of a consistent tradition of thinking on these matters, influencing each other in turn, but also shaping the ideas and expectations of their colleagues in the church. At the same time, each was writing in a context profoundly shaped by social forces that demanded adjustment and reconsideration of truth-discernment in ways that, even in our day, represent problematic challenges to contemporary ecclesial and political decision-making.

¹ Gregory D. Dodds, *Exploiting Erasmus: The Erasmian Legacy and Religious Change in Early Modern England* (University of Toronto Press: Toronto, 2009).

The writings of these key authors are not of merely historical interest. Rather, the pressing dynamics of their context and the answers they gave – as well as the tradition of response they were a part of and developed – remain pointedly relevant to our own ecclesial situation in twenty-first century North America, not only among Anglicans but among the myriad of Christian churches trying to reconsider their witness and their relationship to their rapidly complexified civil settings. This is because a central question in early modern and present times is how Christians can discern the truth within fragmented and pluralized social and ecclesiastical bodies.

Both periods have seen the proliferation of social, civil, political, and church divisions as the result of the demand for adherence to absolute claims either to particular doctrines, particular moral positions, or to the sole manifestation of a ‘true Church.’² The danger of divided Churches teaching, preaching and acting autonomously – without the capacity to be challenged, corrected, and potentially prevented from acting – has severe consequences for Christian witness.³ In both times, a lack of ecclesiastical unity has hampered the capacity for reformation of individuals and of Churches. Division has promoted a Pelagian sense of self-sufficiency in renewing the world, which in turn has prevented both individuals and Churches from taking a posture of humility and penitence necessary for receiving grace and its transformation of common and individual moral life.

The Erasmian tradition and the questions it engages as it is adapted by the sixteenth and seventeenth century English thinkers examined in this dissertation touch

² See Ephraim Radner, *End of the Church: A Pneumatology of Christian Division in the West* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998).

³ See Radner, *End of the Church*; Ephraim Radner, *A Brutal Unity: The Spiritual Politics of the Christian Church* (Baylor, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012), 19-168 especially.

upon contemporary ecclesiastical challenges, particularly as the latter include contested articulations of Christian truth. Efforts to discuss reconciliation have continued from the sixteenth century through to the present, often drawing on the conciliar tradition. These efforts, however, have been undermined in two ways. First, the retention of absolutist tenets of ecclesial identity by fragmented Churches defy the very life of Christ whose willing and sustained deference to God first necessarily included his submission to his neighbor. This is a theological matter: the Church's division, wherein members of the Church have failed to defer to a decision made through corporate discernment, is an unfaithful response to God for it betrays their own promise to God and their promise to uphold their commitment to their neighbors before God.⁴ The second way efforts to reconcile have been undermined is a pragmatic matter. Nowhere in the Western world is a person compelled to attend Church at all, let alone a particular Church. Without civil sanction, each Church fragment competes against others for members often on the basis of pedestrian matters such as music type, liturgical style, whether a building has air conditioning and whether the coffee is good. At least in most Protestant denominations, the Eucharist and in some cases, ministries are shared between members of different denominations and so there is a relative indifference as to which Church one attends, and so little concern with division.⁵ This reduction from a common life of worship and formation in the Christian faith stands in marked contrast to the vision set out by Erasmus, Hooker, Chillingworth, Wilkins, and even Watts (although I shall offer serious

⁴ See Radner, *End of the Church*, pp. 1-56 in general, specifically, pp. 52-55; Matthew 5:37, c.f. John 21:15-19 and 2 Samuel 15, 20:1-2, 1 Kings 11:31.

⁵ Ephraim Radner, *Hope Among the Fragments: The Broken Church and Its Engagement of Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2004), 23-38.

reservations about Watts's vision). Where all five thinkers sought to find a common space for corporate religious discernment, the twenty-first century Church creates conditions in which each fragment of the Church can 'cherry pick' particular aspects of faith and worship it wishes to emphasize. With each fragment articulating its autonomously chosen vision of the faith, Christian witness to a world that does not know Christ becomes incoherent at best and is presumed irrelevant at worst.

The fundamental challenge for all modern Churches then has been reduced to a matter of pragmatism: the capacity to move from one denomination to another eliminates any requirement for mutual deference, and thus for a limit to one's actions. The result is not transformation inherent in corporate discernment and required deference to mutually agreed resolutions or doctrines. Rather it is the elevation of self-determination (whether individual or one small fragment of a Church) to an equivalence with the will of God, particularly with the Holy Spirit.⁶

Yet the generational rapidity of decline in Western Churches,⁷ with the exception until quite recently⁸ of Churches in the United States, coupled with rapid growth of the Church in Africa and in Asia over the last half century,⁹ has pressed Christians in the

⁶ For an example of this argument as used to justify the Holy Spirit's leading the Episcopal Church into truth over and against the conciliar discernment of the whole body of the Anglican Communion see: Ellen Wondra, "The Highest Degree of Communion Possible," in *Anglican Theological Review*, http://www.anglicantheologicalreview.org/static/pdf/articles/Address_87.2.pdf, (Accessed August 14, 2018), see in particular pp. 195-196 which present the issue under consideration and 198-199 for her understanding of the role of the Spirit in guiding a Church operating autonomously from its whole body, into truth.

⁷ Paul Silas Peterson, ed., *The Decline of Established Christianity in the Western World* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

⁸ Pew Research, "America's Changing Religious Landscape," <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>, (Accessed August 7, 2018).

⁹ Pew Research, "Global Christianity – A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World's Christian Population," <http://www.pewforum.org/2011/12/19/global-christianity-exec/>, (Accessed August 7, 2018).

West to reevaluate the sufficiency of their collective and individual witness. At the heart of this reevaluation is the question of the relationship between autonomy and limit in decision-making. It is just here that Erasmus, Hooker, Chillingworth, Wilkins, and Watts provide much needed wisdom for the modern Church. Examining the progression in the arguments of these thinkers, alongside their contemporaries, will demonstrate both the folly in any presumption to autonomous possession of Christian truth, and the folly in widening the arena of discernment so far that particular Christian truths are lost or conflated with secular moral truths. Their discussions, at the least, offer a helpful lens to reevaluating present potential for creating common space for corporate or comprehensive discernment of the truth. The distance between the seventeenth-century thinkers examined in the dissertation and late twenty-first-century Anglicanism seems vast. Yet the fundamental problems remain similar, though now it seems many have forgotten the tools Anglicans themselves have for engaging constructively.

One representative example of the rehashing of these problems in the twenty-first-century is provided in a 2004 essay by Ellen Wondra, entitled, “The Highest Degree of Communion Possible.” Wondra argues that that the primary locus of authority for Anglicans rests with Diocesan or National (Provincial) Churches, while any relationship to other Provinces or dioceses is, according to her understanding of Communion polity, a matter of mere “consultation.” The difficulty in deferring to the decision of the whole Anglican Communion gathered in council (whether at the Lambeth Council, the Primate’s Meeting, or The Anglican Consultative Council) is that:

... the emphasis on containment [centralizing authority in the gathered councils of the whole Communion] puts at risk something important: the potentially constructive and even revelatory role of dissent, and of discernment or assessment of new developments. To put it theologically, the question is how we go about

discerning the work of the Holy Spirit not just in preserving us in all truth, but in leading us into all truth, especially new truth.¹⁰

Wondra is responding here to a document produced in 2004 entitled, *The Windsor Report*, whose writers were commissioned by the Anglican Communion Office and the Archbishop of Canterbury to address the issue of authority within the Anglican Communion.¹¹ The Windsor Report grew most specifically out of the need to address a particular issue: the Episcopal Church's consecration of a bishop in a same-sex union in 2003, after having agreed to a resolution prohibiting such acts by any Province or Diocese in 1998.¹² This particular event elevated the issues of autonomy and deference to mutually discerned Scriptural understanding (tradition) to the forefront of concern within the Communion. So too did the counter response where American bishops or congregations disaffected by these developments asked for and received cross-border interventions by bishops of Anglican Churches in the Global South. Both the problem, and various responses, parallel conflictual situations in seventeenth-century England, yet in a context now bereft of the theological and ecclesiological tools central to seventeenth-century discussion.

¹⁰ Wondra, "The Highest Degree of Communion Possible," 198.

¹¹ The Anglican Commission on Communion, *The Windsor Report*, Oct. 18, 2004, <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/media/68225/windsor2004full.pdf>, (Accessed August 13, 2018).

¹² The Anglican Communion, *Lambeth Conference 1998: Resolution 1.10*, specifically subsections (b and e) <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/resources/document-library/lambeth-conference/1998/section-i-called-to-full-humanity/section-i10-human-sexuality?author=Lambeth+Conference&year=1998>, (Accessed August 13, 2018); The particular impetus for making explicit, a twenty-first century Anglican understanding of conciliar gathering – including mutual deference, accountability, autonomy and its limit – was the consecration of Bishop Gene Robinson, a man in a committed same sex relationship, to the Diocese of New Hampshire in the Province of the Episcopal Church, USA in 2003. This decision by the Episcopal Church was met by a break down in relationship between Anglican Churches of the Global South and the United States (and Canada). The response to this and subsequent events was the production of the Windsor Report which sought to define the problem and to suggest what steps were needed to resolve and reconcile the division that had begun occurring within dioceses and between provinces of the Anglican Communion.

Thus in her response, Wondra goes on to criticize what she determines is the historical myopia of the Report's writers, who draw only on the Communion's process of discernment with respect to Women's Ordination:

“The Windsor Report,” she writes, “embraces this conserving role [of tradition handed on through generations], preferring containment and preservation over the breaking in of the new. This is evident in how it analyzes recent Anglican history in order to set the stage for its recommendations [a Covenant Agreement]. Specifically, the Windsor Report takes the ordination of women as its single positive example of how the need for adequate consultation at the worldwide level has taken place in the course of making a significant change in the life of the Communion.”¹³

As an example of beneficial things resulting from decisions that went against the received wisdom of the Church, Wondra argues that it was a leading of the Holy Spirit that moved the Church to affirm the Christian legitimacy of divorce and remarriage.¹⁴ But she nowhere provides evidence that these are actual goods, socially, politically, economically, or Scripturally. She simply makes the assertion that because they have occurred, they are good.¹⁵ At best, Wondra's assertions amount to contestable opinion, buttressed by a conviction that the Holy Spirit is leading a small fragment of the Church – the Episcopal and Anglican Churches of Canada – into a “new truth,” while leaving the larger and growing part of the Communion, the whole Christian tradition, and a good portion of the rest of the Christian Church behind.

¹³ Wondra, “The Highest Degree of Communion Possible,” 199.

¹⁴ Wondra, “The Highest Degree of Communion Possible,” 203.

¹⁵ Scripture and psychological study might suggest otherwise: Matthew 19:4-6, c.f. Malachi 2, 4:1, NRSV; A. Sands, E.J. Thompson, and D. Gaysina, “Long-term influences of parental divorce on offspring affective disorders: A systematic review and meta-analysis,” in *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 2017 Aug 15, 218:105-114; The main conclusion states that: “Parental divorce is associated with an increased risk of adult offspring depression, with no indication of the effect being weaker in recent publications.” [https://www.jad-journal.com/article/S0165-0327\(16\)32175-9/fulltext](https://www.jad-journal.com/article/S0165-0327(16)32175-9/fulltext), (Accessed August 15, 2018).

Wondra's claims to legitimate national autonomy for the Episcopal Church in the twenty-first-century are representative of the revived, within Anglicanism, challenge of corporate religious decision-making in a contested and pluralistic context.¹⁶ Her arguments press for consideration of four categories shared between the present Churches of the Anglican Communion and by a core strand of sixteenth and seventeenth century thinkers that will be examined in this dissertation: contestation concerning the truth, evidence and its evaluation, epistemic certainty, and contained and ruled arenas of debate. In fact these four, shared categories are central to the concerns raised and addressed by twentieth and twenty-first century Anglican Church leaders in the Anglican Covenant Agreement.¹⁷ The Covenant provides a concrete, if under-explicated parallel to the kinds of larger suggestions made by the sixteenth and seventeenth century authors we shall examine below, each of whom sought to order discernment according to a structure of deference for the sake of apprehending the truth.¹⁸

¹⁶ See for example, Diarmaid MacCulloch's public statement of 2012, posted as part of the "No Covenant Coalition," a group formed to oppose the Covenant Agreement's adoption by member Provinces. He writes: "Anglicanism was born in the Reformation's rejection of an unwarranted and unhistorical over-centralization of ecclesiastical authority ... This pernicious proposal of a Covenant (an unhappy choice of name if you know anything about our Church's history) ignores the Anglican Communion's past, and seeks to gridlock the Anglican present at the cost of a truly Anglican future" (No Anglican Covenant Coalition, "Coalition Announces Professor Diarmaid MacColloch as Patron," News Release, January 31, 2012, <https://deimel.org/noanglican covenant/pr9.pdf>, (Accessed August 20, 2018)); for his perspective on the history of the English Church, see: *The Reformation: A History* (London: Penguin Books, reprint edition, 2005); for his understanding of the development of the Church, including the English Church and the Anglican Communion see, *A History of Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years* (London: Allen Lane, 2016); For another example see, Bruce Kaye, Bruce Kaye, *Conflict and the Practice of Christian Faith: The Anglican Experiment* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009).

¹⁷ Anglican Communion Office, *The Anglican Covenant*, http://www.anglicancommunion.org/media/99905/The_Anglican_Covenant.pdf, (Accessed August 15, 2018).

¹⁸ Not all Anglican thinkers in the West are convinced of the historical or present arguments and justifications for autonomy provided by these scholars and others who have made similar arguments. See for example an article by Mark Chapman, wherein he draws on the work of William Reed Huntington to provide justification for a constitutional model of Church for governing the life of Anglican Communion members. He mentions the Covenant Agreement but contends that its fourth section – where handling

Is there an historical precedent for an assumption of deference to sustain unity in the Church on which the Covenant text draws? Indeed, there is. The analysis offered by Wondra proceeds without reference to the substantial historical lessons concerning the relationship between autonomy and consent provided by Anglicanism's own history: mainly, a core thread of Anglican-self-understanding and articulation drawn from the tradition of conciliarity in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries,¹⁹ and from thinkers like Erasmus in the sixteenth century.²⁰ English thinkers like Richard Hooker in the later sixteenth, William Chillingworth in the third decade of the seventeenth century, and John Wilkins from the beginning of the civil war through to the last 30 years of the seventeenth century, argued that seeking religious truth required constant discernment over time. Discerning the truth was to be a corporate act, comprehending the whole people of England. As Wondra indicated, discernment is as it always has been,

disputes is addressed – is insufficient as a constitutional document since it is not accepted by many in the Episcopal Church. He argues revisions be made (but does not specify what these should be) that would enable it to function in a constitutional capacity. See: Mark Chapman, "American Catholicity and the National Church: The Legacy of William Reed Huntington," in *Sewanee Theological Review*, 56,2 (Easter 2013), 135. Citing Huntington, Chapman writes, "A non-English Anglicanism fit for the American republic was the basis for 'the Church of the Reconciliation [in the United States, scattered Protestant congregations and Roman Catholics].'" (137); See also, Paul Avis who writes in response to the Anglican Covenant that, "[t]he member bodies of the Communion are churches in their own right, *but they are not churches on their own; they are bound together in a particular form of unity, ecclesial communion,*" (124). Avis proposes that the Covenant is a mechanism, with constitutional capacity (not imposed) of ordering common life by way of "moral intentionality:" the willing consent to defer to the decisions of the Church gathered in council at Lambeth, and in Primate's Meetings (124). The focus of the Covenant is relationship: how do member Churches relate to one another and what happens when disagreement occurs, how might we adjudicate matters. "At its most basic," he says, "the Covenant seeks to extend the courtesy, charity and sensitivity that we try to show to our fellow Christians individually and locally, to the level of inter-church relationships. It seeks to prevent such a crisis as we are now experiencing ever happening again, *and it does that by making provision for consultation, mediation [provided by section 4] and restraint when controversial actions are being mooted,*" (124). (Paul Avis, "Anglican Ecclesiology and the Anglican Covenant," in *Journal of Anglican Studies*, 12:1 (May 2014), 112-132 (italics mine).

¹⁹ For the influence of conciliarity on Anglican thinkers, particularly Richard Hooker see, Paul Avis, *Beyond the Reformation: Authority, Primacy and Unity in the Conciliar Tradition* (London: T&T Clark, 2006), see chapters 4, 5, 7 and 9 in particular.

²⁰ Dodds, *Exploiting Erasmus*.

constrained by sin, finitude, and thereby, the need to probabilistically weigh the evidence in support of claims when making decisions about how to act, what practices to allow, and what limitations on actions, practices, or teachings is ever present.²¹

For Roman Catholic conciliarists of the 14th and fifteenth centuries through to Wilkins in the mid to late seventeenth, a central task was to articulate a relational framework that could provide common space for corporate discernment of religious truth.²² On the one hand thinkers in the conciliarist and Erasmian stream, like Hooker, Chillingworth and Wilkins, recognized the need to allow persons to hold a diversity of positions where absolute certainty could not be obtained through discernment. On the other hand, each thinker, given the needs or possibilities in his own context, concluded that there were limits to a person's, or a party's capacity to act autonomously on account

²¹ Each of the five thinkers examined in this dissertation describe the necessity of and in some cases, some guidance for weighing the data of the Scriptural text and its interpretation through time (tradition), as well as historical events, ideas and propositions, natural history (science), and testimony concerning this data. Weighing equates for each of them to part of a process of discernment concerning the likelihood that the data, or a particular arrangement of the data fits Christian truth (and thereby God's will). Writing just prior to the division of the Western Church, Erasmus demonstrates his recognition of the inherent ambiguity of Scripture and of historical events. The division of the Church exacerbates claims to certainty about not only data, but the locus of authority for determining what data is relevant to consider, and what witnesses ought to be trusted as sources of truth. When using the terms, "probability," "probabilism," or "probabilistic," this dissertation follows the work of J.A.I. Champion in his book, *Pillars of Priestcraft Shaken: The Church of England and its Enemies, 1660-1730* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992). Champion argues that particularly by the seventeenth century (although present in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries as well), those who attempted to anchor claims about Christian truth in history were demonstrated to be susceptible to distortions, typically by an interlocutor with whom one thinker was engaged. To combat the doubt or skepticism that grew from constantly tearing down the supposed proof of one's claim to truth, many thinkers argued for the legitimacy of determining or making a decision on the basis of what was 'most likely' to be aligned with God's truth, in terms of the data under consideration. The process of discernment was termed, "probability" or "probabilistic." Champion notes that particularly in the latter half of the seventeenth century, being able to demonstrate alignment with 'universal testimony' (across time and space), was to establish a 'fact' as probabilistically true evidence of God's providential ordering of history (Champion, *Pillars of Priestcraft Shaken*, 43).

²² For a history of the conciliar thought from Scripture through to the present see, Francis Oakley, *The Conciliarist Tradition: Constitutionalism in the Catholic Church 1300-1870* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Avis, *Beyond the Reformation: Authority, Primacy and Unity in the Conciliar Tradition*; For a summary of the conduct of early voting in councils see, Ramsay MacMullen, *Voting About God in Early Church Councils* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006); for medieval conciliarity see: Brian Tierney, *Foundations of the Conciliar Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, reissue edition, 2010).

of her own interpretation. Deference to either the Church or State or both together, was required to sustain the peace, faith and order of the Church for future discernment. What each one sought was a comprehensive Church that could sustain a range of understanding while not becoming so broadly permissive to strip the Church of its capacity to proclaim the truth of Christian revelation.²³

Hooker shared more in common with Erasmus in his understanding of consent than did any of the other thinkers examined in this dissertation. He was also the only English thinker to provide explicit structural mechanisms for enforcing limits.

Chillingworth, Wilkins and Watts share Hooker's concern for limited comprehension.

Their work, however, will allow us to see how division or the threat of division

²³ The term 'comprehension' has been used to refer to different conceptual ecclesiastical frameworks over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Gary Remer argues that for Erasmus (and the same is true, in part, for Hooker), comprehension and toleration were concepts used interchangeably. The goal in tolerating a person whose beliefs and ensuing actions were not consistent with the Church's, was to convince the person of the plausibility of the Church's teaching, in order that they might be willingly 'comprehended,' rather than coerced. The ultimate goal then was to open dissenters' minds – through preaching or through conversation (depending upon the level of the person's theological education and social position) to the possibility of God's transforming them in accordance with the truth (Remer, *Humanism and the Rhetoric of Toleration*, 7-8). Chillingworth's and Wilkins's works mark a shift in the notion of comprehension, arguing, in effect, for widening the limits defining Christian truth in order to 'include' or 'comprehend' those who were willing to consent to the national Church without expectation that their particular assertions of certainty would be met. This general trend toward broadening the limits on acceptable teaching and actions that maintain common space for corporate discernment reaches a climax shortly after the 1688 Revolution, with William III's two proposed bills, one on "Comprehension" (this one drawn from Wilkins's work on a scheme of comprehension in 1668), the other on Toleration. Only the Act of Toleration passed (1689). Brent Sirota argues that the pushback against the bill for Comprehension had to do with a fear about the visibility of the national Church, and its authority and capacity to order the common life of English people. Whereas mere toleration suggested that the Church of England was still authoritative in ordering the common life of English people, giving their permission to dissenting sects to gather comprehension suggested that the Church of England and independent sects were in fact, 'equals' in ordering the life of English people (Brent Sirota, "The Occasional Conformity Controversy, Moderation, and the Anglican Critique of Modernity," in *The Historical Journal*, 57,1, (March, 2014), 81-105, see in particular pp. 100-105. By the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, various members of various Church parties were not arguing over the need for comprehension, but rather, how comprehension was best implemented. In the burgeoning days of the Anglican Communion, the questions of comprehension revolved around the extent to which traditional Church of England practices ought to be used or thrown out and replaced by local customs in the Church's missionary expansion. See Jeremy Morris, "The Spirit of Comprehension: Examining the Broad Church Synthesis in England," in *Anglican and Episcopal History*, 75,3, (September 2006), 423-443).

broadened the proposed limits eventually, in the eighteenth century, resulting in the civil acceptance of divided sects each claiming their own version of Christian truth.

At first glance Watts's proposal, in the eighteenth century, to limit the state's coercive interference in the life of a particular Church looks appealing. It pressed for a reversal to the continued widening of limits on teaching and practices by protecting a particular church's practices and claims from the state's interference exercised through a national or established Church. After all it was the particular claims of groups or parties within England that had led to the violence of civil wars, the execution of a king, a period of moral confusion during the interregnum, and the continued threat of division. If such groups were permitted their autonomy from having to defer or consent to a national church, these dangers or threats to social, political and ecclesiastical peace could be eliminated. The United States, without a national Church, and with a constitution that explicitly set out law to allow for the freedom to practice one's own religion by limiting the State's capacity to interfere in an individual's or a Church's life, certainly shares commonality with Watts's vision. But what sort of vocation, we might ask, has this justification of autonomous Churches who often convey contradictory doctrines and practices, led to in a pluralistic Western world?

Two things ought to be noted about this. First, the Episcopal Church's own constitution and Prayer Book, along with its participation in and agreement to uphold mutually agreed to resolutions at Lambeth Conferences, indicates that it did not wish to assert autonomy from the Church of England or from other Provinces of the Communion

until the latter half of the twentieth century.²⁴ In other words, there is no recent historical precedent for justifying autonomous decision-making, particularly where it contradicts mutually agreed-to interpretations. Second, if the Holy Spirit ontologically joins each Church to the one body of Jesus Christ, it is incumbent upon all members of the Church that meets in council together to determine matters of worship, faith and order, to consider how this unity can be embodied in witness.

In his various editions of the *History of Scepticism*, Richard Popkin provides an historical lens through which to understand The Episcopal Church's presumption of epistemic certainty. Popkin argued that skepticism was an important response to the presumption of absolute epistemic certainty formulated into ecclesiastical dogmatism.²⁵ He begins with Erasmus, although in later editions, he recognizes the work of earlier precursors of skepticism and concludes that there are three pathways taken by early

²⁴ Constitution of the Episcopal Church: Preamble https://www.episcopalchurch.org/files/attached-files/candc_2012pp1-10.pdf. (Accessed August 22, 2018), 1; The Episcopal Prayer Book of 1789 also includes a Preface wherein the claim is made that the liturgy of the Episcopal Church can be slightly adjusted to local custom but ought to remain mostly in common with the worship in the Church of England, to prevent "too much stiffness," but also "too much easiness in admitting variations in things once advisedly established." Enabling minor alterations would allow for local adaptations to help teach the faith, but would retain the majority of things handed on from past generations. This capacity for minor alteration while retaining most aspects was essential, the English and American Prayer Books state, for the, "preservation of peace and unity in the Church" (The [Episcopal] Book of Common Prayer, Preface, 9-10. Resolution 37 of the 1930 Conference calls for deepening the fellowship of the members of the Communion itself so that mutual understanding and appreciation all may come to a fuller understanding of the truth, "as it is in Jesus." The capacity to understand the truth is, so the bishops affirm in Resolutions 48 and 49c, contingent on the union or unity of the Church. Within the Anglican context, while autonomy is affirmed, it is limited by being, "bound together not by a central legislative and executive authority, but by mutual loyalty sustained through the common *counsel* of the bishops in conference," (Coleman, 83-4); The Episcopal Church sent its bishops to the first Lambeth Conference in which they agreed with Resolution 4 that: "unity in faith and discipline will be best maintained among the several branches of the Anglican Communion by due and canonical subordination of the synods of the several branches to the higher authority of a synod or synods above them" (Roger Coleman ed., *Resolutions of the twelve Lambeth Conferences 1867-1988* (Toronto: Anglican Book Centre, 1992), 1). They sustained agreement to this way of life as articulated in Resolution 9 at the 1920 Lambeth Conference (Coleman, *Resolutions of the twelve Lambeth Conferences 1867-1988*, 46).

²⁵ Richard Popkin. *The History of Scepticism: From Savonarola to Bayle*, revised and expanded edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003),

modern thinkers: first, the fideist argument of thinkers like Erasmus and Montaigne who would suggest that rational argument and the capacity to come to agreement is destroyed by skepticism. This leaves the mind open to the only available source of personal certainty: to revealed truth as determined by the Church. The second pathway he notes is that of mitigated skepticism in thinkers like Chillingworth, Popkin argued, maintained that there was no rational certainty to be had. As a result, they constructed a religious epistemology involving experience and probability.²⁶ Finally the third response was attributed to dogmatists like John Wilkins, who attempted to develop foundationalist philosophies and natural theology on the basis of unquestionable principles.

Popkin's arguments concerning skepticism and the role of each thinker he examines have been analyzed, developed and criticized for the past few decades.²⁷ At the least, his work challenged scholarly research from the earlier twentieth century which had suggested the development of skepticism and probabilistic reasoning was an inevitable result of the study of natural history and science. He pressed scholars to examine the

²⁶ On this see Barbara Shapiro, *Probability and Certainty in Seventeenth-Century England: A Study of the Relationships between Natural Science, Religion, History, Law, and Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983). Shapiro argues that in seventeenth-century England, probability and specifically probabilistic empiricism had taken the place of absolute certainty as the standard of truth. She suggests that this came about because of a crossover between disciplines between many seventeenth-century thinkers. The desire, she concludes, was to move away from religious contestation to a moderate natural religion consonant with science. Such a conclusion implicitly assumes a separation between science and religion that is simply not evident in the writings of any seventeenth-century thinkers I have examined. I believe Peter Harrison offers a more accurate account of the shift to probabilistic reasoning, suggesting that it serves as a tool of experimental science, specifically for the purpose of mitigating the effects of sin in human reasoning. This is a specifically Christian use of what will come to be a distinctive discipline from theology; but which is, I suggest, a theological method in the seventeenth century. See Harrison, *The Fall of Man and the Foundations of Science*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), particularly 103-138 and 216-244; and Ian Hacking, *The Emergence of Probability* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

²⁷ For a recent set of essays examining, developing and critiquing Popkin's work see, Jose R. Maia Neto, Gianni Pagganni and John Christian Laursen ed. *Skepticism in the Modern Age: Building on the Work of Richard Popkin.*" in Brill's *Studies in Intellectual History*, 181, (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2009).

intellectual and historical context for the return to skepticism in both Catholic and Protestant thought. Later twentieth and twenty-first century work has built on the reframing of intellectual developments in the early modern period, particularly as a response to increased concern with sin and the capacity and limitation to human knowledge and thus to salvation.

In the wake of Popkin's research, scholars like Peter Harrison have demonstrated that the relationship between science, philosophy, and faith in decision-making was centered in theological considerations, rather than in an inevitable turn to science with the ascendancy of human knowledge and capacity. In two main books, *The Fall of Man and the Foundations of Science* and *The Bible, Protestantism and the Rise of Natural Science*, Harrison demonstrates that scientific method developed as a tool for Christians to be able to mitigate the effects of sin by weighing evidence and falsifying the least probable explanations of that evidence, in accordance with Scripture and the tradition of its interpretation.²⁸ Such work challenges the idea that reason was, for Anglicans of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, divorced from revelation; or in fact, was an attempt to reach God through reason. Robert Orr and Barbara Shapiro, the respective biographers of Chillingworth and Wilkins, drew on this rationalist framework in their assessments of both the latter thinkers' use of probability in reasoning.²⁹ This notion of 'Anglican rationalism' is predicated on alignment between the natural world's evidence and

²⁸ Peter Harrison, *The Bible, Protestantism and the Rise of Natural Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, Revised edition); and *The Fall of Man and the Foundations of Science*.

²⁹ Barbara Shapiro, "Latitudinarianism and Science in Seventeenth Century England", *Past and Present*, No. 40, (1968), 16-41; and *John Wilkins, 1614-1672: An Intellectual Biography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), chaps. iv and viii; and *Probability and Certainty in Seventeenth-Century England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983); Robert Orr, *Reason and Authority: The Thought of William Chillingworth* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967).

revelation.³⁰ Following Popkin’s research, Harrison’s work suggests that the work of Chillingworth and Wilkins, and even Hooker before them, was foremost theologically concerned to determine how to mitigate the effects of sin on truth seeking, and pragmatically, to deal with the reality of competing Church parties and fragments.

While substantial scholarship has been done examining the work of Erasmus and Hooker,³¹ Chillingworth and Wilkins have remained minor characters in academic

³⁰ For an example of this argument that Hooker, Chillingworth and Wilkins, fit into a stream of Anglican “rationalist” thinkers who relied on reasoning to come to truth, see, Henry MacAdoo, *The Spirit of Anglicanism: A Survey of Anglican Theological Method in the Seventeenth Century* (New York: Scribner, 1965); For an argument on the Latitudinarian’s alignment with science see; Lotte Mulligan, “Anglicanism, Latitudinarianism and Science in seventeenth Century England,” in *Annals of Science*, 30,2 (1973), 213-219.

³¹ Major works on Erasmus include: Erika Rummel, *Erasmus* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2004); C. Augustijn, *Erasmus: His Life, Works and Influence*, Trans. J.C. Grayson, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991); Marjorie O’Rourke Boyle, *Rhetoric and Reform: Erasmus’ Civil Dispute with Luther* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983); and more recent work, Christine Christ-von Wedel, *Erasmus of Rotterdam: Advocate of a New Christianity* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013); Peter G. Bietenholz, *Encounters with a Radical Erasmus. Erasmus’ Work as a Source of Radical Thought in Early Modern Europe* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009); for Erasmus on consent: James K. McConica, “Erasmus and the Grammar of Consent,” in *The Pursuit of Holiness in Late Medieval and Renaissance Religion*, ed., Charles Trinkaus and Heiko Oberman. (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1974); and importantly for tracing a trajectory of Erasmus’s thought in England: Dodds *Exploiting Erasmus*; Major works on Hooker include, W. Bradford Littlejohn, “The Freedom of a Christian Commonwealth: Richard Hooker and the Problem of Christian Liberty,” (Ph.D. Diss., University of Edinburgh, 2013), Accessed January 2, 2016, <https://www.era.lib.ed.ac.uk/bitstream/handle/1842/9515/Littlejohn2014.pdf?sequence=2&isAllowed=y>. (This dissertation has now been published, in revised form, as: W. Bradford Littlejohn, *The Peril and Promise of Christian Liberty: Richard Hooker the Puritans and Protestant Political Theology*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017); however, all page number references in my dissertation refer to the Ph.D. dissertation itself, since it provides more in-depth argument of persons and events particular to this dissertation). See also W. Bradford Littlejohn, “The Search for a Reformed Hooker: Some Modest Proposals.” *Reformation and Renaissance Review* 16,1 (2015): 70-73; Michael Brydon, *The Evolving Reputation of Richard Hooker: An Examination of Responses 1600-1714* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Diarmaid MacCulloch, “Richard Hooker’s Reputation,” in *A Companion to Richard Hooker*, ed., W.J. Torrance Kirby, Brill’s Companions to the Christian Tradition (Leiden: Brill, 2008); Peter Lake, *Anglicans and Puritans?: Presbyterianism and English Conformist Thought from Whitgift to Hooker*, (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1988); Nigel Voak, *Richard Hooker and Reformed Theology: A Study of Reason, Will and Grace*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Paul Avis, *Anglicanism and the Christian Church: Theological Resources in Historical Perspective*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989); David Neelands, *Richard Hooker and the Debates about Predestination 1580-1600* in *Toronto Journal of Theology*, 17.1 (May 2001), 187-202; Torrance Kirby, *Richard Hooker: Reformer and Platonist*, (London, Routledge, 2005); Torrance Kirby, *Richard Hooker and the English Reformation* (New York: Springer Publishing, 2004); Nigel Atkinson, *Richard Hooker and The Authority of Scripture, Tradition*, (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2005).

literature. The latter two are often mentioned as a part of or influential to different movements like the Latitudinarians, Deists, or non-conformists.³² To what extent these categories actually existed during the seventeenth century as more than pejorative labels by contemporaries is increasingly contested particularly as twentieth century scholarship may have presumed thinkers to fit neatly into these groups when in fact they may not have.³³ Popkin's work also seeks to fit Chillingworth and Wilkins, (as well as Erasmus) into distinct categories of skeptical types as discussed above: mitigated skepticism, dogmatism predicated on fundamental natural principles (and fideism).

While these thinkers' arguments and reasoning differ, Popkin has assumed this is to do with their respective intellectual influences and interlocutors. But each theologian was in fact facing distinct historical circumstances when attempting to determine how to make decisions in pursuit of the truth. As Harrison argues, intellectual arguments around the relationship between sin, capacity to know, salvation, and the locus of truth (or authority), in the wake of civil and ecclesiastical division and the threat of division pressed their reformulations of truth seeking. In the first place then, any sort of probabilistic reasoning was not merely a response to an intellectual challenge. Rather it was foremost a struggle to determine how to maintain the space for corporate religious

³² Martin Griffin, *Latitudinarianism in the Seventeenth-Century Church of England* (Leiden: Brill, 1992); Dodds, *Exploiting Erasmus*, Hugh Trevor Roper, *Catholics, Anglicans and Puritans: Seventeenth Century Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988); Bruce Mansfield, *Phoenix of His Age: Interpretations of Erasmus, c. 1550-1750* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979); W.H. Spellman, *The Latitudinarians and the Church of England, 1660-1700*, (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1993); Gary Remer, *Humanism and the Rhetoric of Toleration*, (University Park, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996); Wayne Hudson, Diego Lucci, Geoffrey R. Wigelsworth, (ed.), *Atheism and Deism Revalued: Heterodox Religious Identities in Britain, 1650-1800* (London: Ashgate Publishing, 2014), 149-152 in particular.

³³ See for example, William J. Bulman, *Anglican Enlightenment: Orientalism, Religion and Politics in England and its Empire, 1648-1715* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

discernment of the truth when traditional routes to achieving recognized social or religious consent no longer worked or simply could not be implemented.

Without taking into consideration their particular historical contexts, Popkin's classification scheme of skeptical types seems plausible. However, as we shall see when accounting for historical events, the entire category of skeptical thought is secondary to each thinker's concern to provide an argument justifying both the necessity for common space for corporate religious discernment and the ensuing necessary limits to diversity in doctrine and worship. Each thinker recognized that human sin, finitude and the propensity for the false presumption of epistemic certainty, required some deference to a corporate body to mitigate the distorting effects these three things had on interpretation and understanding. Deference required limits in articulating doctrine, and in the common life of worship and morality exercised by that body's members. Without this capacity to permit discernment, and even holding a diversity of perspectives on matters not determinable with absolute certainty, they were aware, disorder, division, and potentially violence would ensue. And yet without limit to autonomous practices, there would remain no capacity to recognize sin and correct it.

At this point, one might question whether this common space was a precursor and inevitable 'door-opening' to eighteenth century toleration, which the modern Episcopal Church could claim is Anglicanism's true legacy. In, *Exploiting Erasmus*, Dodds argues that the "via media," or the rhetoric of "toleration, peace, love and unity" often associated with Erasmus, Hooker, Chillingworth and his Tew Circle brethren, as well as Wilkins, was hardly a middle ground for merely allowing constant discussion or unmitigated

diversity without limit on worship and practices.³⁴ This so called, *via media* or, ‘middle way’ – where space was preserved for engagement of probabilistic matters – was actually an argument intended to discredit and demonstrate the sin of those who insisted on autonomously determined doctrines, practices and moral acts where the Scriptural evidence did not allow this.³⁵

Consistent with recent work done by Brad Littlejohn on Hooker’s political theology, the notion of eighteenth-century toleration where each sect of Christians (except Catholics) was permitted its own freedom of doctrine and worship was not a consideration for the majority of sixteenth century Church of England thinkers. The demand for autonomy in worship and practice presumed an epistemic certainty regarding matters of faith that Hooker did not believe human beings capable of in a postlapsarian world.³⁶

Chillingworth, an early seventeenth century thinker, draws on Hooker’s arguments with adaptation to his context of increased concern with division in England. He provides evidence of accepted historical interpretations of Scripture and contested battles over the locus and justification for authority, which contradict the claims of both Puritans and Roman Catholics. He accuses both groups of asserting autonomy with false claims to absolute certainty in these matters, which do not supply the evidence to justify arguments that their respective Churches are the only true Churches and thereby the true loci of authority. In fact, he uses the evidence of the Church’s tradition to posit that only

³⁴ Dodds, *Exploiting Erasmus*, 212.

³⁵ Dodds, *Exploiting Erasmus*, 212.

³⁶ Littlejohn, “The Freedom of a Christian Commonwealth: Richard Hooker and the Problem of Christian Liberty.”

a body capable of permitting diversity in discernment is justified as being a locus of true teaching because it permits searching for grace, receiving it, and therefore willing assent to God. As with Erasmus and Hooker, this body continues to be the Church. However, Chillingworth's argument, with respect to the essentials of the English Church, begins to broaden in comparison to Hooker. This is so because the fragmentation of Church bodies themselves requires less definition of essentials to believe and to practice being enforced if comprehension is the goal. The unacceptable assertion by any Church body for Chillingworth is that of Scriptural or structural infallibility. In other words, Chillingworth's argument is against the assertion of Christian particulars as absolute.

Wilkins, whose main political writings were published post-Restoration, continues Chillingworth's press for the widest body of discernment possible. He is also aware, however, of the dangers of legal imposition of the demand to consent to the National Church's teaching, but also of the moral decay of a society without limit in its religious discernment. He ultimately argues that the English Church provides the best means to preserve comprehension and that non-conformists ought to consent to its practices and teachings. However, he believes, as per Popkin's assessment, that providing a clear articulation and framework of first principles – evident throughout history – will allow divided Christians to return to a comprehensive Church of England willingly. Using this first principles argument associated with natural religion, Wilkins suggests that English Christians can find the basis for engaging the substance of revelation again without the intellectual barriers that provide the impasse of his time; such a basis can create common space for corporate discernment of the truth.

At the core of Erasmus's, Hooker's, Chillingworth's and Wilkins's theologies is the presumption that truth is the unmediated gift of God that allows people to grasp – imperfectly, due to finitude and sin – something of Being itself. Human beings, for these thinkers, are incapable of exercising the perfect knowledge required to know God fully, however; therefore, any knowledge of the truth is dependent solely upon God's agency. For each of them, deference to the Church or to the State (or both where possible) as ordered by God's historical providence, is not mere political consent. Rather consent to religious and moral customs and the authority of the Church (and potentially the State) is in fact a preparation for receiving God's grace. It strips the individual of the idolatrous, sinful, self-deception that he knows the fullness of Being, of God, and of God's providential ordering of history. And this stripping enables the individual to find herself before God where she can submit to his transformation of her. Thus, each thinker argues for an imposition of limits by the moral life of the largest body of which one is a part and adherence to those limits not because that body is inherently righteous. Rather, that body is the mechanism through which one is washed, pruned, burned, stripped, and made fit for the wedding banquet of God's final consummation of all time when He will be all in all.³⁷

This dissertation traces five distinctive types of comprehension found in the respective works of Desiderius Erasmus, Richard Hooker, William Chillingworth, John Wilkins and Isaac Watts. I will show that each of these thinkers had to, given their circumstances, develop a *unique* type of comprehension in ways appropriate to their political and ecclesiastical contexts. At the same time, I intend to demonstrate their

³⁷ Matthew 22:1-14, NRSV; 1 Corinthians 15:28, NRSV.

reasons for and means of attempting to preserve a theoretical framework for a *common search* for Christian understanding of the truth, following Erasmus to the fourth chapter on John Wilkins. The fifth and final chapter on Isaac Watts presents a unique form of comprehension.

In the wake of proposals like Watts', we are left, at present, in a social and ecclesiastical context where no one knows how to engage in common religious discernment, at least in part because it has not been valued and thereby taught as part of cultural or religious formation. We are thereby consigned to a stark individualism even as members of one fragment of a Church. Even here, each individual, choosing one's own Church, can pursue this in accordance with one's desired goal of "assurance:" an ecclesiastical confirmation bias. Watts' type of "comprehension" deliberately lays the groundwork for mutual *incomprehension*. It encourages social fragmentation and mutual conflict. Watts's vision of autonomous Churches ought to provide both a parallel and a warning to the twenty-first century Churches of the Anglican Communion. Watts's vision planted the seeds for a Church, that, when stripped of a theocratic State, has become more and more absorbed into the secular political culture in which it finds itself. Heirs of the fragmented, perhaps finally 'Wattsian ecclesial vision' may be comforted by this. However, they should remember that such autonomy also permits the alignment of Christian ethos with retaliatory war, capital punishment, the imprisonment and possibly execution of members of the LGBTQ community, and the subjugation of women to men. Churches espousing these moral determinations of scriptural discernment are large and growing throughout the world.

The dissertation ends without substantively developing an alternative to our current impasse of ecclesiastical life due to its current length and scope. Yet the figures examined in the following chapters, and their responses to a search for common space for corporate religious discernment of the truth, provide substance for current Church bodies having to rethink the way truth seeking is engaged in the present context.

Chapter 1: Desiderius Erasmus

Introduction

The relationship between truth discernment and the role of the Church and state in this discernment has a long history from the first disciples following Jesus around the Middle East to its post-Constantinian ascension to ordering the religious life of Western nations.³⁸ Early councils, beginning with Jerusalem and continuing through to the present, initially provided the expanding Church with the means of determining matters of doctrine, discipline, worship, and practices and things unacceptable to common and catholic Christian life.³⁹ The medieval period in the Western Church saw the eruption of a struggle for power and authority after the papal schism which lasted from 1378-1417.⁴⁰ The schism was ended by conciliar decree at the Council of Constance (1414-1418), and conciliar authority was briefly elevated as the means for making decisions concerning the Church's common life. Arguments for conciliar authority and papal authority continued, yet it was the concrete events of Church practices – specifically, the abandonment of council and excommunication of bishops – that continued to raise questions about adequate representation, the legitimacy in the exercise of power, how consent is

³⁸ For a theological examination of historical developments see, Hans von Campenhausen, *Ecclesiastical Authority and Spiritual Power* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1997) for an historical and theological examination of the development of the relationship between church and state politics, theological development, and historical events see, Oliver O'Donovan and Joan Lockwood O'Donovan, ed., *From Irenaeus to Grotius: A Sourcebook in Christian Political Thought 100-1625*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), whose introductions to its wide set of primary sources is invaluable.

³⁹ Von Campenhausen, *Ecclesiastical Authority and Spiritual Power*; Oakley, *The Conciliarist Tradition*; Ramsey, *Voting About God in Early Church Councils*.

⁴⁰ See, Walter Ullmann, *The Growth of Papal Government in the Middle Ages: A Study in the Ideological relation of Clerical to Lay Power* (London: Methuen & Co. LTD, 1955); Oakley, *The Conciliarist Tradition*.

determined, and where the origin of authority actually resided.⁴¹ After the Councils of Constance and Basel (1431-1449), and the fall of Constantinople in May 1453, Western Christians appeared to have accepted the Pope's headship. This, however, proved a fragile and finally untenable agreement for many as the next 80 years of growing dissent and finally excommunication and reestablishment of ecclesiastical bodies apart from Rome would demonstrate.

The drive for truth in the midst of ecclesiastical corruption in the latter medieval period – along with battles between Church and national leaders, as well as the violence of the wars in Bohemia, or persecutions and executions of dissenters like Jan Hus – suggests that the exercise of authority in shaping Christian life has consistently involved an ongoing struggle. The Reformation, however, marked a period after which was to come a proliferation of division between worshipping Christians in the West that continues to the present. The common thread through history would seem to be the desire to, at the least, mitigate the effects of epistemic uncertainty accompanying finite and sinful human creatures as they attempt to order themselves to God. It is a struggle that extends the notion of a “long reformation”⁴² – involving the relationship between

⁴¹ For arguments in support of papal authority see Ullmann, *The Growth of Papal Government in the Middle Ages: A Study in the Ideological relation of Clerical to Lay Power*; Brian Tierney, *Origins of Papal Infallibility 1130-1350: A Study on the Concepts of Infallibility, Sovereignty and Tradition in the Middle Ages* (Leiden: Brill, Revised Edition, 1997); for the development of conciliar arguments see Tierney, *Foundations of the Conciliar Authority*.

⁴² In a volume of essays, edited by Nicholas Tyacke, several early modern scholars argued that the events of the Reformation period were preceded by a drive for evangelical renewal, and that this drive continued well into the seventeenth or even eighteenth centuries. The status quo for the English population remained largely conformance to the Church of England throughout this period. Evangelical movements remained peripheral to English life, and yet these served as the fodder for continuous change and adaptation to new social and ecclesiastical conditions. The social, political and civil strife of the civil war pressed most English commoners and thinkers to turn to catechesis and moral formation within a comprehensive English Church, largely in response to the perceived moral chaos of the interregnum period. At the time of publication (1998), this argument for continuity of the status quo, along side the press of reforming evangelical drives was a relatively novel argument but has subsequently become a more widely accepted,

authority and Christian formation – to God’s gathering and extending of Abram’s family.⁴³

One figure in the early modern Church’s history who provides a lens on the search for truth or religious understanding that brings into focus a range of central concerns is Desiderius Erasmus. This is so because, while he shared the sympathies of many of the reformers, particularly Martin Luther, he ultimately rejected what he perceived to be Luther’s insistence on Scriptural and doctrinal certainty. We see this debate play out in their exchanges over the doctrine of free will, which reveal not only their respective approaches to Scriptural interpretation, but importantly for our purposes, their understanding of the relationship between authority, certainty, and the search for truth. While both held that Christ alone revealed the truth, to be found in Scripture alone, they differed most fundamentally in their understandings of who had the authority and proper agency to interpret Scripture. This debate would become central in England during

(although still contended) understanding of the shape of English life through sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (on this claim see: Lucy Bates, “The Limits of Possibility in England’s Long Reformation” in *The Historical Journal* 53.4 (2010), 1049-1070; for the initial argument concerning the continuity of the Reformation see: N. Tyacke ed., *England’s Long Reformation 1500-1800* (London: UCL Press, 1998), see in particular essays by Eamon Duffy, Patrick Collinson, Hickman, Jeremy Gregory; Diarmaid MacCulloch, *The Later Reformation in England* (New York: Palgrave, 1990 and 2nd ed. 2002), see chapter 10 in particular; Peter Marshall, *Reformation England 1480-1642* (London: Bloomsbury, 2003), see ch. 6 in particular, as alternative to MacCulloch’s perspective; Christopher Marsh, *Popular Religion in Sixteenth-Century England* (New York: Palgrave, 1998), see for a survey of the period with a focus on the drive for consensus; Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (London: Penguin Global, New edition 2012), provides an understanding of how popular faith was sustained in this period of intellectual and natural history (scientific method) development; Patrick Collinson, *The Religion of Protestants: The Church in English Society, 1559-1625* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), see ch. 5 on ‘Popular and Unpopular Religion’; Christopher Haigh, “The Taming of Reformation: Preachers, Pastors and Parishioners in Elizabethan and Early Stuart England,” *History*, 85 (2000); Judith Maltby, *Prayer Book and People in Elizabethan and Early Stuart England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Peter Marshall ed., *The Impact of the English Reformation: 1500-1640* (London: Arnold, 1997), offers a different understanding of what was meant by, ‘Prayer Book Protestants’; Anthony Milton, “Religion and community in pre-civil war England” in N. Tyacke ed., *The English Revolution c.1590-1720, Politics, Religion and Communities* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2007); Ian Green, *The Christian’s ABC: Catechisms and Catechizing in England c.1530-1740* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), provides detailed analysis of the role of catechizing in reforming the English population.

⁴³ Genesis 12, NRSV.

the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and Erasmus's arguments would become a tool for polemical debates by English theological combatants on all sides.⁴⁴ What we find in Erasmus's work is an argument for a type of comprehension; that is, an argument for a common space for the corporate discernment of Christian truth.

The central distinction between Erasmus and Luther concerned the former's ultimate deference to the determination of the Church in matters of faith and practice. In contrast, Luther persisted in challenging the Church's authority. His offence, according to Michael Mullett, was to be, "the head of something called in the Latin title a *sequacium*, literally, a 'followership', or a discipleship," teaching heresy as well as challenging the legitimacy of the authority of Catholic clerics.⁴⁵ Luther's refusal to recant his writings before Church authorities had first issued in a condemnatory papal bull in 1520, *Exsurge Domine* which prohibited people from reading his work or offering him support, as well as banning him from writing, teaching, and exercising priestly duties.⁴⁶ He received the final disciplinary measure of excommunication exercised by the Church in 1521.⁴⁷ While it would be incorrect to suggest that Luther was the sole cause of his own excommunication, his refusal to suffer the consequences of excommunication and to

⁴⁴ Dodds, *Exploiting Erasmus*.

⁴⁵ Michael Mullett, *Martin Luther* (London: Taylor Francis and Group, 2005), 116.

⁴⁶ Mullett, *Martin Luther*, 117.

⁴⁷ Luther was excommunicated January 2, 1521 (with the final mandate published as *Decet Romanum*, May 6, 1521), following his refusal to recant his criticisms of Roman Catholic authorities and the Church's doctrines and practices. (see Mullett, *Martin Luther*, 119).

defer to the Church's punishment, provided an example and a self-declared justification for failing to defer to the Church's disciplinary action.⁴⁸

Erasmus's arguments for and practice of deferring to the decisions of the Catholic Church were based in the belief that God in Christ revealed himself in and through the Scriptures as interpreted by the one Catholic Church. The nature of human limitations in lifespan, knowledge, understanding and the effects of sin, necessitated corporate discernment to allow for the most probable conclusion to become evident over time. For Erasmus, unity and peace in and between both the civil and ecclesiastical spheres provided means (laws, offices, procedures) of establishing and reforming doctrines and practices, as well as disciplining those who persisted in sin. Together, working in a type of neo-platonic harmony in the exercise of authority and of teaching, clerics and monarchs maintained the civil and ecclesiastical structures ensuring an arena for discernment of Christian truth. In Erasmus's scheme, the individualist presumption to epistemic certainty proposed in writings, teachings, practices and in leading others against the Church could only lead to division. Although necessitating human structures of governance, ultimately the aim for human life was union or conformance to Christ. And while this union was dependent upon God's agency, it was the function of the whole of society that allowed for the reception of grace in part, by mitigating the distorting effects of sin and finitude.

In order to understand Erasmus's concept of comprehension I will first examine his understanding of language, and specifically the language of Scripture, and the latter's

⁴⁸ Mullett argues that Cajetan's initial approach to Luther was far more patient and charitable than was Johann Eck's in the Church's proceedings against him at the Diet of Worms in 1521 (Mullett, *Martin Luther*, 116-117); see also: Radner, *End of the Church*, 28-47, 277-333, who argues that division at the Reformation was the result of lack of charity, forbearance, accepting discipline and penitence.

role in forming the character necessary to lead one's neighbor to Christ through one's role in society. I shall touch briefly on Erasmus's Christianizing of a neo-platonic understanding of social order, wherein he develops an analogy of deference between the Father and Son and the various levels of deference within society. He qualifies this as an imperfect analogy since the Son's deference to the Father is perfect while this cannot be the case in any human relationship. Yet he cautions that not deferring to those offices or stations above one's own might lead not only to division, but also to replacement with an even worse government or situation. Thus, deference ironically serves to preserve the diversity of offices and social positions involved in discernment by preventing fragmentation into likeminded groups. To the extent that the Church's division has caused incoherent witness to the Christian faith, Erasmus's argument here can provide a lesson to those who would prefer to act autonomously on presumed certainty in their truth claims. Deference is important for another reason as well, however. In Erasmus's Christianized neo-platonic hierarchy, consent to those above one's own social position is a means of imitating (*imitatio*) those who are closer to the perfection of Christ (more learned, more wise, more holy). Erasmus presumes that God works in and through the social structures of governance to draw or conform people to him as they exercise choice in their day-to-day lives within the social order. Finally, we will examine Erasmus's argument against scholastics and against Luther. Both, Erasmus contends, want to presuppose epistemic certainty in their conclusions about the faith. He offers evidence that contradicts the claims of both, but concludes that it is precisely in epistemic uncertainty – situated in Scripture itself – that God, working through the Church and civil society, can conform persons to him.

The Role of Scriptural Language in the Life of Faith:

Desiderius Erasmus was born in October of 1466 in Rotterdam, Netherlands, less than two decades after the failure of the conciliar reform movement which brought an end to the papal schism of 1378. While politics and interest in power were core components of the Church's struggles over authority, *how* people could come to religious understanding of the truth was the central issue at stake. Erasmus entered the fray of discussion seeking to transform the role theology would take in forming people in the faith. He was highly critical of scholastic methodology, which he suggested dealt too much in abstract doctrines rather than in addressing the concrete concerns of people.⁴⁹ In her intellectual biography of Erasmus, Erika Rummel summarizes Erasmus's position:

[Erasmus's] emphasis on reading the gospels rather than studying Aristotelian philosophy reflects the humanistic preference for ethics over logic and his personal view of the purpose of theological studies. He found fault in setting a purely academic goal. Just as the aim of a liberal education was intellectual as well as moral excellence, so theological studies should equip the graduate with doctrinal knowledge as well as spiritual insight.⁵⁰

Rummel alerts us not only to Erasmus's de-emphasis on philosophy, but his desire to focus (and in general, the Christian humanist desire to focus) on language, in translating, understanding, interpreting the Scriptural text and in teaching the faith. Many of Erasmus's contemporary opponents, such as Jacques Masson, maintained that all that was required for correct understanding of religious truth was the Latin Vulgate and Latin commentaries. These, according to Masson, would provide sufficient means of proper

⁴⁹ On Erasmus's dislike of scholastic methodology, see: Eugene F. Rice, Jr., "Erasmus and The Religious Tradition," in *Renaissance Essays Volume 1*, ed. Paul Oskar Kristeller and Philip P. Wiener (University of Rochester Press: Rochester, NY, 1968), 177-178.

⁵⁰ Erika Rummel, *Desiderius Erasmus* (London: Continuum Publishing, 2004), 28.

exegesis of Scripture, preventing forays into speculative interpretations of difficult passages.⁵¹

Erasmus does not appear to have developed a comprehensive concept of the role language has in forming a society or nation. When discussing the relationship between words and things, for example, we find comments without elaboration. Erasmus argues that we understand words first “by the sounds we attach to them,” and once we obtain this, the things symbolized by the words, the “more important” aspect of knowledge, become clear.⁵² Knowledge then consists both in words and in knowing the things to which the words refer, yet Erasmus does not elaborate further on this. However, he goes on to say that a person who does not understand the force of words is “short-sighted, deluded, and unbalanced in his judgment of things as well.”⁵³ In *De Recta Pronuntiatione* (1528) Erasmus cites Galen, concluding with the latter that language (*oratio*), rather than reason (*ratio*), was what distinguished human beings from other creatures.⁵⁴

Erasmus does not develop a comprehensive metaphysic or system of language. Nonetheless, how words give shape to concepts and how these concepts come to shape a society is an important consideration implicit in his focus on developing a method of

⁵¹ Jacques Masson, *De trium linguarum et studii theologici ratione* (On the Three Languages and the Method of Theological Study, 1519), in *Disputationes contra Lutherum*, ed. J. Pijper (The Hague, 1905), 60, as cited in Rummel, *Erasmus*, 28.

⁵² Erasmus, *De Ratione Studii*, in *The Collected Works of Erasmus*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press), Volume 24, page 666 <https://crs.ca/library-2/editions-of-erasmus/> (Accessed December 15, 2017); for the remainder of the dissertation Erasmus’s works will be cited as Author, Title, CWE, Volume number, page number.

⁵³ Erasmus, *De Ratione Studii*, CWE, 24, 666.

⁵⁴ Erasmus, *De Recta Pronuntiatione*, CWE, 26, 369; Erasmus will use metaphors to indicate the relationship between words and things: for example, clothing/body (“style is to thought as clothes are to the body” (*De Ratione Studii*, CWE, 24, 306) or vessel/content (“mystery concealed by the letter” (*The Handbook of the Christian Soldier*, CWE, 66, 32). But without elaboration or development, it is impossible to determine whether he had a theology or metaphysic of language.

preaching. This method involved substantial linguistic work, combined with the importance he places on language as the essential distinguishing feature of knowledge and of cultural communication. In the *Lingua*, for example, he says: “The tongue was given to men so that by its agency as messenger one man might know the mind and intention of another.”⁵⁵ As is explicitly laid out in *Ecclesiastes*, those training to communicate the gospel – preachers, that is – were to be extensively trained in Scripture, its interpretation by the Church fathers, and most particularly, in moral character. This was the case so that a preacher could not only teach but also to physically embody the things symbolized by the words they preached.⁵⁶

According to Erasmus, language and its capacity for enabling communication and learning was aimed primarily at producing piety both in speakers (princes, bishops, preachers) and in listeners. But Erasmus’s piety was specifically tied to God’s fulfillment of the words and things of Scripture (the language of Scripture). And this fulfillment was centered most fundamentally in his understanding that God revealed himself fully in Christ. Thus, to “learn” was not simply to participate in rituals (although these had their place) but to learn the very words of Scripture – to embody the very words, such that one could simultaneously conform and be conformed to Christ’s life⁵⁷ articulated in Scripture

⁵⁵ Erasmus, *Lingua*, *CWE*, 29, 314.

⁵⁶ Erasmus, *Ecclesiastes*, *CWE*, 68, 253-60, especially 259-60, (accessed December 20, 2017).

⁵⁷ Erasmus, *The Handbook of the Christian Soldier*, *CWE*, 66, 65-66. Erasmus writes:

“Let us add a fifth rule, as a kind of reinforcement to the previous one, that you establish firmly in your mind that perfect piety is the attempt to progress always from visible things, which are usually imperfect or indifferent, to invisible, according to the division of man discussed earlier (cf. 41-2) ... Let us imagine, therefore, two worlds, the one merely intelligible, the other visible. The intelligible, which may also be called the angelic, is the one in which God dwells with the blessed spirits, while the visible world comprises the celestial spheres and all that is contained therein. Then there is man, who constitutes, as it were, a third world, participating in the other two, in the visible world through the body, and in the invisible

and fulfilled in the Word made flesh. This learning was dependent, however, upon grace and upon faith, and not on one's own learned capacity.⁵⁸

He contrasts the fullness of God's revelation in Christ with that of mere ritual given to the Israelites:

Now as God speaks most seldom and most briefly, so he speaks a truth both absolute and powerful. God the Father spoke once and gave birth to his eternal Word. He spoke again and with his almighty word created the entire fabric of the universe. And again he spoke through his prophets, by whom he entrusted us to his Holy Writ, concealing the immense treasure of divine wisdom beneath a few simple words. Finally he sent his Son, that is the Word clothed in flesh, and brought forth his concentrated word over this earth, compressing everything, as it were, into one epilogue ... What proves his succinctness of speech? The fact that he has encompassed the law and the prophets in two words: trust and love. The infinite talkativeness, so to speak, of forms and rituals [those of the Israelites] has been eliminated, since the body and gospel light itself has shone forth. What shows us his truth? The fact that whatever had been promised for so many centuries he fulfilled through his Son.⁵⁹

It is then the language of Scripture taught not in accordance with ceremonies or ancient philosophies, but in accordance with the Word – God revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ – that gives true knowledge (true word and true thing

through the soul. Since we are but pilgrims in the visible world, we should never make it our fixed abode, but should relate by a fitting comparison everything that occurs to the senses either to the angelic world or, in more practical terms, to morals and to that part of man that corresponds to the angelic ... Whatever influence the upper world has over the earth, which lies beneath it, God exercises this same influence over your soul ... Therefore whatever you observe in it, or rather, whatever you observe in this material world, which is made up of elements, and which some have distinguished from the rest of the universe, and, lastly, whatever you see in the more material part of yourself, learn to refer to God and to the invisible part of yourself. In that way, whatever offers itself to the senses will become for you an occasion for the practice of piety (cf. Erasmus, *Letter to Jan Slechta*, CWE 7, 126-127; and *Enchiridion*, CWE, 66, 32),

⁵⁸ Erasmus, *The Handbook of the Christian Soldier*, CWE, 66, 32. Erasmus writes: "To begin with, since it did not issue from the earth but rained down from heaven, you can observe the distinction between human and divine learning. All sacred Scripture is divinely inspired and has proceeded from God, its author. That it was in tiny particles signifies the lowliness of speech that conceals immense mysteries in almost crude language; that it was white signifies that there is no human learning that is not defiled by some blackness of error, while only the doctrine of Christ is as white as snow, immaculate, and unadulterated. That it was somewhat rough and granular signifies that the mystery is concealed by the letter."

⁵⁹ Erasmus, *Lingua*, CWE, 29, 322

fulfilled).⁶⁰ In *Lingua* Erasmus contrasts the false ways of the philosophers and Pharisees who do not have the truth even if they have rituals suggesting they do. Citing Hosea, as the prophet through whom God chastises false knowledge, we hear, “There is no truth, and there is no mercy and there is no knowledge of God in the land; cursing, lying and killing, and theft and adultery have overflowed and blood has touched blood: and the earth will mourn for this.”⁶¹ Erasmus concludes that:

where there is no truth, there is no compassion. For the truth of the philosophers and Pharisees has arrogance instead of pity. Where there is lying, that is hypocrisy, no matter how human disciplines thrive there is no knowledge of God, that is, the wisdom that according to the teaching of James springs from on high, ignorant of strife and bitterness, but chaste, peace-loving, modest, easy to deal with, full of compassion and good works, in no way wavering, and free from all pretense . . . neither does anyone have any knowledge of God, unless he believes in the sacred Scriptures; yet no one either understands or believes these unless the heavenly spirit has breathed upon him. Without the Scriptures, slander overflows through the spirit of Satan so long as we attack the failings of our neighbors with insults and abuse when we should have healed them with gentle and brotherly warnings.⁶²

For Erasmus, Jesus Christ, revealed in the Scriptures, is the central orienting figure of Christian life. To pursue a Christian life is to pursue the life of Christ, which is revealed in Scripture. But to do this is a matter not of obtaining academic or philosophical knowledge about Christ, or of mere adherence to ceremonies, but of seeking Christ in the

⁶⁰ Erasmus considered that progress toward Christ, although requiring the observance of rites and ceremonies for the sake of weaker members, was a progress from the “visible to the invisible.” He writes, “[The human being] participates in the visible world through the body, and in the invisible world through the soul. Since we are but pilgrims in the visible world, we should never make it our fixed abode, but should relate by a fitting comparison everything that occurs to the senses either to the angelic world or, in more practical terms, to morals and to that part of man that corresponds to the angelic” (*The Handbook of a Christian Soldier*, *CWE*, 66). His statement here isn’t disapproval of ceremonies which he believes necessary for many since they are still “spiritual children,” not yet mature in the faith. What he wants to guard against is obedience to rites or to ceremonies becoming the measure of faithfulness, something he believes will inhibit spiritual and moral progress toward Christ – superstition rather than true religion or true faith.

⁶¹ Hosea 4:1-2, NRSV.

⁶² Erasmus, *Lingua*, *CWE*, 328.

words and things of Scripture, as encountered in life and in ceremony. It is a life of piety learned from hearing (or if able, reading) Scripture: taking on Scripture's spiritual and moral virtues of chastity, peace, modesty, compassion, humility, and perseverance, in order that one might both passively and actively be conformed to the very life of Jesus Christ (sanctified). Piety consisted of the acquisition of knowledge together with virtue, and a learned and practiced *way of life*. These were the twin purposes of education according to Erasmus, and common to Christian humanists of the period.⁶³

Social Order and Piety

Erasmus defines four dimensions of piety and the role of Scripture in giving shape to it. The first is the correct attitude of an individual before God, before neighbor, and before the society in which he/she is living. This he calls *caritas*, defined as one's indebtedness to God and to neighbor. The second dimension, piety itself, is an internal quality independent of external observance of rites. This requires a third dimension of detachment from ordering one's life to the particular norms of one's culture and instead reorienting one's use of external things in light of God as one's *telos*. Finally, the fourth aspect of piety is persistence in *caritas* engendering intellectual humility and awareness of the limits of human wisdom.⁶⁴

Piety in the sixteenth century was hardly an individual pursuit, however. It was understood to be an ordering concept for the whole of society. It therefore included moral and spiritual attributes that were necessary for members of a society to learn, teach,

⁶³ Erasmus, *De civilitate morum peurilium*, CWE, 25, 273.

⁶⁴ Erasmus, *The Handbook of a Christian Soldier*, CWE 66, 124.

interact, develop, and flourish in relationships with other members of the society.⁶⁵

Flourishing was not a matter of a general common good but simultaneously the individual and collective pursuit of religious understanding and the truth of God's will. As was common in late medieval and early modernity, Erasmus presumed that society's governing structures were given by and ordered to God.⁶⁶ As with his discussion of language he relied on a standard medieval hierarchical order that was Platonic in nature.⁶⁷

While he does not make an explicit statement concerning the matter, it would appear that Erasmus's justification for using this scheme of governance derives from custom and pragmatism rather than from an absolute claim about civil or ecclesiastical order. In *Handbook of a Christian Soldier*, he argues that society is arranged in concentric circles around Christ. Clergy (priests, bishops, cardinals, and popes)⁶⁸ are within the first circle, closest to Christ, and they are charged with teaching the gospel. They have the most responsibility, and their lives as a result are to be focused on living a pure and pious life, since their words and acts are to embody Christ to those whom they teach. It is also essential then that they be educated and thoroughly trained in the languages of the Scriptures and in the use of language wedded to classical virtues. This

⁶⁵ In what follows, I rely on Rummel's excellent analysis of Erasmus' notion of the ordering of society and church (see Rummel, *Erasmus*, 54-62).

⁶⁶ For general perspectives see: particularly in exercising discipline and law, see Harold Joseph Berman, *Law and Revolution: The Formation of the Western Legal Tradition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983); Brian Tierney, *Religion, Law, and the Growth of Constitutional Thought, 1150-1650* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982); Brian Tierney, *Rights, Laws, and Infallibility in Medieval Thought* (Aldershot, U.K., and Brookfield, Vt.: Routledge, 1997); Anders Winroth, *The Making of Gratian's Decretum* (Cambridge, U.K., and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

⁶⁷ Erasmus, *Handbook of a Christian Soldier*, *CWE*, 66, 13-14. Specifically, Erasmus models his society on what he terms the "heavenly kingdom of God" (something he does not specify), and the ancient notion that monarchy was the best form of government; Erasmus lays out this framework of political and spiritual order in the following two works: *The Handbook of a Christian Soldier*, *CWE*, 66; *The Education of a Christian Prince*, *CWE*, 27, 206.

⁶⁸ See also Erasmus, *Letter to Paul Volz* (1518), *CWE*, 6, 80.

was to be so in order that the things taught to lower orders might not be mere words but embodied acts pointing to Christ as the embodiment of moral and spiritual perfection.

Erasmus writes:

And no doubt in these three degrees of men, that is to say. In princes and officers which are in their stead. In bishops and other priests which are their vicars. And in them that bring up the tender youth which are formed and reformed even as their master entices them Doth chiefly consist the whole power to increase the Christian religion. Or else to restore it again which hath long been in decay. Now if these would a while seclude their own private business and lift up their hearts with a pure intent unto Christ seeking only his glory and the profit of their neighbor we should see within [a] few years a true and godly kind of Christian spring up in every place which would not only in ceremonies, disputations and titles profess the name of Christ. But in their very heart and true conversation of living.⁶⁹

The next circle contains the nobility, including those who instruct young noblemen, whose responsibility it is to preserve the peace and order of the society. So too must their lives be shaped and formed by education, constant learning, and pious life, informed by learned clergy and held accountable by the latter.

But truly if that the princes for their part would remember themselves and go about to fulfill with pureness of living this humble and rude learning (as they call it). If the preachers in their sermons would advance this doctrine exhorting all men unto it and not to their own fantasies and imaginations. If schoolmasters would instruct their children rather with this simple science than with the witty traditions of Aristotle and Averroes, then should the Christian be at more quietness. And not be disturbed with such perpetual storms of dissension and war.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Erasmus, William Roye's: *An Exhortation to the diligent studye of scripture and An exposition in to the seventh chaptre of the pistle to the Corinthians*, ed., Douglas H. Parker (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 80. The CWE edition of *An Exhortation to the Diligent Study of Scripture* (Parclesis) has come out too late to use for this dissertation [The CWE is titled, "The New Testament Scholarship of Erasmus: An introduction with Erasmus' Preface and Ancillary Writings," ed., Robert D. Sider, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, CWE volume 41, 2018). I have used the influential sixteenth-century English translation of it by William Roy. I have modernized the spelling and format for ease of reading in this dissertation.

⁷⁰ Erasmus, William Roye's: *An Exhortation to the diligent studye of scripture and An exposition in to the seventh chaptre of the pistle to the Corinthians*, 79.

Such education in the Christian faith would preserve civil society from violence and war (potentially even against the Turks/non-Christians), and enable the spread of the Christian faith. It is important to point out that although the clergy primarily, and the noblemen secondarily, are closest in moral authority to Christ, Erasmus does not believe their teachings, even those of the pope, to be infallible. Erasmus addresses concerns presented by “schoolmen” that a person guided only by Christian charity might act in a particular situation in a way that could “disagree with the accepted tradition of centuries and the conduct laid down by princes in their laws.” He argues that while Christian princes ought not to be condemned for “executing their duty ... conversely [one ought not] sully that heavenly philosophy of Christ by confusing it with the decrees of man.” Instead, he writes, “[I]et Christ remain what he is, the centre, with several circles running round him. Do not move that mark from its place.” In other words, do not confuse the words and acts of human beings for those of Christ. Christ’s words and acts alone are the measure for those of human beings, who must continually defer to his teachings.⁷¹

Finally, the third circle contains the common people, whose responsibility includes obeying their superiors and following their teachings.⁷² They are, however, furthest from the moral perfection of Christ, the least learned, and the least capable intellectually. Nonetheless they are still parts of the “body of Christ,” and as its weakest yet vital members, they require the most leniency and care from those in the first two circles.⁷³ This requires that the clergy and princes have sufficient theological and moral

⁷¹ Erasmus, *Letter to Paul Volz*, *CWE*, 6, 79-80.

⁷² Erasmus, *The Handbook of a Christian Soldier*, *CWE*, 66, 13-14.

⁷³ Erasmus, *Letter to Paul Volz*, *CWE*, 6, 81-2.

virtue to carry out their responsibility of care with patience, kindness, gentleness, and perseverance.⁷⁴

These were not general moral virtues. These were acts that had to be shaped by the teaching and formation in the faith that clergy and princes had obtained. Formation in learning Scripture would create or transform a person to enable him to exercise his authority with these attributes. This in turn would enable him to respond with a witness shaped to and by Christ, therefore with nuance to particular situations, rather than with generalized rules. Here Erasmus cites Christ's treatment of the adulterous woman. He does not condemn or punish her in accordance with strict Jewish rule, but instead calls her out and tells her to go and sin no more. Her response is to go and tell her neighbors that Christ is the Messiah.⁷⁵

These concentric circles of the Christian community can be understood as having two other dimensions with respect to social ordering. The first dimension is political and ordered most explicitly by positive law, most implicitly by relationships. The distinctions between the circles indicate a division of tasks, responsibilities, and required lines of submission that are proper to each rank and that are dependent upon the proper function of the other ranks (those who fall into each circle). The second dimension is spiritual. The spiritual differences between the circles provide clarity about moral and spiritual authority and the degrees of virtue and knowledge required to properly exercise authority out of each concentric circle.

⁷⁴ Erasmus, *Letter to Paul Volz*, *CWE*, 6, 78-9.

⁷⁵ Erasmus, *Letter to Paul Volz*, *CWE*, 6, 80.

Moral perfection lies at the center of the concentric circles, fulfilled perfectly in Christ alone. As one moves out from Christ, the distance between Christ and the individual and the membership of one's place in society increases. Thus, those who are within the circle of "common people" have the least moral perfection and thereby the least responsibility for ensuring society upholds moral authority. Likewise, they also have the least capacity to exercise authority and the most responsibility for obedience. The whole of humanity, however, stands to God as the common people stand to nobility: unable to cross the unbridgeable distance from one circle to the next. In this way, all are children in their perception of moral virtue and can only follow Christ, who draws them to their Father in heaven.⁷⁶

To modern readers this hierarchical social framework might seem oppressive. For Erasmus and many of his contemporaries, however, this hierarchy was founded on the basis of the Son's submission to the Father and the Father's acceptance and reception of the Son: the perfection of love. Piety takes the form of this relationship: specifically, it consists of love between equals within the circles and a proper relationship among those from different circles. Distinct from this analogy to the divine relationship between Trinitarian Persons, and on analogy to the relationship between God and every other human being, love consists of mutual submission to one's superior. On analogy to God's relationship to human beings, we see the deference of a superior to one's inferior fulfilled in willing the exercise of care for them as weaker and without power. This is based in the ideal of a monastic community where people have "banded together," "joined willingly,"

⁷⁶ Erasmus, *The Handbook of a Christian Soldier*, CWE, 66, 15-16.

and are of “mutual service to each other.”⁷⁷ Erika Rummel notes that although Erasmus draws a parallel between monarchical governance of subjects and God’s rule over humanity, this analogy ends for him at a descriptive and imperfect analogy. For “God is always just; secular princes are human and subject to vices.” Erasmus concludes however, that even as this is true, they still “must be honored where they perform their duty and put up with perhaps where they use their power for their own advantage lest something worse arise in their place.”⁷⁸

It is important to point out that Erasmus’s schema of society was highly idealized, as were those of several Christian humanists. One could contrast this ideal with Machiavelli’s *The Prince*, wherein he provides a more realistic account of affairs, including corruptions, treachery, etc.⁷⁹ This will become important as we examine the work of Hooker and Chillingworth. Particularly with the latter, the ideal ecclesiastical and civil society becomes increasingly fragmented, while the ideal of formation in the common faith remains.

Having cautioned that Erasmus’s societal schema of governance is idealistic, we should not presume him to be naïve about the capacity of the functioning parts of this model to lead people to the truth. In a letter to Paul Volz (Basel 14 August, 1518), Erasmus critiques preachers and those theologians whom he believes are leading them astray through their concerns with worldly affairs and worldly knowledge. Further, many “pastors and doctors” of the faith are “preaching earthly things and not the things of

⁷⁷ Erasmus, *The Handbook of a Christian Soldier*, CWE, 66, 21.

⁷⁸ Rummel, Erasmus, 56; Erasmus, *The Education of a Christian Prince*, CWE 27, 231.

⁷⁹ Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*, Edited and transl. by Robert M. Adams, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Second Edition, 1992); c.f. Rummel’s comparison between Erasmus’s idealism and Machiavelli’s more realistic depiction of the period in Rummel, *Erasmus*, 55.

heaven, human things and not divine – those things in fact, which tend not to Christ’s glory but to the profit of those who traffic in indulgences”⁸⁰ This has led to the “common body of Christians [becoming] corrupt not only in its affections but in its ideas.” Where there is extensive difference of opinion, leading to cultural “tumult,” the gospel is the sole refuge.⁸¹ The gospel ought not to be burdensome. While Scripture has a depth that no human being can grasp (the nature of God is impenetrable), God also accommodates himself to individuals through his Word often in spite of its impoverished communication within the schema of governance and order we saw above.

To this end, Erasmus again charges those with the most learning – those trained to be doctors and pastors of the Church – to study and learn in order to know the Scriptures and distill their critical lessons for the common person. He acknowledges that the Scriptures are full of mystery and difficulty, and so a select few who lead pious lives with gifts both in morality and scholarship ought to be chosen to preach and teach, specifically to:

reduce[] into brief compass the whole philosophy of Christ, out of its purest sources in evangelists and apostles . . . short but clear. What concerns the faith should be set out clause by clause, as few as possible, what relates to life should also be imparted in few words, and those words so chosen as to make them understand that Christ’s yoke is easy and comfortable and not harsh; to make them understand that they have acquired fathers and not despots, shepherds not robbers, and are invited to accept salvation and not dragged by force into slavery.⁸²

⁸⁰ Erasmus, *Letter to Paul Volz*, *CWE*, 6, 77, 79.

⁸¹ Erasmus, *Letter to Paul Volz*, *CWE*, 6, 77.

⁸² Erasmus, *Letter to Paul Volz*, *CWE*, 6, 77.

Erasmus wishes to strike a careful balance here for both the common person and for those charged with teaching them. Both groups are susceptible to fear (albeit the former more than the latter) but also to what he calls *impia curiositas*, an unholy curiosity. To presume one has greater certainty about one's understanding of God's will revealed in Scripture is dangerous and leads to the sort of disagreement he has mentioned above, or to the sort of superstition that leads one astray from seeking Christ, the truth. He warns the learned, "You love the study of letters? Good if it is for the sake of Christ. If you love it only in order to have knowledge, then you come to a standstill at a point from which you should have gone on ... do not allow [your knowledge] to go beyond what you think will be profitable to your virtuous intent."⁸³ Erika Rummel offers that this captures Erasmus's understanding of "learned piety": love of God and neighbor, aimed at witness to the truth of Christ revealed in the Scriptures. For this to be a truthful witness, Rummel writes of Erasmus, it must "respect certain limits, beyond which knowledge becomes unprofitable, even sinful."⁸⁴

According to Erasmus, for witness to be aimed at truth it must be directed by the teachings of Christ: "The first point of Christianity is to know what Christ has taught. The next is to do there after and to fulfill it as nigh as god gives us grace."⁸⁵ He is adamant that to know Christ, one must know Scripture, for this is how one comes to love Christ and "do his will":

⁸³ Erasmus, *The Handbook of a Christian Soldier*, CWE, 66, 61-2.

⁸⁴ Rummel, *Erasmus*, 49.

⁸⁵ Erasmus, William Roye's: *An Exhortation to the diligent studye of scripture and An exposition in to the seventh chapre of the pistle to the Corinthians*, 82.

Christ says he that loves me does keep my sayings this is the knowledge and mark which he has prescribed. Therefore if we be true Christian men in our hearts if we believe unfeignedly that he was sent down from heaven to teach us such things as the wisdom of the philosophers could never attain if faithfully we trust or look for such things of him as no worldly prince (be he never so rich) can give unto us: why have we anything in more reverence and authority then his scripture word and promise which he left here among us to be our consolation? Why recount we any thing of gravity or wisdom which dissents from his doctrine?⁸⁶

Yet learning Scripture for Erasmus is not a matter of cognitive understanding or assent.

This is too shallow an understanding of how God works within a person and within a society to transform and reconcile people to him:

It is a life rather then a disputation. It is an inspiration rather then a science. And rather a new transformation than a reasoning. It is a seldom thing to be a well learned man but it is useful for every man to be a true Christian. It is useful for every man to live a godly life ... and I dare be bold to say it is useful for every man to be a pure divine. Now doth every man's mind incline unto that which is wholesome and expedient for his nature. And what other thing is this doctrine of Christ which he calls the new regeneration. [b]ut a restoring or repairing of our nature which in his first creation was good?⁸⁷

Erasmus is adamant that regeneration and restoration of human nature is a matter of committing one's whole life to Christ, and so the pursuit of truth becomes a matter of a way of life, in *imitatio*, rather than the acquisition of mere knowledge or the performance of ceremonies, as if true Christian faith were a mere checklist of things to know and do.

Learning, Free will and *Imitatio*

⁸⁶ Erasmus, William Roye's: *An Exhortation to the diligent studye of scripture and An exposition in to the seventh chapre of the pistle to the Corinthians*, 80.

⁸⁷ Erasmus, William Roye's: *An Exhortation to the diligent studye of scripture and An exposition in to the seventh chapre of the pistle to the Corinthians*, 81.

Erasmus presupposes, following classical authors, that *imitatio* (imitation) is the means or mechanism by which one is transformed in accordance with the truth. He argues that this transmission of words and ideas, “to the mind for inward digestion,” allows what is transmitted to “become part of your own system, it gives the impression not of something begged from someone else, but of something that springs from your own mental processes, something that exudes the characteristics and force of your own mind and personality.”⁸⁸ It is important here to note that Erasmus is not encouraging a sort of rote memorization of Scripture, or of rules, or of propositions about the faith. It is vital to him that what is imitated is “owned” by the person who is learning, but more importantly that this ownership of what is learned is internalized and capable of being adapted to particular needs and contexts that cannot be known or addressed *a priori*:

I welcome imitation with open arms – but imitation which assists nature and does not violate it, which turns its gifts in the right direction and does not destroy them ... [a]gain, I approve of imitation – but imitation not enslaved to one set of rules, from the guidelines of which it dare not depart, but imitation which gathers from all authors, or at least from the most outstanding, the things which is the chief virtue of each and which suits your own cast of mind.⁸⁹

In this way, what is learned becomes not merely an exact imprint, but a part of one’s own particular self, which can in turn be a reflection back to the one who taught it, a “living image of its father.”⁹⁰

Striving to imitate Christ was the consequence of Erasmus’s understanding of free will, as he argued at length against Luther.⁹¹ Erasmus charged Luther with having

⁸⁸ Erasmus, *Ciceronianus*, *CWE*, 27, 441.

⁸⁹ Erasmus, *Ciceronianus*, *CWE*, 27, 441.

⁹⁰ Erasmus, *Ciceronianus*, *CWE*, 27, 441.

cherry-picked particular passages of Scripture to build his case that all good and bad comes about through divine necessity, so that human beings are essentially tools or puppets acted upon for good and bad.⁹² Erasmus responded by demonstrating several passages that indicate human will had some agency, *solely when assisted by grace*, in seeking the good in accordance with one's particular capacities.⁹³ Even knowledge of the good required grace, he confirmed; nonetheless, a person was presented with choices for which he had to weigh evidence that would enable him to pursue Christ rather than evil, for which he alone (and not God) would be responsible:

It is believed that we have the power to choose whether to turn our will towards, or away from grace, just as it is in our power to open, or close, our eyes to the light that shines on them from without. Since God's great love for humanity does not suffer man to be deceived with false hopes even of the grace known as "sanctifying grace," if he strives for it with all his might, it is true that no sinner should be presumptuous, but that none should despair either, and it is also true that no one perishes except through his own fault.⁹⁴

Erasmus summarizes his perspective of the opinion on free will held by Augustine and Aquinas as attributing "a great deal to grace and almost nothing to free will," and he agrees that this opinion is "highly probable, for it permits man the opportunity of serious moral endeavor, but not of making any claims for his own powers."⁹⁵ Erasmus solidifies his own perspective on the matter by arguing that there is sufficient Scriptural support to demonstrate that "God offers a reward if man will choose what is right and threatens

⁹¹ For the full argument see Erasmus, *De libero arbitrio*; *Hyperaspistes* 1, CWE, 76; *Hyperaspistes* 2, CWE, 77.

⁹² Erasmus, *De libero arbitrio*, CWE, 76, 33, 45.

⁹³ Erasmus, *De libero arbitrio*, CWE, 76, 45-47.

⁹⁴ Erasmus, *De libero arbitrio*, CWE, 76, 32.

⁹⁵ Erasmus, *De libero arbitrio*, CWE, 76, 32.

punishment should he prefer to follow the opposite path.” In fact, God “shows that evil thoughts and desires can be overcome, and do not compel us to sin.” This is not to say that one is rewarded with justification but with greater insight into understanding God’s will, i.e. to sanctifying grace: being drawn closer in conformance to God.⁹⁶

Learning the language of Scripture and learning how words and things operate together are so important for Erasmus because of his conviction that in Scripture – through its words and things – “God shows us what is good and what is bad, and shows the two different consequences for each, life and death.” A human being is compelled to learn this as far as she is capable, precisely because “the freedom to choose [from these two consequences], [God] leaves to man.”⁹⁷ Imitation then is not only about learning the language of Scripture and how to use it to understand the things of which it speaks. It is also taking on a posture of humility and piety that will enable one to be conformed to Christ as one engages the Scriptures over time throughout one’s concrete, lived, day-to-day experiences. This in turn will allow one to make choices consistent with God’s will as it is discovered in Scripture, revealed through the lens of Christ’s life, death, and resurrection.

This *imitatio* is not and absolutely cannot be an individual practice alone, as the section above should indicate. Not all people everywhere have the capacity to understand Scripture as do the clergy. Not all people everywhere have the capacity to sustain and enforce the peace as do the princes and magistrates. These components of common ecclesiastical and civil life are vital for each other, and for common people to learn so

⁹⁶ Erasmus, *De libero arbitrio*, *CWE*, 76, 34.

⁹⁷ Erasmus, *De libero arbitrio*, *CWE*, 76, 34.

that they, by their obedience, can also participate in handing on and preserving the faith from one generation to the next. According to Erasmus, *imitatio* – a way of life – therefore requires a pope with cardinals, bishops, and ministers responsible for guarding and teaching the faith, to communicate the gospel. This in turn requires obedience to what is taught and social and political stability to enable this teaching, learning, and development over time to take place. And this requires the capacity of princes and magistrates who have the authority, shared with clerics, to provide discipline and order within the political and civil spheres.

In his *Paraphrase on Mark*, Erasmus indicates that while clerics are to use the “sword of the gospel” to maintain discipline and mitigate evil, kings or princes must have a separate sword of legal and actual weaponry in order to mitigate the works of evil doers.⁹⁸ The latter are to use this sword only to defend the public peace, not to achieve their own ambitions.

When has a king more kingly majesty than when he sits in judgment and dispenses justice, curbs wrongdoing, settles disputes and succors the oppressed, or when he sits in council and takes thought for the prosperity of the commonwealth? When for that matter, does a bishop enjoy more of his true dignity than when he is in the pulpit teaching the philosophy of the gospel?⁹⁹

The tasks of the clerics and princes are distinct: teaching the Scriptures is the proper task of the bishops; justice and law are the tasks of the princes. Although their tasks are distinct, their purpose is common: to pursue life in keeping with the truth of God revealed

⁹⁸ Erasmus, *Paraphrase on Mark*, CWE, 49, 5; *Expositions on the Psalms*, An Exposition of Psalm 83 (On Mending the Concord of the Church), CWE 65, 198-200.

⁹⁹ Erasmus, *Paraphrase on Mark*, CWE, 49, 5.

in Jesus Christ.¹⁰⁰ Because of the intertwined nature of protection afforded to the Church's teachers and to the common person by civil governors and teaching, as well as the exhortation to the public's obedience afforded to the civil governors, the peace and order of the whole nation was of tantamount importance. And so Erasmus interprets the potential division of the Church and its inevitable disruption of common civil life as stemming from "man's evil behavior," the result of Adam and Eve's original sin, following which, "all of us have [come] to provoke the Lord's anger." Recognizing this danger in his own time, Erasmus exhorts: "all [Christians], of one accord ... turn to [God] in sincerity."¹⁰¹

He goes on to describe how this turning ought to happen:

Let each one of us be what he ought to be. Popes must be true popes, the vicars of Christ, caring for the Lord's flock in all sincerity. Princes must be true princes, the ministers of divine justice; they must remember that they will have to render account to God, and they should fear him all the more the more freedom they have from the fear of men. Elected magistrates must serve the state honestly. Monks must display their behavior [with] the perfection they profess in their names. Priests must "spend day and night in contemplation of God's law," so they may be the salt of the people. As for the laity, they must correspond to their name; they must not take a leading place, but obey the priesthood with reverence, faithfully adhere to the laws of secular rulers, and each in his own livelihood must clear his conscience before the Highest ... and so on with the rest.¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ Erasmus explicitly equates Christ with the truth and concludes that the heretics' error is that "instead of referring the Scriptures to Christ, who is the truth, they pervert the sense by giving their interpretations a purely human reference" (Erasmus, *Expositions on the Psalms, An Exposition of Psalm 83 (On Mending the Concord of the Church)*, CWE, 65, 154.

¹⁰¹ Erasmus, *Expositions on the Psalms, An Exposition of Psalm 83 (On Mending the Concord of the Church)*, CWE 65, 198-200.

¹⁰² Erasmus, *Expositions on the Psalms, An Exposition of Psalm 83 (On Mending the Concord of the Church)*, CWE 65, 200.

This requires a very concrete common goal: "... the peace and tranquility of the commonwealth." Peace and tranquility, Erasmus posits, are essential to the development of moral goodness – which comes about through the common people's imitation of clerics who teach and live in accordance with the truth. As indicated above, moral goodness is not a matter of adhering to rules or laws, but of having internalized the capacity to make choices that are most aligned with the Scriptures, insofar as one can determine, given the particular circumstances being considered. Moral goodness aimed at the imitation of Christ, for Erasmus, is learned through social order and imitation of those he presumes to be closer to Christ (clergy); but for moral goodness to be learned in the first place, a society needs peace and order.

The way of life to which Erasmus refers here is presumed to have both a relational dimension to God and neighbor, and an individual dimension – one's own effort to seek God in accordance with one's capacities, gifts, and place within society. Christian truth cannot be pursued merely by participation in civil society; nor, however, can it be pursued by an individual. Erasmus presumes truth to be revealed in Christ. Yet to know Christ, to be conformed to and to come to imitate Christ, is a matter of participating in given spheres of civil and ecclesiastical order, through which God works to draw the most common and the most learned persons to himself. Thus, religious understanding for Erasmus is a matter of common formation, not merely individual formation in the faith.

As we have seen already, this becomes an essential distinction between Erasmus and Luther and other Protestants who sought the truth. For Erasmus, order and obedience

to the Church and even to magistrates were essential to seeking Christian truth. We will see Richard Hooker repeat this exhortation, but with more explicit and precise reasons. For Erasmus, the order and peace of society is essential to the common good and the very capacity to seek Christian truth. Sedition is unthinkable, since it would destroy the carefully intertwined relationships between the concentric circles, which provided not only for teaching and learning, but for correction, discipline, and (foremost) protection of the weakest persons in society.

The Challenge of Epistemic Uncertainty: Peace, Order, and Obedience

In his commentary on Romans, Erasmus has an extensive discussion of the relationship between sin, law, and the role of princes and magistrates. All things can be divided into three classes: 1) heavenly things, which because they are “peculiar to Christ,” are in every case to be preferred to all other things; 2) worldly things such as sin and desire, which ought to be avoided; 3) things which are neither good nor bad in themselves, “but which [are] nevertheless necessary for protecting the order and concord of the whole state.” It is this third category that requires careful discernment and, in some cases, difficult obedience. Even if a law is unfairly applied, it might need to be obeyed – for example, in the case of persecution where Christian beliefs run up against public law that has been received by all.¹⁰³ Where Christ neither sanctioned nor condemned public or positive laws, “whoever belongs to the human race should obey [them].” Indeed, he argues:

¹⁰³ Erasmus, Paraphrases on Romans, CWE, 42, 74.

He should submit to magistrates who bear a sort of image of God and who, through punishing evil, do the work of God in one way or another. And to that extent, certainly, the power of those men comes from God. Consequently, whoever resists a ruler or magistrate, even an impious and heathen one, who is performing his duty, resists not the one performing his duty, but God, from whom all authority derives. For just as the shadow of the Mosaic law was from God and until now was not to be disregarded, so also the justice of the law arises from God, so that it is so fitting to grant some authority to this justice *for a time*.¹⁰⁴

Obedience to magistrates is not merely a matter of political peace and order for Erasmus. As we saw above, Erasmus conceived of truth emanating from Christ outward through clergy and noblemen. Moral authority and the ensuing capacity for teaching and enforcing order were essential to the preservation, protection, and communication of the faith. Erasmus argues that "... just as God wished that there should be order among the members of his own body ... so in the whole commonwealth in which there are both good and evil, he wished that there be a certain order. And order itself is a good in itself, even if someone abuses a magistracy." This order is so essential to the preservation and communication of the faith, according to Erasmus, that "those who disturb this order fight against God, its author." And he insists that "those who fight against God will justly pay the penalty." How can one escape being subjected to laws or to magistrates? Not by "defiance, but rather by innocence. For magistrates have no power by law except over those who commit an act which is not permitted." Therefore, he concludes, "live rightly and the law does not concern you."¹⁰⁵

Erasmus nowhere argues that clergy or magistrates are always right or just. In fact, he proposes the opposite, as we have seen. However, ultimately the good of the state

¹⁰⁴ Erasmus, Paraphrases on Romans, CWE, 42, 74.

¹⁰⁵ Erasmus, Paraphrase of Romans, CWE, 42, 74-75.

takes priority and requires obedience. Without obedience, the edifice of a society might be pulled apart, destroying the good of many others: “Consequently, since the public order cannot be firm unless authority is granted to the magistrates, you too should obey them for the sake of the common need of the state.” It is not solely for the public good that one ought to defer to positive laws and orders of the state, however, but even for the sake of one’s own conscience, “for even if the rulers do not threaten you with any punishment, your conscience tells you that you must not disturb what God wished to be left in order.”¹⁰⁶ It is therefore the good not only of society, but of one’s own self as a person standing before God, and as a member of a society of finite and sinful people, that compels obedience to the civil and ecclesiastical authorities. We shall see Richard Hooker make a similar argument in the next chapter.

The order and the peace of a society are not merely about political or social stability. Instead, order, obedience, and the positive laws in place to enact discipline where order is disturbed are required to constantly seek understanding of religious truth over time. For Erasmus, understanding how God has ordered the world does not result in propositions that remain infallible through time. As new or particular situations are encountered, members of a society, pastors, doctors, princes, and common persons must exercise their best learning, wisdom, and virtue in seeking to respond in a way faithful to God, as revealed by Christ read and heard in Scripture. Erasmus’s scholastic contemporaries questioned how, without their general rules, peace and order could be maintained when questions arise concerning how to interpret events given what has occurred and what people believe might occur in the future:

¹⁰⁶ Erasmus, Paraphrase of Romans, CWE, 42, 75.

But at the point someone from the serried ranks of our universities will protest: “it is easy to lay down in general what we should aim at and what we should avoid; but how in the mean time are we to answer those who need advice about what has happened and what may happen?”¹⁰⁷

Erasmus responds that this is precisely the reason people must be strongly formed by Scripture rather than by scholastic and philosophical doctrine. The fundamental issue, he maintains, is that “human affairs take so many shapes that definite answers cannot be provided for them all.” So having general rules that can be applied *a priori* is rarely helpful in resolving people’s practical struggles about how to seek God’s will. Furthermore, unless one can trace every effect to its cause(s), any absolute or certain answer is “impossible.” Finally, he says that human finitude, manifest in disagreement about “so many points,” ought only to allow one to say, “this is in my view the safer course; this I regard as tolerable.”¹⁰⁸

Throughout his writings Erasmus argues that finite sinful human beings are unable to arrive at certainty by tracing causes and their effects. He maintains that the proper course of action is to engage in careful discernment, to gather and weigh evidence and determine (epistemically not mathematically) the most probable conclusion one can currently draw. While probabilities did not provide absolute certainty in decision making, the process of weighing evidence itself would provide a means to struggle with the faith more deeply, to thereby learn and grow in Christ. Over time, this could allow those tasked with responsibility for preserving and teaching the faith to conclude that it was “likely safer” to proceed in this way, “given the evidence we have before us.” This is *not*,

¹⁰⁷ Erasmus, Letter to Paul Volz, CWE 6, 79.

¹⁰⁸ Erasmus, Letter to Paul Volz, CWE 6, 79.

however, recourse to classical or modern skepticism or modern relativism. It evokes a type of epistemic probability (although he does not use this term or phrase “decision making” in this way): the weighing of evidence and the choice of what seems the best course open to further revelation and testing. It is an inherently conservative path of decision making, for it demands retrospective consideration: the evaluation of things known and handed on – tradition – when investigating a new circumstance. According to Erasmus, to evaluate in accordance with the faith and its tradition, one must have substantial formation in the Christian faith, and in moral and in theological virtue. The purpose of such evaluation is not to obtain the most generally probable conclusion, but the conclusion that is closest to the will of God as revealed in Christ through the Scriptures and the Holy Spirit. Erasmus writes, “If we have Christian charity like a carpenter’s rule, everything will easily be set straight by that.”¹⁰⁹

He anticipates the challenge from scholastics: “But what will you do if this rule disagrees with the accepted tradition of the centuries and the conduct laid down by princes and their laws? For even that not seldom happens.” Here, as already cited above, he answers that we should not condemn noblemen or clergy for doing their duty in attempting to direct people to God in their decision making, but that we should also not confuse this with the will of God; for God alone is good and he alone can bring about his will. Human response is always subject to finitude, to sin, and therefore to contingent decision making, even when seeking God with a well-formed mind and life.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ Erasmus, *Letter to Paul Volz*, *CWE*, 6, 79.

¹¹⁰ Erasmus, *Letter to Paul Volz*, *CWE*, 6, 79-80.

Erasmus Engages Luther on Certainty of Scriptural Discernment

In accordance with tradition and social custom, Erasmus insisted that, with few exceptions, deference to political and ecclesiastical superiors was crucial in sustaining civil peace and order and thereby the conditions for discernment of things he determined epistemically uncertain. This presumption of deference where the Church declared a particular teaching on uncertain matters, or even where it was in error, distinguished him from Luther. As we have seen so far, Erasmus urged patience and humility in conduct, broadly consistent with the conceptual tradition of theological and moral virtues important for sustaining civil peace and order. In early exchanges with Luther, we find him exhorting the latter to follow a course of persuasion rather than assertion with the hope of reform rather than risking a revolution.¹¹¹ Erasmus warns Luther, “Everywhere we must take pains to do and say nothing out of arrogance or faction; for I think the spirit of Christ would have it so. Meanwhile we must keep our minds above the corruption of anger or hatred or of ambition; for it is this that lies in wait for us when our religious zeal is in full course.”¹¹² Erasmus criticized the Roman Church’s practices in things like indulgences, but he did so in a careful tone, respecting the office of the pope and of the clergy and monarch. Luther, on the other hand, drove straight for the papal jugular in his trial at the Diet of Worms in 1521. When asked if books, including the 95 Theses and writings against the pope were his he answered yes; and when asked to recant of their

¹¹¹ See for example, Erasmus, *Letter to Martin Luther*, *CWE*, 6, 392-93.

¹¹² Erasmus, *Letter to Martin Luther*, *CWE*, 6, 393.

contents Luther replied that to do so would be tantamount to allowing papal abuses to continue. He further avowed that he would only change his mind were an argument presented from Scripture or clear reason, and not from either the pope alone or from councils alone, neither of which he trusted.¹¹³

Erasmus, loyal to the pope, sought to distance himself and his proposals to reform the Church, from the tactics used by Luther. His hope was to use “new learning” to reform the Church, especially against scholastic theology. His fear was that if such learning were tied to the reform movement, this study of language and new method of scriptural exegesis would be thrown out with the Reformers themselves.¹¹⁴ Prior to the Diet of Worms, Erasmus attempted to resolve the growing dispute concerning the faith, specifically with respect to Scripture. In *A Person who Seriously Wishes Provisions to Be Made for the Reputation of the Roman Pontiff and the Peace of the Church*, Erasmus advocates what I have called a type of epistemic probability. He presents a twofold method of determining doctrinal truth in Scripture: 1) collecting the evidence of both sides of a doctrinal question; 2) comparing various passages of Scripture that are related and comparing the evidence, and then forming a resolution. He declared that if the evidence were clear, one could use logic to determine the proper resolution. If, however,

¹¹³ For details of the events and Luther’s responses at the Diet of Worms see, Heiko Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006) 13-49; Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther*, trans. James L. Schaaf, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985-93), 1:460.

¹¹⁴ Erasmus, Letter to Albert of Brandenburg, CWE, 7, 109-116.

the evidence was ambiguous or lacking in some way, one must defer to the teaching of the Church.¹¹⁵

This last point formed a sharp divide between Luther and Erasmus. For Luther, deference to the Church, to the pope, was to be in league with the “kingdom of Babylon and the power of Nimrod, the mighty hunter [Gen. 10:8-9].”¹¹⁶ For Erasmus, deference or obedience to the Church was the only means by which religious truth could be sought and revealed. In fact, were the Church to divide, Erasmus writes in a letter to Justus Jonas (1521), it would cease to be capable of forming people in the faith or witnessing to the truth; “if not held together in concord [it would] cease to deserve the name of Church.” How so? Erasmus responds, “For what is our religion, if not peace in the Holy Spirit.” Why, he asks, should the Church divide now over differences when it has always had to hold “good and bad fish in the same net ... compelled to endure tares mixed with the wheat.” The Church, he says, “suffered even in the old days from great faults, as orthodox Fathers testify, deploring from time to time the gross corruption of the ranks of society whence models of simple piety ought to proceed.”

Erasmus demonstrates his affinity with Luther’s position and an understanding and agreement on the one hand. He accuses the princes of the Church of displaying “a passionate and unconcealed appetite for the good things of this world, which Christ taught us ought to be despised ...” and concludes that this was a “breakdown ... no less

¹¹⁵ Erasmus, *A Person who Seriously Wishes Provisions to Be Made for the Reputation of the Roman Pontiff and the Peace of the Church*, CWE, 71, 110.

¹¹⁶ Martin Luther, “The Babylonian Captivity of the Church,” in *Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings*, ed., Timothy F. Lull (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 268.

in the study of Holy Scripture than in morality” where the “word of God was forced to become the slave of human appetites and the simple faith of the multitude was distorted to the profit of a few.” Yet Erasmus says that despite his agreement with Luther, “I was full of fear that the thing might end in an uproar and split the world openly in two.” His hope, as we saw above, was to encourage Luther to subtler efforts at persuasion in reforming the Church so that it would be capable of communicating the truth of the Christian faith. Erasmus was not successful in his effort, as Luther’s condemnation at the Diet of Worms demonstrated.¹¹⁷

In line with his concern to preserve the peace and unity of the Church, Erasmus wrote to Jonas that Luther “uproot[s] what has long been commonly accepted,” without care. He sought to overturn tradition by tearing apart the foundations of both Church and civil structures that had sustained common seeking for the truth for centuries. Rather than simply point to methodological flaws – “sophistic philosophy” in this case – “Luther in [a] torrent of pamphlets has poured invective directed against men whom it was [unwise to treat like that] if he wished to make them better, at once, making everything public and giving even cobblers a share in what is normally handled by scholars as mysteries reserved for the initiated.”¹¹⁸ Erasmus’s concern here was twofold. First, Luther had conducted his criticism in such a way as to provoke hostile responses from Church authorities, which indeed happened when Luther was sanctioned at Worms. The second issue for Erasmus was that Luther’s attack on Church authorities pushed complex doctrinal matters into the public sphere, where the average person (a cobbler, for

¹¹⁷ Erasmus, Letter to Justus Jonas (1521), CWE, 8, 203.

¹¹⁸ Erasmus, Letter to Justus Jonas, CWE, 8, 203.

example), neither literate nor trained in theology, was suddenly exposed to ideas that required careful analysis they did not possess.

These ideas, Erasmus worried, had to be discussed with common people prudently – or, often, they ought not to be discussed with them at all. Lack of prudence could lead to social and political unrest, which in turn would hamper the common capacity to seek the truth, given his understanding of the social structures and governance of society. This meant that although it was vital that Christians seek the truth, *how* the truth was sought carried as much importance as did seeking it. For if the Church were pulled apart in the process of seeking the truth, the latter would likely be lost in the process. Thus, Erasmus argued that it is sometimes “right for truth to remain unspoken, and everywhere the time, the manner and the recipients of its publication [be considered since these considerations] are of great importance.” He provides a helpful analogy: “Reliable physicians do not take refuge at the outset in their ultimate remedies; first they prepare the patient’s body with less powerful drugs, and they adjust the dose to cure and not to overwhelm.”

In other words, not every person in a society is capable of understanding or of adopting or acting on the truth in the same way. Because of this, those who have greater understanding of the faith must take care to introduce it in stages, as people are capable, so as not to overwhelm or confuse them. Even where reform or correction is desperately needed, prudence must be taken in order to pursue truth without leading to social, political, and ecclesiastical unrest: “nor will I listen to people who say that the distemper

of our generation is too serious to be healed by the gentler remedies. It is better ... to let the evil lie that's well disposed, than by unskillful physic to arouse its full force."¹¹⁹

Epistemic Certainty in Scriptural Interpretation

But what happens, according to Erasmus, when teaching found in Scripture is obscure?

The debate between Luther and Erasmus over free will had much broader implications than the matter of one doctrine. In their exchange, both thinkers revealed the presuppositions they brought to the search for religious understanding of truth. As we have seen above, Erasmus presumes that peace, order, and unity (although not uniformity) is required in both spheres of Church and civil governance. This certainly has to do with his belief that consent, obedience, and imitation are the mechanisms by which one learns the faith. God has made this form of governance natural to a nation's common capacity for flourishing and thus for individual growth in the Christian faith and for a nation's ability to defend its common life and faith from outsiders.

But there is a more fundamental reason for his insistence on unity in these spheres: that God has made Scripture intentionally obscure in order that no one who pursues true faith can be built up in arrogance and each person remains humble with his lack of complete knowledge. In *A Discussion of Free Will*, Erasmus begins by citing free will as an "impenetrable labyrinth" that has "long exercised the minds of philosophers and theologians"¹²⁰ He identifies the method he will use in debating Luther – that of "juxtaposing various scriptural texts and arguments to illuminate the truth." And he

¹¹⁹ Erasmus, Letter to Justice Jonas, CWE, 8, 205.

¹²⁰ Erasmus, *A Discussion of Free Will*, CWE, 76, 5.

emphasizes that he will do so without abuse, both because this is a requirement for Christians and because it “is a surer way of discovering the truth, which is often lost in too much angry repartee.”¹²¹

He denounces assertions that purport to carry certainty, particularly because these cause conflict that threatens to upend the peace of the land. Instead, Erasmus states, “I will gladly seek refuge in Skepticism whenever this is allowed by the inviolable authority of Holy Scripture and the Church’s decrees[.]” But, and here he deviates strongly from Luther, remaining consistent with the vision we have thus far laid out, “to [the Church’s] decrees I willingly submit my judgment in all things, whether I fully understand what the Church commands or not.” He contrasts this approach to what he will in subsequent writings¹²² accuse Luther of having done in asserting his understanding as though he has absolute certainty about his convictions: “I prefer . . . to have this case of mind than that which I see characterizes certain others, so that they are uncontrollably attached to an opinion and cannot tolerate anything that disagrees with it, but twist whatever they read in Scripture to support the view they have embraced one for all.”¹²³

Erasmus draws on the “ancient authority” of the Church fathers, but says that “there are various views on free will” and that, as such, he has “no settled opinion regarding them, beyond a belief that a certain power of free will does exist.” His ultimate concern here is that Luther is attempting to draw on particular fathers while excluding

¹²¹ Erasmus, *A Discussion of Free Will*, CWE, 76, 7.

¹²² See Erasmus, *Hyperaspites 1 and 2*, CWE 76 and 77.

¹²³ Erasmus, *A Discussion of Free Will*, CWE, 76, 7.

others, and then twisting Scripture in support of his narrowed “evidence” of the fathers’ opinions, to confirm his bias that there is no justification for any sort of free will offered in Scripture.¹²⁴ In a sure rhetorical effort consistent with his belief that the search for truth requires humility, he writes, “[a]lthough I believe that I have grasped Luther’s argument, I might be mistaken and so I will act as disputant, not as judge; as inquirer, not as dogmatist; ready to learn from anyone, if truer or more reliable arguments can be put forward.”¹²⁵

Here it might be noted that, while certainly conducting himself with humility and deference, Erasmus – with his dispute with Luther finally public and his wish to distance himself from the reformers’ teachings – is engaging in a polemical undermining of what he has hinted is Luther’s arrogant presumption of certainty concerning doctrine. As we shall come to see in subsequent chapters, while Erasmus did certainly believe one must engage in debate with humility and charity, his rhetorical tactic in doing this was polemical and would continue to be used polemically by English thinkers into the later sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. His ultimate goal was to secure unity, to press its importance, and to do this by undermining and casting those claiming religious certainty as erroneous, and even as sinners.¹²⁶

Erasmus’s fundamental difficulty with those who wanted to assert certainty (whether scholastics or reformers) was that with the exception of some essentials

¹²⁴ Erasmus, *A Discussion of Free Will*, CWE, 76, 8.

¹²⁵ Erasmus, *A Discussion of Free Will*, CWE, 76, 8.

¹²⁶ Dodds, *Exploiting Erasmus*, xi-xx.

necessary for salvation, Scripture, the very root of truth, does not provide people with epistemic certainty. He begins his discussion of Scripture's obscurity by arguing that he wishes he could "persuade those of average intellect that ... they should not be too persistent in making assertions which may more readily damage Christian harmony than advance true religion." Why is this so? "For in Holy Scripture there are some secret places into which God did not intend us to penetrate very far, and if we attempt to do so, the farther we go the less and less clearly we see." And why would God do such a thing? "This" he says, "is presumably in order to make us recognize the unsearchable majesty of divine wisdom, and the frailty of the human intellect."¹²⁷

Where we cannot penetrate the Scriptures more deeply, or where, as with free will, the texts brought to bear and the considerations of the fathers do not provide a clear and absolutely certain answer, "what we have learned from the Scriptures should be sufficient." What does this mean for Erasmus? That "if we are on the path to righteousness, we should move swiftly on to better deeds ... if we are entangled in sin, we should do our best to struggle out [through penance] and in all ways seek to obtain God's mercy, without which human will and effort are fruitless." All good ought to be attributed to God and all bad to us, and everything that "befalls us in this life has been sent by God for our salvation; that no wrong can be done us by a God who is righteous by nature ... and that no one must despair of forgiveness from a God who is by nature most merciful."¹²⁸

¹²⁷ Erasmus, *A Discussion of Free Will*, CWE, 76, 9-10.

¹²⁸ Erasmus, *A Discussion of Free Will*, CWE, 76, 9.

Uncertainty does not lead us to despair and it should not lead us to a triumphalist proclamation of certainty that might tear apart the Church or destroy the peace of the civil sphere. This is so precisely because God has given to finite and sinful creatures those two mechanisms of governance – Church and State – to preserve them in the faith through time, in spite of their lack of righteousness. To strive for righteousness, responding to the grace of God is the only capacity one has; but this requires consent, obedience, and submission to one’s role in the civil and ecclesiastical order, even to one’s own conscience ordered by these two forms of governance. For unity in both spheres and between them, rather than presumption of certainty in the truth, is essential to the continued capacity to *search for truth as Christ’s body extends through time*: “[w]hat confusion the brawling over the conception of the Virgin Mother of God has stirred up in the world [for example]! What results have these laborious arguments so far brought, I ask, except that, with such great costs to unity, we love too little even as we try to know too much?”¹²⁹

Conclusion

Erasmus serves as a useful foundational figure for examining “types” of comprehension, largely because of the influence he had on subsequent generations of English thinkers concerning questions of truth, polity, and certainty. For Erasmus, comprehension ultimately required deference to two spheres, the civil and ecclesiastical – two distinct mechanisms of governance with one aim of enabling a nation’s people to be formed in and to God. His argument was aimed at maintaining the peace of the civil sphere and the unity of the Church against those who required assent to doctrines or beliefs that the

¹²⁹ Erasmus, *A Discussion of Free Will*, CWE, 76, 10-11.

Church maintained were *adiaphora* to salvation.¹³⁰ Those things *adiaphora* to salvation were subject to interpretation and therefore epistemically uncertain. To require adherence would contribute to splitting the Church, as Church parties disagreed vehemently as to the correct interpretation and ensuing practices that ought to follow. And in this sense, his argument was not conciliatory or a matter of toleration as in the late seventeenth century, but polemical: those who insisted on assent to things not necessary to salvation – Luther with his demand to eliminate any doctrines of free will, for example – were not part of the Church catholic; they were dissenters from the true Church.¹³¹ Erasmus would not advocate leaving the Church even if it was in error. To do so would be to rupture the peace and security not only of the Church but also of the civil sphere. Further, it would compromise the operative capacities of members of the clergy and civil government to form people in the faith, which he pressed to be taught in accordance with the Scriptures.¹³²

Erasmus understood the Christian life to involve a gradual formation through both individual and corporate participation in Christ, through both the civil sphere of princes and magistrates, and through the ecclesiastical sphere headed by clergy. The latter, were ideally to be spiritually and morally closest to Christ, with the former further from him and the common laity furthest away and thus taught through their consent and obedience.

¹³⁰ The term '*adiaphora*' will be used throughout this dissertation to refer to "things indifferent," that is to things neither required nor forbidden by God with respect to one's salvation.

¹³¹ Erasmus's vehement rejection of claims to the interpretative certainty of Scripture is clearly (albeit voluminously) demonstrated in his dispute against Luther over free will in *A Discussion of Free Will* and *Hyperaspistes* 1 and 2 in CWE, 76 and 77.

¹³² See in particular Erasmus, *Hyperaspistes* 1, CWE, 76, 127-28. See also his argument on the relationship between freedom and consent. Erasmus claims that it is not true freedom when people can do as they please; nor is it servitude to live in accordance with what is prescribed by just laws. In fact, where people have the same rewards, rights, and freedoms, this often exacerbates inequality, according to Erasmus (*The Education of a Christian Prince*, CWE, 27, 259).

This emanation scheme of concentric circles relied, for Erasmus, on neoplatonic metaphysical presuppositions adapted to Christian purposes, as well as on positive laws that outlined duties, roles, and responsibilities to various members in society, providing means of adjudicating questions and disputes that arose. This scheme of governance, although not divinely or Scripturally ordained, was fitting to how God made himself known to people. God slowly revealed himself over time to individuals, in order to accommodate the capacities of his diverse hearers and enable their response to his revelation. Erasmus understood the capacity to make a choice, in the course of the process of learning, to be an essential element in pursuing the truth of the faith.¹³³

Commenting on Jesus's gradual work in drawing Nicodemus to him in chapter 3 of the Gospel of John, Erasmus writes:

But Jesus did not refute [Nicodemus's] imperfect opinion, nor did he immediately boast how great he was, but with gentle friendliness he gradually drew his willing pupil on to the deeper mysteries of the gospel teaching ... he did not yet bring up what he later required of his more advanced disciples: whoever is ashamed of me before men, I will be ashamed of him before the Father. Instead he drew out the man's ignorance by puzzling remarks, so that he could instruct him *gradually* and change him from unspiritual feelings to spiritual knowledge.¹³⁴

The pope, cardinals, bishops, and ministers of the Church – holding a position closest spiritually and morally to Christ and thus being the rightful teachers of the faith in the land – were essential to enabling this gradual formation to occur over time. It was simultaneously necessary that princes maintain the peace of the nation through

¹³³ See James Tracy, "Erasmus among the Postmodernists: *Dissimulatio*, *Bonae Literae*, and *Docta Pietas* Revisited," in *Erasmus's Vision of the Church*, ed., Hilmar M. Pabel (Kirksville, MO: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1995).

¹³⁴ Erasmus, *Paraphrase on John*, *CWE*, 46, 45 (italics mine). I will note here that Erasmus indicates that this gradual teaching is required in Nicodemus's case because he is a Jew and only knows the Mosaic law and not yet the gospel (45). However, Erasmus goes on to cite a similar gradual teaching of the Samaritan woman in John's Gospel. This provides evidence that Erasmus's belief that God gradually reveals his knowledge applies to all persons and not solely to Jews. This interpretation is consistent with Erasmus's focus on learning, education, and the roles in this played by both the clergy and the princes of a nation.

management of the economic and social system, but also in minimizing domestic and foreign war, and finally, in enforcing and disciplining with charity. Without both peace and order, formation over time would be disrupted or potentially destroyed, and communication of the gospel potentially thwarted or overthrown. This factor of social stability and education thus required obedience and consent to the Church and to one's prince and magistrates. These two spheres were the dual mechanisms of authority that were to set limits both to articulations of the faith and to practices. Erasmus had a basic set of creedally derived beliefs he thought essential to salvation. He believed ultimately that the peace and order of a society trumped division on the basis of things considered inessential to salvation. These inessential practices, teachings, and beliefs provided a common basis from which to learn, challenge, and grow in the truth of God's revelation, even if they were wrong and required correction.¹³⁵

For Erasmus, even God's revelation in the life of Jesus Christ did not make the texts conveying his life to readers clear but instead demanded patience, restraint, and persistence in discernment over time: "Jesus doeth so entermendle and temper his talke, that me semeth his will and pleasure was, to be darke and not understood, not onely to the Aposteles, but also unto all of us. There be also certayne places (as I thinke) almost impossible to be expounded."¹³⁶ It was God's intention to make Scripture unclear to humble persons, an apparently necessary characteristic for being brought from sinful

¹³⁵ Boyle, *Rhetoric and Reform*, 134, 158.

¹³⁶ Erasmus, *Paraphrases I*, sig. [par.] 3V. Preface to Matthew, cited in Dodds, *Exploiting Erasmus*, note 23, 281

presumptions of certain knowledge to formation and thus transformation in the true faith.¹³⁷

The type of comprehension Erasmus expounded – one that enabled discernment and formation in the truth -- was not an explicit theology of Church or ecclesiology. Comprehension was simply a pragmatic response to several presuppositions. First, God made Scripture intentionally obscure in order to draw people out of a presumption of certainty and into a humble posture of the reception of grace sufficient to their capacities.¹³⁸ Second, the unity and peace of the Church should not be disturbed by doctrinal assertions to certainty about things both indifferent to salvation and, most particularly, unclear in Scripture. The ensuing battles and possible violence would undermine the capacity of individuals in the civil sphere and in the Church, and of the Church itself, to be formed and form people in the truth.¹³⁹ Finally, the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church was to provide the ultimate human (positive law) limit as to articulating those doctrines necessary for salvation, to which the faithful were called to consent.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁷ Erasmus, *A Discussion of Free Will*, CWE, 76, 8-9.

¹³⁸ Erasmus, *Paraphrases I*, sig. [par.] 3V. Preface to Matthew, cited in Dodds, *Exploiting Erasmus*, note 23, 281.

¹³⁹ See in particular Erasmus's discussion of the things God intends people to know fully, and those things which remain a mystery, and finally, those things which are obscure enough (details of the doctrine of God for example), that persons should refrain from arguments that could bring about the division of the Church. He writes, "what results have these laborious arguments [about uncertain matters of Scripture and doctrine] so far brought, I ask, except that, with great cost to unity, we love too little even as we try to know too much?" (Erasmus, *A Discussion of Free Will*, CWE, 72, 10-11).

¹⁴⁰ See in particular Rummel, "The Theology of Erasmus." Rummel argues that Erasmus "converts probability into certainty by using church authority as a criterion." Rummel, distinguishing Erasmus from the Reformers, writes, "consensus and tradition emerge as essential decision-making tools for Erasmus the Christian sceptic, and came to shape his attitude toward the Reformers ... for the Christian sceptic, consensus was not only a sociopolitical desideratum; it was an essential criterion and the touchstone of true religion" (Rummel, "The Theology of Erasmus," 32).

To summarize, Erasmus argued that unified interpretation of Scripture was *not necessary* for Christian unity, and so assent to uncertain, *adiaphora* doctrines or practices *ought not* to be enforced by the Church; doing so would constitute a continual threat to unity. Unity sustained by peace and order in the Church was essential because for Erasmus these allowed God working through his Scriptures to form people in a holy, godly, and pious way of life: the way of Christ.¹⁴¹ It was a way of life, not doctrinal propositions, that conformed one to Christ, according to Erasmus.¹⁴² And yet, *because* God formed a whole people in common, not just individuals, even debates on non-essentials ultimately had to be determined by the Church. And to this unified Church, Erasmus argued, an individual was called to submit in order to sustain peace and unity and the continuity of common formation in Christ.¹⁴³

¹⁴¹ The following summarizes Erasmus's understanding of the way of Christ, "yet Christianity itself is only that true and perfect kind of friendship which consists in dying with Christ, living with Christ, and forming one body and one soul with Christ." (Erasmus, *Letter to Richard Foxe*, CWE, 2, 103). It was in this way that human beings imitated Christ and would be conformed to him over time.

¹⁴² Dodds, *Exploiting Erasmus*, 37.

¹⁴³ Just what is this unified Church? It is the Church Catholic consisting of the, "consensus of so many ages and nations." Deference to this Church, now headed by the pope, Erasmus argues, is essential because faith necessitates interpretation since, "it seems clear that in many places Holy Scripture is obscured" such that it might seem, "at first sight to contradict itself." Because of this, "whether we like it or not we must depart from its literal meaning and guide our judgment by interpretation" (Erasmus, *A Discussion of Free Will*, CWE, 72, 87-88). In the same work Erasmus had earlier argued that despite the fact that the majority was not always correct, the tradition of Scriptural interpretation by the Church's fathers provided more probable grounds for support than did the new arguments being made by Luther: "I know it often happens that what the majority approves is not always the best. I know that in inquiry into the truth there will always be something to add to our predecessors' achievements. I concede that it is right for the authority of Holy Scripture alone to outweigh all the decisions of all mortals. But the debate here is not about Scripture itself. Both sides gladly accept and venerate the same Scripture: the quarrel is over its meaning. And if any weight is given to intelligence and learning in scriptural interpretation, whose minds are sharper and more perceptive than those of the Greeks? Who is more versed in the Scriptures? The Latins too, lacked neither intelligence nor knowledge of Holy Writ ... I should not care to compare some of the heralds of this new gospel [specifically Luther, although he also earlier refers to Wycliffe] with those men of old." (Erasmus, *A Discussion of Free Will*, CWE, 72, 16-17; see also, Dodds, *Exploiting Erasmus*, 282 footnote 42. Dodds argues that Remer, in *Humanism and the Rhetoric of Toleration*, is correct in interpreting Erasmus's *A Discussion of Free will*, as Erasmus's permitting intellectual tolerance on non-essentials among scholars. However, Remer is incorrect in extending this beyond this work. With Marjorie O'Rourke Boyle and Erika Rummel, noted above, Dodds suggests that Erasmus submitted his views to the Church in *Hyperaspistes*

and all his later works and that in these Erasmus argued that any tolerance for *adiaphoric* debate was confined to a non-public arena (Marjorie O'Rourke Boyle, *Rhetoric and Reform: Erasmus' Civil Dispute with Luther* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983], 7, 63). We find this exact argument made again after the English Civil War and the interregnum period, as many desired the restoration of a comprehensive national Church and the peace and order it might bring to a fractured and fragmented society licking its wounds.

Chapter 2: Richard Hooker

Introduction

In the early sixteenth century, Erasmus argued that the epistemic uncertainty of matters pertaining to the truth is inevitable due to the limitations of human beings. As such, knowledge of God and of his will could not be obtained directly – from Scripture or from tradition or the two combined – but required a constant process of discernment. That process involved weighing Scripture and the tradition’s interpretation of Scripture to determine the most probable course of action or of teaching in accordance with the truth. But to enable discernment over time, two things were required: first, the humility not to act or teach one’s own interpretation where it differed from the tradition, as if one alone had assurance of absolute certainty about their convictions; the second requirement was an ‘arena’ that provided and maintained limits (and disciplinary measures where limits were passed) to which a person was called to maintain deference or consent. Those at the top of the social and/or spiritual hierarchy – bishops and monarchy – were taught the faith and in turn, were responsible for ensuring the Christian faith was taught and its moral principles upheld in ordering and disciplining clerics and laity. In this way, common day-to-day life would press both those in the higher and lower hierarchy to learn, grow and consider reforms necessary to practices and articulations of the faith. The peace and order of the whole social sphere was dependent upon maintaining deference to the tradition of interpretation sustained by the civil and ecclesiastical hierarchy. It was this structure of offices in hierarchy that created an ‘arena’ within which Scriptural discernment could take place over time. Fragmentation of this ‘arena’ would in fact inhibit the capacity to

weigh the evidence supporting various interpretations and thereby prevent pursuit of the truth and likely too, civil and ecclesiastical reform, including social and personal moral reform.

With England's separation from papal authority (1534), the question of governance of the Church, of the civil society, and of the latter's relationship to the Church required address. To whom, exactly, was allegiance owed? Did the English monarchy overstep its authority in disposing with some of the practices, the ways that Churches were governed, and with doctrines of the Catholic Church? In the late sixteenth century, Richard Hooker laid out a vision for governance in the nation of England in one of the most famous works of the early modern period in England: the *Lawes of Ecclesiastical Polity*. His intent was to establish a case for the legitimate exercise of both civil and ecclesiastical authority in England, apart from the pope. Hooker's argument rested on a system of interwoven law (eternal, divine, natural, and human), that provided metaphysical, theological, scriptural, and natural justification for the monarch's authority in leading the Church. Hooker argued – against Puritan claims that only Christ could be head of the Church – that when using 'headship' to refer to mere human monarchs, there is an ontological distinction between Christ's headship of the Church, and a monarch's headship of the Church. Hooker states:

... first, that it is not simply the title of the Head which lifteth our Saviour above all powers, but the title of Head in such sort understood, as the Apostle himself meant it: so that the same being imparted in another sense unto others, doth, not any way make those others therein his equals ... if I term Christ and Ceasar lords, yet this is no equaling of Ceasar with Christ, because it is not thereby intended.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴⁴ W.S. Hill, ed., *The Folger Library Edition of the Works of Richard Hooker*, vol. 6: *Of the Lawes of Ecclesiastical Politie*, Books I-VIII: *Introductions and Commentary* (Binghamton, NY: Medieval and Renaissance Texts & Studies, 1993); All future references to Hooker's *Lawes* will be taken from W.S. Hill ed., *The Folger Library Edition of the Works of Richard Hooker*, (Binghamton, NY: Medieval and

Thus, while a monarch and Christ could both be ‘head of the Church,’ Christ alone is God, the second Person of the Trinity, and Lord over all. This cannot be said of any monarch. Like Erasmus, Hooker argued that Christ’s headship differs from human headship by way of order, measure and kind¹⁴⁵ – God making him head over the Church on earth and in heaven, therefore for all time, over all things; and thereby, to whom all must (and will) submit.¹⁴⁶ Yet, Christ’s invisible headship and unlimited authority, united as he is to the Church everywhere and at all times, required a visible presence to make known in explicit, tangible, positive laws, God’s invisible presence and power.¹⁴⁷

Hooker developed a far more systematic framework of governance to justify a monarch’s exercise of authority in the English commonwealth and this was tied to the requirement he assigned to the visibility of God’s reign in and through positive laws which are directed to the fulfillment of divine law (Scripture principally, along with other aspects built into God’s ordering of the cosmos). He argued that the monarch was to be the head of the Church where the former had the visible scope of authority to enact, enforce and discipline through laws. For Hooker as for Erasmus, all social life was ordered (civilly and ecclesiastically) to seeking and fulfilling what Hooker calls divine law (Scripture). Thus, Hooker developed his framework of law to justify an arena of common space for the corporate discernment of Christian truth.

Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1977-1993), unless otherwise specified. For the remainder of the dissertation any citation of Hooker’s *Laws* will take this form: Hooker, *Laws* IV.1.3.

¹⁴⁵ Hooker, *Laws* IV.1.4.

¹⁴⁶ C.f. 1 Corinthians 15:28, NRSV.

¹⁴⁷ Hooker, *Laws* VIII.4.7.

The major distinction between Hooker and Erasmus is that the former placed the headship of the Church with the monarch rather than with the pope. This is the case since the pope, at least in England, could no longer control the civil laws governing the nation and therefore the moral life of its inhabitants. This power alone was within the jurisdiction of the English monarch. It was precisely because Hooker wanted to maintain common space for corporate discernment that he made this argument. Without placing headship of the Church in the hands of the English monarch, a nation not under papal jurisdiction would have no visible structures of law – their enforcement and discipline – to limit teaching or actions that might disrupt or destroy the common moral life of the commonwealth.

Again, like Erasmus, Hooker was concerned to sustain peace and unity of the commonwealth; a concept that required integrated deference to interpretation embodied visibly in the Church of England with its monarch as head. Even where matters could not be determined with certainty, deference to the Church would maintain the unity of the commonwealth and its Church to enable future discernment. The claims to interpretative certainty by both Puritans and Roman Catholics threatened this unity and so too then, the capacity to seek the truth into the future. Finally, Hooker argued that consent to the Church with the monarch as its head was not a restriction of human freedom but its realization. To consent was to preserve the capacity for the Church as a whole, and its individual members, to find their own purpose and place in society as that society is directed to God and his will.

Hooker's *Lawes* and their importance for the 17th-Century Church in England

In his arguments, Hooker took up many of Erasmus's own concerns with an ordered, visible arena within which common discernment concerning matters of the faith could take place and where a justification could be provided for consent even where there was epistemic uncertainty, or even disagreement. But England's separation from papal authority required adaptation of the ideas of authority, its exercise, its proper jurisdiction, and its legitimate grounds for consent. Hooker set about this task in his *Lawes of Ecclesiastical Polity*. The *Lawes* are often considered foundational articulations of Anglican thought, offering a broad synthesis of the relationship between English civil and ecclesiastical society in the sixteenth century. Henry McAdoo's *The Spirit of Anglicanism* attempted to implicate Hooker's theological work in a pervasive and linear trajectory of influence through the seventeenth-century.¹⁴⁸ However, a more recent work, Michael Brydon's *The Evolving Reputation of Richard Hooker*, argues that Hooker's work had no single trajectory of influence.¹⁴⁹ Instead, it had a variety of offshoots, where various English thinkers developed aspects of Hooker's work, adapting it to their contingent circumstances. This dissertation follows Brydon's corrective to late twentieth-century scholarship like McAdoo's, where the former suggests a more coherent progression of rationality increasingly stripped of the particulars of Christian doctrine and faith.¹⁵⁰

Although it provided a foundational synthesis of Anglican responses to the ecclesiastical and civil turmoil associated with the division of the Church at the

¹⁴⁸ Henry McAdoo, *The Spirit of Anglicanism*.

¹⁴⁹ Brydon, *The Evolving Reputation of Richard Hooker*.

¹⁵⁰ Brydon, *The Evolving Reputation of Richard Hooker*, 18.

Reformation, Hooker's work did not provide a *systematic* framework for future Anglican thinkers. This was primarily because the proliferation of breakdowns in social and ecclesiastical order in England, especially into the seventeenth century, challenged the epistemically evident efficacy of several of Hooker's presuppositions about the nature and capacity of laws governing the nation's formation in the Christian faith (a reality Hooker likely would have acknowledged). A corollary of this breakdown in the order and authority of political and ecclesiastical institutions was contestation concerning presupposed assumptions about knowledge, understanding, certainty, and obedience or consent. At various points during the seventeenth century, this resulted in the loss of institutional capacity to maintain the order and discipline of English society directed to Christian formation. Seventeenth-century thinkers were thus required to adapt aspects of both Erasmus's and Hooker's respective arguments to continually changing social, political, and ecclesiastical contexts.

Therefore, rather than serving to provide seventeenth-century thinkers with a systematic Anglican framework, Hooker's greatest legacy for seventeenth-century English thinkers was his recognition and articulation of a theological vision for society that expressed the need for comprehension: a common body of Christians engaged in the search for understanding religious truth and limited by the requirement to consent to the dictates of Church and leaders. As with Erasmus, the search for truth conducted in a "limited arena" (by some mixture of laws) for the sake of continued formation in the Christian faith was for Hooker an inherently conservative movement. It required edification in the Christian faith obtained during the course of common worship, prayer, and civic life, in order that present circumstances might be evaluated in light of the

wisdom of God's laws ordering his creation; passed on through time in the body of Christ, his Church; and thus understood in accordance with God's purposes in creation.¹⁵¹

A Brief Outline of the Various Trajectories of Hooker Scholarship

Because Hooker has served almost as a benchmark figure for Anglicans seeking to clarify questions of identity and authority from the seventeenth century to present, his works have inspired a large body of secondary literature. Since the aim of this dissertation is to trace the concept of 'comprehension' through the early modern period in England, this brief literature review is intended to give the broad outlines of the arguments of those thinkers past and present whose work on Hooker is most relevant to the argument of this dissertation.

Hooker provided one response (albeit comprehensive) to a late medieval and early modern concern about formation of societies and individuals in the Christian faith.¹⁵²

¹⁵¹ See: Littlejohn, "The Freedom of a Christian Commonwealth: Richard Hooker and the Problem of Christian Liberty;" Rowan Williams, *Anglican Identities*, (London: Cowley Publications, 2004), 41, Williams suggests that Hooker is "... so manifestly a 'sapiential theologian,' concerned with the natural, the handling of social conflict, and the sustaining of an integrative a metaphor, which, in his case, is 'Law' itself, evoked at the end of Book I of the *Laws*, in terms very close to those of the great hymns to Wisdom in the sapiential books: 'her seat is the bosom of God, her voice the harmony of the world.' The sudden transition here to the feminine pronoun would alert any scripturally literate reader to the parallel with the divine *Sophia* of Proverbs, Job and (most particularly) the Wisdom of Solomon; what is claimed here for 'Law,' Williams suggests, "is what the Bible claims for Wisdom. And, as Book V will remind us (V.52.3-4, 56.6); cf. 55.8 on the participation of Christ's human soul in the divine governance of the universe), Christ is scripturally and traditionally identified with God's Wisdom."

¹⁵² On Hooker as one response amongst others within sixteenth-century England, see J. Maltby who raises a question as to Hooker's "uniqueness" amongst contemporaries and to the uniqueness of his appropriation in the seventeenth century. "Could it be that Hooker was better known before the civil war than is often suggested, and that we are seeing here the 'trickle down' effect of 'formal theology' on 'the laity'? Or rather, do Hooker's views represent not an original 'invention of Anglicanism' but his position within one developing tradition of a theologically pluralist English Church?" J. Maltby, *Prayer Book and People in Elizabethan and Early Stuart England* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998), 103. On formation in the faith, see John C. English, "Catechizing a Nation: The Demise of Anglican Notions of Christ's

Hooker advanced his work in response to continued threat of further ecclesiastical division and contested claims concerning the order of laws understood to be operative in governing and forming God's creation.¹⁵³ While Erasmus presumed, without much discussion, a society ordered in a Christian adaptation to neo-platonic emanation, Hooker provided a far more elaborate discussion and justification of his understanding of the laws governing creation.

The general consensus of Hooker scholarship, until twenty-five years ago, primarily understood him to have provided a *via media* between continental/magisterial Reformed and Roman Catholic doctrine and Church practice, creating space for the exercise of reason and conscience, all the while having protected the sacramental and episcopal cornerstones of the apostolic Church. The primary purveyors of this Hookerian picture in the nineteenth century included John Henry Newman, Edward Pusey, and John Keble, key members identified collectively with the Oxford Movement. Against what they perceived as an impending attack on the Church by liberal social and cultural ideals that would lead to a syncretistic collapse of the Church into surrounding culture, they

Reconciling Particularity," in *Anglican and Episcopal History*, 73,1, (March 3, 2004), 35-52; see in particular chapter 5 on formation and catechesis in Bulman, *Anglican Enlightenment*. For a comprehensive review of catechesis from the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries, as well as a substantial review of historical events precipitating use and change in various types of catechism, see Green, *The Christian's ABC*.

¹⁵³ Timothy Larsen examines nineteenth-century Victorian theology and suggests that Victorian England was neither a period of a Christian golden age, nor a period of retreat. Instead, it was a period of contestation between competing Christian and non-Christian groups attempting to lay claim to ordering principles. This book's primary thesis holds for the fifteenth-eighteenth centuries: Christianity in England has fundamentally been an exercise in reform, formation, and adaptation to continually changing political and ecclesiastical circumstances. On this theme in particular see the role of Erasmian proposals for reform in the English Reformers and later sixteenth- and seventeenth-century reformers in Dodds, *Exploiting Erasmus*. On further efforts at reform and social and ecclesiastical change in the seventeenth century particularly, see J.A.I. Champion, *The Church of England and its Enemies 1660-1730* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

sought to restore a seventeenth-century Laudian “high Church” reading of Hooker’s sixteenth-century work.¹⁵⁴

In that vein, Keble first published an edition of Hooker’s *Lawes* in 1836, complete with a preface pointing to Hooker’s influence on the pervasive “high Church” trajectory of the seventeenth century.¹⁵⁵ Drawing from Isaak Walton’s own seventeenth-century biography of Hooker, members of the Oxford Movement, and Keble in particular, sought to demonstrate from Hooker’s own account that the Church of England was a divine institution, thoroughly within Apostolic Succession, properly ordered in doctrine and practice with Scripture, according to the Book of Common Prayer.¹⁵⁶

In general it has been understood that the perspective provided foremost by Keble through his Preface to Hooker’s *Lawes* was largely an anachronistic reading, one perhaps hopeful of or even potentially driven by a desire to appropriate the work of an early English scholar who could solidify and justify the validity of a distinctly Catholic Church, in line with the apostolic tradition and yet reformed to be consistent with the Scriptures.¹⁵⁷ While this general vision of a reformed Catholic Church is accurate, the emphasis on Catholic practices apart from consideration under a broader framework of laws tends to distort Hooker’s emphasis on a society’s communal formation and reformation by God. Where Hooker intended to describe how God’s laws were

¹⁵⁴ Simut, *The Doctrine of Salvation in the Sermons of Richard Hooker*, 13-15.

¹⁵⁵ John Keble, “Editor’s Preface,” in *Richard Hooker, The Works of that Learned and Judicious Divine*, (New York: Bert Franklin, Seventh Edition), ix-cxxi.

¹⁵⁶ John Keble, “Editor’s Preface.” For example, Keble argues that Hooker “had his full share in training up for the next generation, Laud, Hammond, Sanderson, and a multitude more such divines; to which succession and series, humanly speaking, we owe it that the Anglican church continues at such a distance from that of Geneva, and so near to the primitive truth and apostolical order,” cxiv-cxv.

¹⁵⁷ Littlejohn, “The Search for a Reformed Hooker: Some Modest Proposals,” 70-73. See also Brydon, *The Evolving Reputation of Richard Hooker*, 1-3.

intertwined to draw a society and its individual members to God, too much focus on practices in a society of fragmented Christian groups could lead a society to see those practices as definitive ends unto themselves.¹⁵⁸

In the twentieth century, scholars initially portrayed him as the prototypical figure in having developed a “rationalist” Anglican method where reason was granted some degree of unmitigated exercise alongside Scripture and what they referred to as, tradition.¹⁵⁹ However, this interpretation of his work started to be challenged as early as the 1930s. Corneliu Simut cites Alexandre Passerin D’Entreves, who argues that Hooker was not a rationalist but was rather attempting to demonstrate a case for how spiritual and civil laws could co-exist to lead a society to God. To accomplish this, “the laws of ecclesiastical and civil polity should be conceived rationally (by means of reason, not on the grounds of reason), so that they be historically convenient.”¹⁶⁰ D’Entreves’ argument that Hooker relied on medieval political theory rather than classical rationalism was due, Simut points out, to “four main reasons:” the first is that “Hooker maintains the

¹⁵⁸ See for example Brydon, *The Evolving Reputation of Richard Hooker*. Brydon writes of the Laudian high church movement in the seventeenth century: “Whilst Hooker clearly assisted the ceremonial preoccupations of the *avant-garde* churchmen it is also important to remember that his defence of Church practices had a very different motivation behind it. Although Book V offered a thorough justification of the Prayer Book practices on grounds of adiaphora it said very little to support the Laudian belief that they were immutable Church forms. Consequently many Calvinist conformists reacted in shocked disbelief when Laudians cited Hooker in support of their position” (50).

¹⁵⁹ See for example, Christopher Morris, *Political Thought in England: Tyndale to Hooker*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1953), 196 in particular; McAdoo, *The Spirit of Anglicanism*, 5. McAdoo writes, “... Hooker’s work ... is in one sense a defense of reason, an attempt to establish a liberal method which holds reason to be competent to deal with questions of ecclesiastical polity, and to be in itself an ultimate factor in theology.” We shall examine the use of the term tradition later in the chapter. Hooker did not positively refer to the term tradition, at least as it was understood at the time of his writing the *Laws*. What is generally referred to in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as “tradition” for Hooker, with any positive attribution, ought to be understood as “custom” that was inherited and ought to serve as a starting point or guide for discernment.

¹⁶⁰ Simut, *The Doctrine of Salvation in the Sermons of Richard Hooker*, 28, citing Alexandre Passerin D’Entreves, *The Medieval Contribution to Political Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939), 125.

traditional theological concepts.¹⁶¹ The second is that he sets certain limits to the independence and autonomy of human reason. The third is that rational constructs must resist the test of history. And The fourth is that rational constructs must not contradict the evidence of tradition and the evidence of historical development.”¹⁶²

Simut also cites Leo Strauss and Cropsey in their work *History of Political Philosophy* who argued that Hooker makes a distinction that will be important when we consider the work of both Chillingworth and Wilkins: while the state could not control “the theological *opinions* of all individuals living within a nation,” any “*actions* taken against the established doctrine and polity must be stopped. All actions that are subversive to the already settled polity – either of the Church or of the state – cannot be tolerated.”¹⁶³

This was an important advance in Hooker scholarship. It demonstrated a clear link with the medieval past where consent or deference to the Church and society, and to the customs it had received, remained a central conviction for Hooker. In writing the *Laws* Hooker was reacting against the use of reason not bound to the divine and human laws governing a society, and the customs that society inherited.

¹⁶¹ Classical rationalists include Rene Descartes, Barruch Spinoza, Gottfried Leibniz, John Locke and Immanuel Kant.

¹⁶² Simut, *The Doctrine of Salvation in the Sermons of Richard Hooker*, 28, footnote 106, citing Alexandre Passerin D’Entreves, *The Medieval Contribution to Political Thought*, 120.

¹⁶³ Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey ed., *History of Political Philosophy* (Chicago, Rand McNally & Co., 1966); Simut, *The Doctrine of Salvation in the Sermons of Richard Hooker*, 29, footnote, 111, citing Strauss and Cropsey ed., *History of Political Philosophy*, 320 (italics mine).

In a desire for corrective response, an increasing number of scholars have, over the last twenty-five years, sought to demonstrate that Hooker was in varying degrees of continuity with the continental Reformers. Further, they have argued that his central polemical response was to those of an extreme Reformed tradition who were attempting to limit doctrine and Church practice to only those things found perspicuously within the Scriptures (an error he identified as a Protestant version of the Roman Catholic drive to establish epistemic certainty as the basis from which to justify liturgical and catechetical practices).¹⁶⁴ The central issue, according to several of these scholars, was that Hooker found unacceptable the presumption of epistemic certainty about scriptural interpretation which could justify acts that would disrupt the civil and ecclesiastical life of the commonwealth.

The Reformation Context for Hooker's Writings

In order to understand what Hooker was responding to in his *Lawes*, we will first examine the political and theological challenges presented by the Western Church's

¹⁶⁴ See Littlejohn's substantial work on Hooker's political theology, in, "The Freedom of a Christian Commonwealth: Richard Hooker and the Problem of Christian Liberty," (Again: now published as, Bradford Littlejohn, *The Peril and Promise of Christian Liberty: Richard Hooker, the Puritans, and Protestant Political Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017). Littlejohn has provided a helpful summary of the various trajectories of interpretation: first were the "*new via mediators*," Peter Lake and Nigel Voak as leading proponents, who suggest that while charting a course from the theological categories of the "magisterial reformers" (as opposed to retaining Roman Catholic distinctives), Hooker seeks his own path in order to develop a theological synthesis between his work and that of the Reformed movements, because he is ultimately dissatisfied with these categories; second were what Littlejohn refers to as the "soft reformists," scholars like Paul Avis and David Neelands, who suggest that Hooker certainly has more affinity with the magisterial reformers, and even seeks to retain more Reformed categories, but seeks more independent grounding for his works; 3) and finally we have the "hard reformists," whom Littlejohn groups with Torrance Kirby and Nigel Atkinson, who seek to demonstrate Hooker's own attempt to "win back wayward Puritans," through the latter's alignment of his own doctrinal positions with those most centrally of John Calvin (Littlejohn, "The Search for a Reformed Hooker: Some Modest Proposals," 70-73). For a more detailed and thorough analysis, see Brydon, *The Evolving Reputation of Richard Hooker*, 1-20; MacCulloch, "Richard Hooker's Reputation," 564; Andrea Russell, *Richard Hooker: Beyond Certainty*, Thesis, (Nottingham, UK: University of Nottingham, 2009), http://eprints.nottingham.ac.uk/11335/1/Richard_Hooke1.pdf; Littlejohn, "The Search for a Reformed Hooker: Some Modest Proposals," 68-82.

division and how this affected Church-state relationships. The division of the Church at the Reformation had introduced competing loyalties between Churches and civil society and between individuals and their allegiance to both Church and civil institutions. One of the central questions that emerged had to do with the nature of human freedom in relationship to God and to the state to which one belonged. Was freedom in Christ a freedom from the rule or discipline of human leaders charged with governing the common spheres of Church and civil society? And if so, what means would anyone have to determine what it meant to love one's neighbor?¹⁶⁵

John Calvin addresses these challenges most directly in the following statement from his *Institutes of Religion*:

Now, these two [the Church and civil spheres], as we have divided them, are always to be viewed apart from each other. When the one is considered, we should call off our minds, and not allow them to think of the other. For there exists in man a kind of two worlds, over which different kings and different laws can preside. By attending to this distinction, we will not erroneously transfer the doctrine of the gospel concerning spiritual liberty to civil order, as if in regard to external government Christians were less subject to human laws, because their consciences are unbound before God, as if they were exempted from all carnal service, because in regard to the Spirit they are free.¹⁶⁶

For Calvin, the freedom granted to a person through her justification in Christ ought not to be confused with freedom from obedience to civil and ecclesiastical laws. Instead, an individual whose conscience had been freed from concern with salvation was no longer consumed with fear about her status before God and was thus free and thereby more

¹⁶⁵ In this section I follow the excellent work done by Brad Littlejohn in "The Freedom of a Christian Commonwealth: Richard Hooker and the Problem of Christian Liberty."

¹⁶⁶ John Calvin *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, (trans). Henry Beveridge, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), III.XIX.15.

capable of serving her neighbors. Indeed, drawing on Scripture as the sole basis of authority, Calvin's intent was to establish freedom for the justified person, whose conscience was made free for service to God.¹⁶⁷ While it was not his intention to create separate spheres where civil laws could operate distinctly from ecclesiastical laws, Littlejohn notes that many of Calvin's followers in fact took this path.¹⁶⁸

Luther had taken a similar position with respect to Christian freedom, arguing on the basis of *sola fide* and *sola scriptura* that a person was made free *from* concern with salvation:

No good work can rely upon the Word of God or live in the soul, for faith alone and the Word of God rule in the soul. Just as the heated iron glows like fire because of the union of fire with it, so the Word imparts its qualities to the soul. It is clear, then, that a Christian has all that he needs in faith and needs no works to justify him; and if he has no need of works, he has no need of the law; and if he has no need of the law, surely he is free from the law. It is true that "the law is not laid down for the just" [I Tim. 1:9]. This is that Christian liberty, our faith, which does not induce us to live in idleness or wickedness but makes the law and works unnecessary for any man's righteousness and salvation.¹⁶⁹

However, in being made free from concern with salvation, one is not "induced to live in idleness or wickedness," but instead is set free *for* the sake of others since each

¹⁶⁷ Calvin *Institutes* III.XIX.2, 4, 7 (respectively). Calvin summarized his position in the following three points: (1) "that the consciences of believers, while seeking assurance of their justification before God, must rise above the law, and think no more of obtaining justification by it"; (2) "that consciences obey the law, not as if compelled by legal necessity; but being freed from the yoke of the law itself, voluntarily obey the will of God."; (3) "... we are not bound before God to any observance of external things which are in themselves indifferent, but that we are now at full liberty either to use or omit."

¹⁶⁸ Littlejohn, "The Freedom of a Christian Commonwealth: Richard Hooker and the Problem of Christian Liberty," 1-5.

¹⁶⁹ Martin Luther, *Treatise on Christian Liberty: The Freedom of a Christian*, (1520), in *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, ed., Timothy F. Lull, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 601-2.

individual's good was bound up with the common good of the society in which one lived.¹⁷⁰ In his *Treatise on Christian Liberty* (1520), Luther writes:

To make the way smoother for the unlearned – for only them do I serve – I shall set down the following two propositions concerning the freedom and the bondage of the spirit: A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all. These two theses seem to contradict each other. If, however, they should be found to fit together they would serve our purpose beautifully. Both are Paul's own statements, who says in I Cor. 9[:19], "For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all," and in Rom. 13[:8], "Owe no one anything, except to love one another."¹⁷¹

Importantly in this schema, the limiting factor for ordering one's external acts in the context of community is law, specifically the second commandment: love of one's neighbor. Luther continues:

Love by its very nature is ready to serve and be subject to him who is loved. So Christ, although he was Lord of all, was "born of woman, born under the law" [Gal. 4:4], and therefore was at the same time a free man and a servant, "in the form of God" and "of a servant" [Phil. 2:6–7].¹⁷²

For Luther then, this law's content is love. It is not however love in the abstract sense, where love's content is anthropologically defined in such a way that the law might be understood as condoning moral relativism. The exercise of love was to be shaped by the gospel, specifically (in Luther's later work) by Christ's death on the Cross. Love as the law of God provides inherent anthropological limits explicitly in that the law is made to order all things in their plurality of relationship to one another, to God.¹⁷³ Therefore one is indeed made free by God's justifying grace, but

¹⁷⁰ Luther, *Treatise on Christian Liberty: The Freedom of a Christian*, 601.

¹⁷¹ Luther, *Treatise on Christian Liberty: The Freedom of a Christian*, 596.

¹⁷² Luther, *Treatise on Christian Liberty: The Freedom of a Christian*, 596.

¹⁷³ Rowan Williams suggests that this limitation is intrinsic and inherent to creation – a created and complex web of laws, the outcome of God's bringing otherness (creation) into ordered being. Not only that, but it is essential in a post-lapsarian world: "Hooker, like the good Augustinian he is ... has no particular

free only insofar as one's acts are conducive to the good of one's neighbors.¹⁷⁴ It is this specific understanding of freedom from fear associated with one's salvation, enabling the freedom to serve one's neighbor, that protects Luther's understanding of freedom from modern notions inherently rooted within the individual himself. The

optimism about the moral discernment of the mass of human beings, for all that he greatly privileges the self-determining right of any human community. Now, if these primordial self-determinations are truly for the sake of God's eternal law and our contemplative happiness [our proper end in God], ... [we can understand from Hooker's first Book that for him] law in a plural and contingent world is precisely the self-limitation of divine power so that specific and interdependent processes may go forward in regular fashion: if the goals are diverse, though coherent, God's power logically cannot be present in each substance or process as an *infinite* potentiality. Only God as God possesses infinite liberty – and even that is not a liberty of utterly arbitrary self-definition, since God is by nature thus and not otherwise. So we could say the characteristic shape of law is self-limitation. The community seeking to conserve its conformity to the law of God cannot, in the world of fallen history, remain forever in a state of political innocence; it must decide how to enact its aims, and so must give up its indeterminate potential” (Williams, *Anglican Identities*, 52).

¹⁷⁴ See Luther, *Treatise on Christian Liberty*, 596; Oliver O'Donovan in *Finding and Seeking: Ethics as Theology*, Vol. 2, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014) helpfully clarifies the underlying framework of laws, ultimately fulfilled in Christ, that Calvin and Luther seem to presume in their description of the relationship between freedom and limit: “prudent deliberation [concerning the relationship between one's faith and external actions] conceives of moral laws within an ordered system. Laws come in many forms and stand at variable distances from reality. Typically if loosely, we distinguish ‘moral law,’ articulating the moral order as a whole in its demand upon us, from ‘working rules’ hypothecated upon a given task. There are other variants: laws which we formulate for ourselves and laws formulated for us by others, laws enjoined on us and laws taught us for our instruction but not imposed, and so on. For pedagogical purposes we assemble moral laws in codes: ten in the Decalogue, six hundred and thirteen in the Torah, etc., but they are in principle innumerable, depending on the aspects of reality that need directive formulation at any moment. In principle, too, many may always be reduced to one. That was the critical discovery made by the rabbis in their attempt to provide a comprehensive exposition of the Law of Moses. There were ‘greater’ commands and ‘lesser commands’ and obedience to ‘the law’ as a whole depended on getting the relations among them right. The discovery was, the synoptic evangelists report, taken up by Jesus, who identified two commandments of love, love of God and love of neighbor, as the first and second commandments of the law” (197-8).

When suggesting how these are prioritized, O'Donovan argues that it is a mistake to attempt to prioritize with respect to greater and lesser importance, for this is to “ignore the interconnectedness [of these laws].” Not every act is consistent with loving God or neighbor, O'Donovan and Williams contend (see Williams, *Anglican Identities*, 42). This implies that there is inherent limitation on external actions; but these cannot be *a priori* determined from rules given in Scripture or from tradition. Proper actions must be derived out of deliberation, which takes account not only of the particularity of a situation, but more importantly of how that event is situated within the wider scope of the laws governing the community to which one belongs. O'Donovan writes, “But if the coherence of our obligations attests the will of one creator, it also conveys the gift of coherent agency. It promises a path through the complexities of life, a way of negotiating the plurality of demands that are made on me ... from where does such coherence [of the Deuteronomic laws] come, if not from a ‘second law-giving,’ a self-disclosure on the part of God himself with a law that interprets the plurality of laws, and is therefore at the same time a Gospel” (see especially 200-201).

ontological grounding is not given in a Ciceronian philosophy of the common good. Rather the ontological basis is Christ, whose death and resurrection form the very being and measure or meaning of all other acts, individual and communal.¹⁷⁵

Littlejohn, however, notes the tension between obedience to Christ and obedience to the civil authorities in the wake of breakdowns in civil and ecclesiastical authority.¹⁷⁶ These proved difficult to negotiate.¹⁷⁷ Littlejohn directs attention to a dispute that took place in the last decade of the sixteenth century, between Richard Bancroft, a future Archbishop of Canterbury, and the Puritan radical John Penry.¹⁷⁸

In a sermon in 1589, Bancroft argued that while it was important that individuals be taught to read the Scriptures and to learn their content, it was essential that this act be conducted in moderation. According to Littlejohn, for Bancroft and other Church of England ministers, this implied submission to the Church's authority and discipline. In this way, Bancroft's argument, if restricted to the Church of England, is consistent with that of Erasmus's own exhortation of obedience to the Church.

¹⁷⁵ Luther's concept of the common good builds from his conviction as stated above that "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none and that he is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all." When the sinful man recognizes he is forgiven and justified solely by the "merits of another, namely Christ alone," (Luther, *Treatise on Christian Liberty*, 599), his "heart will rejoice to its depth" (599-600). When this occurs a person will no longer fear death (599-600). This is the status of the 'inner or spiritual man'. Yet, Luther says, the "outer man" must still live with self-discipline (600-601), and importantly, having been freed from fear about justification, to "devote all our works to the welfare of others, since each has such abundant riches in his faith that all his other works and his whole life are a surplus with which he can by voluntary benevolence serve and do good to his neighbor" (617-18).

¹⁷⁶ Littlejohn, "The Freedom of a Christian Commonwealth: Richard Hooker and the Problem of Christian Liberty."

¹⁷⁷ Littlejohn, "The Freedom of a Christian Commonwealth: Richard Hooker and the Problem of Christian Liberty," 1-3.

¹⁷⁸ Littlejohn, "The Freedom of a Christian Commonwealth: Richard Hooker and the Problem of Christian Liberty," 36.

Penry replied to Bancroft that this argument for submission was antithetical to the liberty won by the Reformers, who set Christians free from external obligations to authority, thereby making way for the true justifying faith in Christ to be known and received. Far from proposing that individual or private interpretation ought to result from the Reformers' restoration of the faith, however, Penry responded that it was the Presbyterian ministers who ought to guard and teach the faith to the laity. All lay persons, including the Queen, were to submit to the ministers' authority.¹⁷⁹

As the last chapter demonstrates, the identity of those charged with articulating and maintaining the truth was already a matter of serious contention between Luther and Erasmus. The issue was not merely who communicated the truth, but also how it was received *over time*. This was the central distinction between Luther and Erasmus. For Erasmus, without the preservation of civil and ecclesiastical unity, the capacity to weigh the evidence of claims about the truth – often made intentionally obscure by God – and to form people in that process of discernment over time would be compromised. For Luther, the truth made clear by God's revelation in Christ could be pursued apart from the authority of the Catholic Church of his time.

We begin to see in this continued dispute the various points of tension that threatened to overturn the hope for clarity with respect to justification before God and the freedom given in Christ for living in faith. Just what aspects of the Christian life were necessary for justification and who had the authority to determine this? We have seen that Erasmus sought the reform of the Church, as well as arguing for a shift of many external

¹⁷⁹ John Penry, *A Briefe Discovery of the Untruthes, and Slanders Against Reformation, and the favourers thereof*, contained in D. Bancroft's Sermon [...] (Edinburgh: Robert Waldegrave, 1589/90), 41.

requirements of the Roman Catholic faith from essentials to *adiaphora*. But ultimately, obedience to the Church was necessary to preserve peace, order, and unity for the sake of evaluating epistemically uncertain aspects of the faith. While the Reformers, even Luther, redrew the lines of the true Church and sought this theological tactic to varying degrees, however, they could no longer rely on Erasmus's presumed obedience to a politically and socially unified body. And this was the case precisely because the reform movements of Calvin and Luther (amongst others) prioritized the search for truth even if it meant broken relationships with factions of the Church. The latter's fragmentation made it difficult to establish the locus of both truth and authority, and so what matters truly were *adiaphora*.¹⁸⁰ Littlejohn writes:

Both sides had been brought to this impasse by the seemingly insoluble problem of *adiaphora*: just what sorts of things were indifferent, and as for those that were, who was to decide what we were to do with them? Leaving the Christian conscience free before God seemed a recipe for disaster, since his Word was proving so pliable in the hands of various disputants. Better to seek some definitive sentence from human authority, whether it be magistrate or minister.¹⁸¹

Reformers were not suggesting that outward works ought to be done away with and replaced with an inward appropriation of the faith for one's personal salvation. Instead, the inward reception of grace was understood to both enable and inspire

¹⁸⁰ The concept of *adiaphora* for the Reformers had to do with things unnecessary to one's salvation. As we shall see throughout this dissertation, the lack of capacity to determine and agree, even on the locus of authority for making determinations and agreements, would make the two-kingdom theory of Luther's difficult to uphold even by the mid-sixteenth century. See W.D.J. Cargill Thompson, "The 'Two Kingdoms' and the 'Two Regiments': Some Problems of Luther's *Zwei-Reiche-Lehre*," *Journal of Theological Studies* XX (1969), 77-91; John Witte, Jr., *Law and Protestantism: The Legal Teachings of the Lutheran Reformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 89-115. For a good summary see Bernard Verkamp, "The Limits Upon Adiaphoristic Freedom," *Theological Studies* 36, 1 (1975): 52-76; 63.

¹⁸¹ Littlejohn, "The Freedom of a Christian Commonwealth: Richard Hooker and the Problem of Christian Liberty," 36-7.

outward works that blossomed from one's faith, having been secured by God's justification in Christ.

Again, however, in the midst of ecclesiastical and political contestation, precisely what were *adiaphora* and who had the capacity to determine this created an untenable tension around Luther's and Calvin's basic premises with respect to freedom in action. Neither wished to claim freedom *from* obedience to things that were considered *adiaphora*. Following Erasmus, their call was to freedom *in* things that were *adiaphora* (with respect to salvation).

However, as we have seen and as Littlejohn points out, their followers were unable to preserve this deliberative tension when confronting changes to teachings and practices in both the ecclesiastical and political spheres, brought about by the Church's division decades before. He writes, "Luther's colleague Andreas von Karlstadt quickly took the clarion call of Christian liberty much further than Luther intended, insisting that all impositions beyond Scripture must be rejected outright."¹⁸² Luther responded that this was simply a form of papalism, wherein all things discovered in Scripture were to be applied to present situations as if they were infallible dogmas.¹⁸³ Luther's response here is interesting, considering his certainty in presuming an absence of any doctrine of free will in his arguments with Erasmus.

But of course Lutherans were not the only ones to move in this direction of Scriptural absolutism. For some Puritans, Scripture had become the sole criterion in

¹⁸² Littlejohn, "The Freedom of a Christian Commonwealth: Richard Hooker and the Problem of Christian Liberty," 40.

¹⁸³ Bernard J. Verkamp, "The Limits Upon Adiaphoristic Freedom," *Theological Studies* 36, 1 (1975): 52-76; 57, cited in Littlejohn, "The Freedom of a Christian Commonwealth: Richard Hooker and the Problem of Christian Liberty," 55, footnote 13.

determining the moral goodness of an action. Hooker, responding to this assertion, writes,

The rather, for that it hath grown from no other roote, then only a desire to enlarge the necessarie use of the word of God; which desire hath begotten an error enlarging it further then (as we are perswaded) soundness of truth will beare. For whereas God hath left sundry kindes of laws unto men and by all those laws and actions of men are in some sort directed: they hold that one onely lawe, the scripture, must be the rule to direct in all thinges, even so farre as to the *taking up of a strawe* ... in this we presently dissent, and this we are presently to examine.¹⁸⁴

What Hooker is battling here is the Puritan extremists' desire to assert Scripture as sufficient for the spiritual and moral life, with no need for any other criterion by which to measure good or evil. One of the difficulties with the Puritans' approach was that things that Reformers like Luther and Calvin attributed to the temporal realm – things indifferent to salvation, such as Church polity – now became Scriptural commandments obligatory for salvation.

In contrast, we begin to see some thinkers offer, even in the sixteenth century, that if only a few things were necessary to salvation, then everything else was essentially free for human authorities to determine and change as they thought was warranted. Thus, where Scripture addressed things not necessary to salvation, these were matters indifferent and thereby changeable.¹⁸⁵ For example, Thomas Starkey argued that the Apostles' Creed alone ought to serve as the criterion for determining what was required for salvation.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁴ Hooker, *Lawes* II.1.2.

¹⁸⁵ Lake, *Anglicans and Puritans: Presbyterianism and English Conformist Thought from Whitgift to Hooker*, 39, 164.

¹⁸⁶ Thomas Starkey, *Exhortation to Unitie and Obedience* (Amsterdam; New York: Theatrum Orbis Terrarum, 1973), 7b; see also, Lake, *Anglicans and Puritans*, 119.

The very contestation over how Scripture was to be interpreted with respect to ordering lives seemed to demonstrate that some authority was required to determine this. But in a Church already divided, who could determine which authority was legitimate, and what factors could justify an authority's legitimacy?¹⁸⁷ These questions continued as central to Hooker, into the seventeenth century and through to the present. At the heart of the matter was not merely the question of authority, but the role law had in legitimating authority to direct the common search for religious understanding.¹⁸⁸

Hooker's "Web" of Laws: On How God Draws His Creation to Himself

Consent to the Church's articulation of the faith and to the monarch remained an essential element of Hooker's own theological and moral convictions. This section provides Hooker's philosophical and theological justification for why a political act – consent – is consistent with an act of faith in God.

In his book *Exploiting Erasmus: The Erasmian Legacy and Religious Change in Early Modern England*, Gregory Dodds contends that while not a direct influence on Hooker, "Erasmus remains the most complete antecedent to Hooker's thought."¹⁸⁹ Dodds

¹⁸⁷ The debate initially begun between Thomas Cartwright and Archbishop Whitgift, about whether the Church of England was properly bound to the early Church, opened the way for debate between Catholics and various groups of Protestants about what constituted the true "primitive Church" with respect to teachings and time periods (generally councils). In his article, "This Historical Perspective of Richard Hooker," Arthur Ferguson argues that while Cartwright and Whitgift were arguing on the same level, Hooker changed the nature of the argument: "[the former two] chose to treat the past as a reservoir of authorities and had gone as far in pitting authority against authority as was reasonable to go" (Arthur B. Ferguson, "The Historical Perspective of Richard Hooker: A Renaissance Paradox," *The Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, III (1973), 17-49; 22.

¹⁸⁸ Lake, *Anglicans and Puritans*, 13.

¹⁸⁹ Dodds, *Exploiting Erasmus*, 111.

argues that the midst of contestation about the faith and how one is formed in it, Hooker used Erasmus's rhetoric of *adiaphora* to support conformity to civil and ecclesiastical laws, even when these things were not required for salvation. Dodds, Littlejohn, and Rowan Williams all converge in understanding Hooker to be reticent in attributing epistemic certainty to many matters of the faith.¹⁹⁰ As we have seen in Erasmus's own argument with Luther with respect to the doctrine of free will, Dodds writes, "for Hooker, as for Erasmus, the epistemological problem was that knowledge was conditional."¹⁹¹ Most beliefs were therefore to be held as *adiaphora*. Religious chaos was avoided and some certainty found by prudent reliance on the consensus of the Church.¹⁹² Littlejohn provides a slightly different emphasis: conformity is valued by Hooker because reasoning from within political bodies (both civil and ecclesiastical, ordered to the faith handed on through time) is both an individual and a communal act set within a framework of divinely ordered laws. Far from inhibiting human liberty, as might be concluded from Dodds's interpretation of a mere political conformity in light of uncertainty in knowledge, such laws are given so that finite human beings might be formed in God's

¹⁹⁰ See especially chapters 1 and 5-7 in Littlejohn, "The Freedom of a Christian Commonwealth: Richard Hooker and the Problem of Christian Liberty;" and Rowan Williams, *Anglican Identities*, 24-5. Citing Hooker, Williams writes, "We cannot in any way put God in our debt. But if sanctifying righteousness is connected with the faith by which we appropriate God's sovereign and perfect righteousness, imperfect righteousness and imperfect faith go together. Hooker elaborates this in his sermon on 'The Certainty and Perpetuity of Faith in the Elect,' ... 'it cannot be that any man's heart living should be either so enlightened in the knowledge, or so established in the love of that wherein his salvation standeth, as to be perfect, neither doubting nor shrinking at all,'" (Williams, 24-5). With respect to Hooker's handling of uncertainty, Williams argues that, "[Hooker's] self critical element in theological formulation here comes not from any strictly *epistemological* uncertainties but from the conviction of finitude and sin, intensified by a quite orthodox Reformed pessimism about human capacity" (Williams, 26).

¹⁹¹ Williams contends that the problem of certainty is not fundamentally one of epistemology, but rather of finitude and sin. It is a problem therefore of anthropology, or human nature both in pre- and post-lapsarian states.

¹⁹² Dodds, *Exploiting Erasmus*, 111.

wisdom by adherence to the laws by which he orders creation. In this way, God enables persons to freely choose to act in accordance with themselves and their own fitting end in God, even in contingent circumstances.¹⁹³

The value of conformance, Littlejohn argues persuasively, is not merely for political stability or for the sake of securing salvation by obedience, but for the sake of formation and sanctification in the faith: to learn, that is, to love God and so to serve neighbor. Like Williams, however, Littlejohn also agrees that Hooker is well aware that human knowledge is finite and inhibited by sin (as we shall see below). It therefore cannot provide the certainty of enduring infallible ecclesiastical statements of doctrine or enduring forms of Church polity, whether drawn from Scripture or the tradition of Scripture's interpretation, without distorting the capacity to seek God in created, fallen, and thereby contingent circumstances. For Hooker, this "seeking" takes place through the interconnected web of laws by which God himself moves creation back to its divine source and maker. Thus "seeking" is bound up with "consenting" to the laws of God and God's world.

Rowan Williams notes that in his *Lawes*, but so too in the *Dublin Fragments*, Hooker established the grounds of formation in the Christian faith in the triune God, who is a "law unto himself."¹⁹⁴ Formation for society as a whole, and its individual members, was understood as a matter of God's agency enacted through a "web" of laws both mutable and immutable, by which he would draw all things to their proper *telos* in himself.

¹⁹³ Littlejohn, "The Freedom of a Christian Commonwealth: Richard Hooker and the Problem of Christian Liberty." See especially chapters 2 and 6.

¹⁹⁴ Hooker, *Lawes* I.2.2; Williams, *Anglican Identities*, 41-2.

In Book I, chapter I of the *Lawes*, Hooker describes the nature and the will of God as consistent and coherent – that is, as God’s own free self-determination as a law to himself. Hooker’s concern here is to demonstrate that God’s will is not arbitrary. His will is self-referentially consistent in ordering the relationship of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, which Hooker identifies as the first eternal law – “the being of God is a kinde of law to his working.”¹⁹⁵ And God’s will is consistent in ordering all of creation (the second eternal law):

That which doth assigne unto each thing the kinde, that which doth moderate the force and power, that which doth appoint the forme and measure of working, the same we tearme a Lawe. So that no certaine end could ever be attained, unlesse the actions whereby it is attained were regular, that is to say, made suteable fit and correspondent unto their end by some canon, rule or lawe. Which thing doth first take place in the works even of God himself.¹⁹⁶

The second eternal law ordering creation, which contains all other forms of law (divine

¹⁹⁵ Hooker, *Lawes* I.2.2.

¹⁹⁶ Hooker, *Lawes* I.2.1-I.2.2; Hooker makes a distinction between a first and a second eternal law. The first eternal law is the law by which God freely orders himself. “Nor is the freedom of the wil of God any whit abated, let or hindered by means of this, because the imposition of this law upon himself is his own free and voluntary act. This law therefore we may name eternal, being *that order which God before all ages hath set down with himself, for himselfe to do all things by*” (*Lawes* I.2.6). The second eternal law pertains to the created things that God orders, and encompasses within it all other laws that order creation. Hooker writes, “I am not ignorant that by law eternall the learned for the most part do understand the order, not which God hath eternallie purposed himself in all his works to observe, but rather that which with himselfe he hath set downe as expedient to be kept by all his creatures, according to the severall condition wherwith he hath indued them” (*Lawes* I.3.1). Hooker next explains how the two eternal laws are related: “All things therfor, which are as they ought to be, are conformed unto this second law eternall, and even those things which to this eternall law are not conformable, are notwithstanding in some sort ordered by *the first eternall lawe*. For what good or evil is there under the sunne, what action correspondent or repugnant unto the law which God hath imposed upon his creatures, but in or upon it God doth worke according to the law which himselfe hath eternally purposed to keep, that is to say, the first law eternall? So that a twofold law eternall being thus made, it is not hard to conceive how they both take place in all things” (*Lawes*, I.3.1). Under the second eternal law (that which has been traditionally considered merely a part of “eternal law” by “the learned,” Hooker includes natural law, which orders natural agents; celestial or heavenly law, which orders Angels without their “swarving” from it; the law of reason, which binds those creatures with capacity for rational thought, and which is known by them without special revelation (scripture); divine law, which is known only through God’s revelation (scripture); and human law, which is known either from the law of reason or divine law, and which through deliberation is made into governing laws (*Lawes* I.3.1).

[Scripture], natural, and positive), connects one thing to another in both horizontal relationships (between created things) and vertical relationships (created things to God). The laws provide limits, since not all possibilities can obtain if there is a first principle – a principle which even “the wise and learned among the verie Heathens themselves have all acknowledged ... whereupon originallie the being of all things dependeth.”¹⁹⁷ The limits inherent in the laws – providing order amongst created things, and foremost being ordered to God – serve as the means by which things are moved by God to their proper end or purpose in him:

All things that are have some operation not violent or casuall. Niether doth any thing ever begin to exercise the same without some foreconceaved ende for which it worketh. And the end which it worketh for is not obtained, unlesse the worke be also fit to obtaine it by. *For unto every ende every operation will not serve.*¹⁹⁸

It is the limit mutably and/or immutably inherent in these laws (the former necessitating deliberation for decision-making) that makes possible the pursuit of one’s fitting end. This is so since the laws and their inherent directivity to God provide both means (grace) and knowledge (human agency contained in the will and understanding), both of God’s purpose and one’s place within God’s order as one comes to know God over time.¹⁹⁹ This scheme is predicated on Hooker’s assumption about the nature of God being the locus of law and wisdom: “a world in which no regularity could be depended upon would be a world in which the very idea of an ‘end’ would make no sense, since we could give no

¹⁹⁷ Hooker, *Lawes* I.2.3.

¹⁹⁸ Hooker, *Lawes* I.2.1 (italics mine)

¹⁹⁹ Hooker, *Lawes* I.3.1.

content to categories of cause and effect, or process and outcome.”²⁰⁰ Williams continues, “if we want to talk of God acting so as to bring about some end, we have to suppose that the divine activity too is ‘law-like’; and, since God cannot be limited or conditioned by any other agency, it is what God is that determines (limits) how God acts.”²⁰¹

Therefore, if God is a law unto himself and he is wise, the laws that order the universe (laws falling under Hooker’s second eternal law) are soaked in divine wisdom. Willing participation by human beings is willing participation in the proper end for which a particular person has been made by God – proper because wise and good and thus fitting, within a particular social context. Again, if “God is a kinde of lawe to his working,” then “that perfection which God is, geveth perfection to that he doth ... God thererfore is a law both to himself, and to all other things besides ... all those things which are done by him, have some ende for which they are done: and the ende for which they are done, is a reason of his will to do them” (*Lawes* I.2.2-I.2.3).

A proper appreciation of Hooker’s notion of this network of teleologically-ordered laws helps dispel the common but misleading analogy of a ‘three-legged stool’ attributed to Hooker for describing the loci of Christian authority.²⁰² The following

²⁰⁰ Williams, *Anglican Identities*, 42.

²⁰¹ Williams, 42; cf. *Lawes* I.2.5, 6.

²⁰² Two examples of the misuse of this analogy are found in documents directed not to scholars but to clerics and lay members of Anglican dioceses and congregations in the American and Canadian Anglican Churches. The first is from The Episcopal Church’s website, *The Episcopal Church: An Episcopal Dictionary of the Church*, “Glossary A-Z: Authority, Sources of (in Anglicanism),” (unpublished definition, unpublished date), <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/library/glossary/authority-sources-anglicanism>, (accessed December 3, 2018). The second is from the Anglican Church of Canada’s website: John Thorp, “Making the Case: The Blessing of Same Sex Unions in the Anglican Church of Canada” (unpublished essay, May 2007): 1-2, <https://www.anglican.ca/wp-content/uploads/2010/10/Making-the-Case-Thorp.pdf> (accessed December 3, 2018).

passage is assumed to be the warrant for the ill-conceived twentieth-century suggestion of the three-legged stool:

Be it in matter of one kinde [matter of order] or of the other [articles concerning doctrine], what scripture doth plainlie deliver, to that the first place of creditt and obedience is due; the next whereunto is whatsoever anie man can necessarelie conclude by force of reason; after these the voice of the Church succeedeth. That which the Church by her ecclesiasticall authority shall probablie thinke and define to be true or good, must in congruite of reason overrule all other inferior judgments whatsoever.”²⁰³

According to this misapplied analogy, Hooker purportedly locates authority respectively with the “three legs” of Scripture, tradition, and reason. For some interpreters of Hooker, the “legs” are of equal length but operationally independent of one another. For others, the “legs” are of unequal length in accordance with the longest having respective primacy over the others. The analogy errs in two ways. First, Hooker does not actually refer to Scripture, tradition or reason as a linked triad. Tradition was understood as a “merely human” tool that ought not to have independent authority along side Scripture (*Lawes* I.13.2; II.14.5; II.8.7). Instead, Hooker does refer to “long received custome,” which he considers important for consideration, but not the final arbiter for determination of truth. This is an important point to which Chillingworth will refer directly as we shall see in chapter 3.

Second, even if Hooker gives high value to reason (*Lawes* I.8), this does not imply a completely autonomous capacity as might be the case for later rationalists. There is for Hooker a co-dependence between reason and revelation:

[W]e have endeavoured to make it appeare how in the nature of reason it selfe

²⁰³ Hooker, *Lawes* II.39.7-14

there is no impediment, but that the selfe same Spirit, which revealeth the things that god hath set down in his law, may also be thought to aid and direct men in finding out by the light of reason what laws are expedient to be made for the guiding of his Church, over and besides them that are in Scripture.²⁰⁴

What Hooker seems to imply here are that there are limits imposed by the interrelationship between the laws themselves and the place of scripture, inherited customs, and reason as components of the laws that govern creation. Such an anachronism (as we have just seen in the former section and as we will see again in the seventeenth century) could be used to justify an argument that one “leg” is the legitimate source of authority from which to derive moral laws or rules of action. Second, losing sight of the way in which the framework of laws is bound to God in and through Christ could imply a pretended capacity to shift priority between independently functioning “legs” of the stool. This could give a basis for an individual (or groups of individuals) to use nature, history, or science as referential independently of the others’ subjection to the interrelationship of laws. This could in turn create a sort of epistemologically imagined conflation between God and his creation, in which an individual becomes responsible for determining what is true of himself and before God.

Indeed, to assume this popular notion of Hooker’s work is to fail to appreciate his attempt to respond to and resolve precisely the tensions that mounted during the sixteenth century. These tensions arose in the aftermath of the Church’s division with respect to the loci and legitimacy of various sources of authority in forming people in the Christian faith. The *adiaphora* of Erasmus’s theology, adapted by both Luther and Calvin, proved difficult to sustain in the wake of the Church’s division. And as we will see in chapter

²⁰⁴ Hooker, *Laws* III.8.18

two, exacerbated by this ecclesiastical and civil breakdown, the confusion about the role and place of *adiaphora*, and how they pertained to both Scripture and ecclesiastical authority, prompted many conformists and non-conformists to seek a common referent for anchoring Christian formation in a variety of contested ways.

Hooker's primary task was not to delineate or prioritize the respective roles of Scripture, received custom of interpretation, and reason in forming knowledge of God. As indicated, Hooker did not understand reason to operate independently of revelation and of the English Church's discernment, and potentially in contradiction to civilly and ecclesiastically given positive laws.²⁰⁵ Nor was he arguing that Scripture alone could provide the basis for determining how to order common Christian life using a basic framework of essentials while maintaining all else was *adiaphora*. Finally, he was not rigid in conformity to any received custom of practice or of interpretation of Scripture, as if what was inherited should not be reconsidered in light of present circumstances. Instead, Hooker's task was to articulate the means by which God formed his people by a type of comprehension. Those means were a framework of laws given in Christ and brought to effect by God through people's engagement in a common ecclesiastical life of worship and prayer, and through common civic life.

Like both Luther and Calvin before him, Hooker held that Scripture, alongside divinely ordered laws, including the use of human reason, were all together, critical for assessing given evidence in discerning the truth in matters *adiaphora* to salvation, but

²⁰⁵ Such a conclusion would propose Hooker to have followed in the footsteps of many followers of both Luther and Calvin, prioritizing one source of authority over another. Instead he argues that together, they are interwoven laws or mechanisms that operate to bind decision-making to limited deliberation within a socially defined arena.

critical to the social and moral life of a nation. Nigel Voak argues that, “It is true that Reformers like Calvin distinguished the internal witness of the Holy Spirit authenticating Holy Scripture (the subjective evidence) from the ratiocinative analysis of the marks of Scripture proving that Scripture is the Word of God (the objective evidence). Only the former, they believed, was able genuinely to authenticate Holy Scripture and offer faith the infallible certainty it requires, leaving the latter providing ancillary, albeit still important, evidence for the faithful.” As indicated earlier in the chapter, Voak, consistent with Littlejohn’s observation, notes that it was not Luther and Calvin themselves, but, “subsequent Reformed orthodoxy [which] put increasing emphasis upon the ratiocinative evidence proving that Scripture is the Word of God and indeed earlier reformers like Calvin and Luther for that matter, were far from denying the value of reason in religion, especially as regards Scriptural interpretation and theological debate.”²⁰⁶. Hooker –

²⁰⁶ Nigel Voak, “Richard Hooker and the Principle of *Sola Scriptura*,” *Journal of Theological Studies*, 59 pt. 1, (April 2008): 96-139, 98; In his argument here, Voak follows the work of Richard A. Muller, on the distinction between objective and subjective evidence (see: Richard A. Muller, *Post Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 4 vols. (vols. 1 and 2, 2nd edition) (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), and specifically Vol II, 78, 128, 256. Voak argues, still following Muller, that Hooker retains his Reformed credentials if in fact one excludes from the Reformed fold, more extreme Puritans like Cartwright. He argues that Hooker believed that Holy Scripture (divine law/revelation) “contains the axioms or principles of revealed truth which cannot be ascertained by reason alone.” Also, with the Reformed tradition (and as we shall see Chillingworth argue against his Catholic interlocutor, Knott), he held that “Holy Scripture is not authenticated by the Church, although the Church does have an instrumental role in bringing people to the faith and to accept Scripture’s authority.” In a critical distinction from later rationalist thinkers, Voak points out that in Book III of the *Lawes*, Hooker clearly affirmed that reason could not operate in the reception of grace and validation of Scripture apart from the Holy Spirit. He cites the following from Hooker, ‘I must ... not be understood ... [to be claiming that reason applied to divine things can occur] without the aide and assistance of Gods most blessed spirite’ (Hooker, *Lawes* I.234.31-235-2). Voak next argues that with respect to reason, Hooker is again consistent with Reformed doctrine where those things necessary for salvation are explicitly stated in Scripture, whereas doctrines like the Trinity and infant baptism can only be worked out through “deduction involv[ing] the use of reason.” Finally, with respect to Holy Scripture’s authentication, Voak demonstrates that Hooker, as will Chillingworth after him, departs from traditional Reformed doctrine when Hooker claims that although Scripture contains all things necessary to salvation, it cannot actually verify itself as divine for people. Scripture is reliant therefore, on other created aspects of life, ordered to and by God, including things like the exercise of reason, Church practices, governance, etc (see especially Hooker, *Lawes* I.153.13-25. Interestingly, on page 131, Voak contends that Scripture is authenticated through ‘a demonstration sound and infallible’ which he takes directly from Hooker’s own writings. He concludes that while Hooker doesn’t try to advance this argument in surviving works, “one may

against the claims of some of these later reformed voices, like that of Cartwright, who claimed that Scripture must explicitly indicate something to be indifferent if it is *permitted* to be indifferent – argues that the epistemological basis for *adiaphora* is actually in Scripture’s not setting down something as necessary to salvation:

Now in things although not commanded of God, yet lawfull because they are permitted, the question is, what light shall shew us the conveniencie which one hath above another. For answere, their final determination is that *whereas the Heathen did send men for the difference of good and evill to the light of reason, in such things the Apostle sendeth us to the schoole of Christ in his word, which only is able through faith to give us assurance and resolution of our doings.*²⁰⁷

But Hooker replies, “it is not the Scriptures setting downe such things as indifferent, but their not setting downe as necessarie that doth make them to be indifferent” (*Lawes*, II.4.3). The issue at stake here is whether one sins by choosing amongst things determined to be indifferent, when the direction comes from a source (reason, tradition, positive law, for example), other than Scripture. So Hooker writes:

Wherefore seeing that in all these severall kindes of actions there can bee nothing possible evill which God approveth; and that he approveth much more than he doth command; and that his very commandements in some kind, as namely his precepts comprehended in the lawe of nature, may otherwise knowne then onely by scripture; and that to do them, howsoever we know them, must needes be acceptable in his sight: let them with whom we have hitherto disputed [extreme Puritans] wel, how it can stand with reason to make the bare mandate of sacred scripture the onely rule of all good and evill in the actions of mortall men.²⁰⁸

And so, continues Hooker,

observe that like all infallible demonstrations, it would need to rely on completely certain first principles.” This is a critical observation because as we shall see in chapter 4, this is precisely the tactic Wilkins uses to provide such authentication to Scripture (Voak, 122-131)

²⁰⁷ Hooker, *Lawes* II.4.5.

²⁰⁸ Hooker, *Lawes* II.8.5-6.

Nor let any man thinke, that following the judgment of naturall discretion in such cases [those things not laid down as necessary in Scripture], we can have no assurance that we please God. For to the author and God of our nature, how shall any operation proceeding in naturall sort be in that respect unacceptable.²⁰⁹

How can reason operating independently of Scripture be pleasing to God? Does Scriptural silence (for example on the particularity of ecclesiastical polity [*Lawes* III.2.21]), imply that God is morally indifferent and therefore that human beings might be as well? Hooker indicates that neither God or human beings ought to be indifferent: “All actions of men endued with the use of reason are generallie eyther good or evill,” and “the judgement of naturall discretion,” that is, of reason, is capable of judging moral action. Hooker maintains that this is because human nature does not operate independently of laws that order creation, of which Scripture is one part. These laws *together* are given by God to “work by,” such that “he cannot but be delighted with, when we exercise the same any way without commaundement of his to the contrarie (*Lawes* II.4.5).

Hooker, following Erasmus’s own logic, continues by arguing that if in fact God, in revealing himself in Christ, had abrogated the law of nature, then human beings would be left with scripture being “but a snare and a torment to weak consciences, filling them with infinite perplexities, scrupulosities, doubts insoluable and extreme despaires.”²¹⁰ How, he asks, could God overthrow the law of nature when he wrote it upon the hearts of human beings as an “infallible knowledge imprinted in the minds of all the children of men, which by both general principles for directing humaine actions are comprehended

²⁰⁹ Hooker, *Lawes* II.4.5.

²¹⁰ Hooker, *Lawes* II.8.6.

and conclusions derived from them?”²¹¹ Would abrogation not imply an arbitrary will in God himself, or that God is in fact mutable – not, as Hooker lays out in Book I, an ordered Law “unto himself”? Hooker thinks this is an untenable theological position. God is neither inconsistent or mutable, since as Hooker asserts, “the being of God is a kinde of lawe to his working; for that perfection which God is, geveth perfection to that he doth.”²¹²

As Littlejohn demonstrates, as soon as Reformers won the freedom of Christian conscience from the fear of damnation, they entered into a new battle trying to hold together the freedom in justification and the competing views of how the faith was taught

²¹¹ Hooker, *Lawes* II.8.5.

²¹² Hooker, *Lawes* I.2.2. Hooker indirectly addresses here the skepticism about the valid origin of knowledge arising in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century humanist critiques of Aristotelian-derived scholastic arguments. In an essay examining the development of theories of knowledge in the late medieval and early modern period, Richard Popkin suggests that the humanist critique of scholastic theory was not a systematic philosophical attack, but rather “a pointing to other sorts of knowledge [beyond Aristotle’s] to be found in the classical world in writers like Cicero and other Latin sages and in Greek philosophers and moralists” (Richard Popkin, “Problems of Knowledge and Action: Theories of knowledge,” in *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy*, ed., C.B. Schmitt, Quentin Skinner, Eckhard Kessler, and Jill Kraye (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 672. In the chapter, Popkin points out that humanists were concerned to demonstrate the inadequacy of Aristotelian methodology for discovering new knowledge, which they concluded was “an abstruse, artificial and abstract way of manipulating ideas and symbols that led to neither concrete nor genuine knowledge.” It could not account for the discovery of empirical facts and practical considerations that have moral considerations for both the individual and for society (Popkin, “Problems of Knowledge and Action: Theories of Knowledge,” 672). These debates of the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries took concrete form with the division in the Church, where the authority for determining what institutions had valid jurisdiction in forming people in the faith was in question. The syllogistic reasoning of Aristotelian/scholastic methodology was ineffective when the question surrounded the origin of authority for providing limits to truth claims and to formation in the truth. Following the humanist response, Hooker seeks to establish that reason, bound to and within a framework of laws, was divinely given and ordered, and thereby was a valid means of obtaining knowledge through deliberation aimed at discovering the most probable or most useful knowledge (Popkin, 673). Reason is not an independent agency ordered to a natural end for Hooker. Nor was it so marred by the fall as to have no place in coming to know God. For Hooker, reason was an intrinsic capacity of human beings given for the purpose of deliberation about phenomena. These phenomena serve as signs that are themselves ordered to God, who can in turn provide the knowledge necessary to act toward the supernatural good to which one is naturally inclined.

and therefore who ought to have authority.²¹³ Given the contestations of mid-sixteenth century Europe and England in particular, what are we to make of the relationship between moral direction, nature, and Scripture with respect to a source of authority? In contrast to the Puritan belief that all moral guidance could be determined in Scripture, Hooker argues that such direction is simply not always apparent, or is potentially not even given. This does not leave a person without moral direction, however:

All actions of men endued with the use of reason are generallie eyther good or evill ... Wherefore the naturall measure wherby to judge our doings, is the sentence of reason, determining and setting downe what is good to be done. Which sentence is either mandatory, shewing what must be doone; or els permissive, declaring onely what may bee done; or thirdly admonitorie, opening what is the most convenient for us to doe.²¹⁴

To summarize Littlejohn's assessment, the first of these statements operates when there is absolute good on one side, evil on the other; the second when, among diverse evils, we must choose the least of these; the third when, among diverse goods, we must choose which is best.²¹⁵ Although this realm of moral reasoning (in things *adiaphora*, with respect to salvation) is not detached from Scripture, and although Scripture itself "is fraught even with the lawes of nature," the natural law does not derive its authority and thereby its directives from Scripture. Instead, the authority for these moral directives, derived as they are from nature, take their authority directly from God on this basis of his having created all things.

²¹³ Littlejohn, "Freedom of a Christian Commonwealth: Richard Hooker and the Problem of Christian Liberty," chs. 4-6, 102-202.

²¹⁴ Hooker, *Lawes* I.8.8.

²¹⁵ Littlejohn, "Freedom of a Christian Commonwealth: Richard Hooker and the Problem of Christian Liberty," 161-202.

To affirm this is not to deny that Scripture provides the sole basis for knowledge in the soteriological realm, as Hooker clarifies:

Some things in such sorte are allowed that they be also required as necessarie unto salvation, by way of direct immediate and proper necessitie finall, so that without performance of them we cannot by ordinarie course be saved, nor by any means be excluded from life observing them. In actions of this kinde our chiefest direction is from scripture, for *nature is no sufficient teacher what we shoulde doe that we may attaine unto life everlasting.*²¹⁶

Instead, Hooker seeks to demarcate what is essential to salvation – *sola fide*, faith in Christ, by which a Christian is justified – from what is morally fitting with the end for which one was made: communion with God. Therefore, for Hooker reason does not operate independently of Scripture, as the analogy of the “stool” might establish. Instead, the law of nature, and the exercise of reason therein, gains authority as a source of knowledge of God not from Scripture itself, but by virtue of their operating *together* within a web of interwoven laws, as described above. By these God has ordered creation to him as the proper end of all things.

Still, one might raise the question: if all that is ultimately necessary for salvation is a *sola fide* belief in God revealed in Christ Jesus, does this not relativize the rest of Scripture? Might this not, as the Puritans seemed to worry, leave its moral directions solely to one’s discretion, diminishing the authority of God and potentially returning Christians to being misled by an errant Church? Hooker spends significant time engaging the Puritans’ attempt to give Scripture much broader authoritative scope than he is willing to admit is possible. He counters by demonstrating how, within a framework of laws ordering creation, the notion of *adiaphora* could be applied.

²¹⁶ Hooker, *Laws* II.8.3.

Having established that “all actions of men indued with the use of reason are generally either good or evil,” he proceeds to outline three different kinds of morally good action. First, where all things are either good or evil, some are also morally unimportant. Since these last are *adiaphora* both in terms of their epistemological sense and in terms of their soteriological effect, these fall utterly within the realm of natural reason with respect to discernment: “Some things are good, yet in so meane a degree of goodnes, that men are only not disproved or disallowed of God for them. . . . In actions of this sorte the very light of nature alone may discover that which is so far forth in the sight of God allowable.”²¹⁷

On the other extreme, as we have already encountered, “some thinges in such sorte are allowed that they be also required as necessarie unto salvation . . . so that without performance of them we cannot by ordinarie course be saved.”²¹⁸ Here it is Scripture alone that can provide direction in obtaining salvation. Nothing, in this case, falls into any category of *adiaphora*.

But in between these two there are things that we find in life, or in Scripture, for which we cannot find clear (perspicuous) direction. While doing or not doing them will not lead to damnation, doing or not doing them has moral implication both with respect to our relationship with those in society, and within our own sanctification (formation in and to Christ):

²¹⁷ Hooker, *Lawes* II.8.2.

²¹⁸ Hooker, *Lawes* II.8.3.

Finally some things although not so required of necessitie that to leave them undone excludeth from salvation, are notwithstanding of so great dignitie and acceptation with God, that most ample reward in heaven is laid up for them. [As an example, he gives the sharing of possessions in Acts 2-4.] Hereof wee have no commandement either in nature or scripture which doth exact them at our handes: yet those motives there are in both which drawe most effectually our mindes unto them.²¹⁹

Returning to our anachronistic analogy, it might be presumed that the “leg” of Scripture has a prioritized role, in that for Hooker, it is the sole (and sufficient) means by which we can determine what is necessary for salvation (the proper end for which human beings are created). Reason has no role or very little role in obtaining such knowledge. This is a point that will have substantial significance for Chillingworth, whose work we shall examine in chapter three, and in a different vein for Wilkins and Watts as well. The “three-legged stool” analogy, however, does not adequately account for the importance of natural or positive laws that Hooker cites as having authority from God in directing one’s moral choices. As indicated above, for Hooker, the authority in obeying these laws, and the preservation of human freedom, has to do with the way in which Hooker establishes his framework of laws most centrally in God himself. As God willingly submits himself to his own eternal law, so the perfection of all creatures and that of their freedom is found in their willing discernment and submission to the laws God has made to govern his creation and to draw it to him.

Littlejohn notes that there are many things to be discovered in nature that are useful for ordering the Church and one’s own life, but for which Scripture provides little

²¹⁹ Hooker, *Laws* II.8.4.

to no direction. Even when it does so, it is not in a way that is universally binding.²²⁰ And this is so because natural law and the positive laws that grow from reasoning about nature are given by God, as providing “an infallible knowledge imprinted in the mindes of all the children of men, whereby both generall principles for directing of humaine actions are comprehended, and conclusions derived from them, upon which conclusions groweth in particularitie the choise of good and evill in the daylie affaires of this life.”²²¹ While these may or may not be found within Scripture, Scripture does not necessarily provide the sort of specificity of enduring moral rule that the Puritans attempted to derive. In such cases, Scripture can alert us if reason has led us astray, but it will not always provide us with an obvious answer.

What we have witnessed above is a twofold move made by Hooker. First, he wishes to return to Luther’s and to Calvin’s premise that we are set free from fear with respect to justification. Second, far from making Scripture either a document containing a few essentials while making the rest superfluous, or turning Scripture into a book of prescriptive, universal rules – propositions – Hooker avers that Scripture instead provides an arena filled with divine wisdom through which God provides for discerning a way of acting morally in contingent circumstances. Although certainly not pietistic, and though far more elaborate than Erasmus’s, Hooker’s type of comprehension shares Erasmus’s impetus to form persons in the contingent circumstances of life, to render them capable of making decisions consistent with the truth of God’s revelation in Christ.

²²⁰ Littlejohn, “Freedom of a Christian Commonwealth: Richard Hooker and the Problem of Christian Liberty,” 102-124; 161-202.

²²¹ Hooker, *Laws* II.8.6.

With respect to salvation, Scripture is perspicuous. Beyond this, however, we cannot expect a necessarily clear answer to the questions we bring to Scripture. Therefore, we must be willing to engage it with patience and perseverance, and most of all with faith over time in the common discernment of the Church. By grace we can allow our rational discernment of the natural law to guide us, since it does not operate outside God's creative ordering of it. Therefore Scripture, nature, and human reason do not and cannot act as independent sources of authority, since God has not created these in such a way that they would confound human beings in their pursuit of him. Hooker argues:

We see therefore that our soveraigne good is desired naturally; that God the author of that naturall desire had appointed naturall meanes whereby to fulfill it; that man having utterly disabled his nature unto those meanes hath had other revealed from God, and hath received from heaven a lawe to teach him how that which is desired naturally must now supernaturally be attained; finallie we see that because those later exclude not the former quite and cleane as unnecessarie, therefore together with such supernaturall duties as could not possiblie have bene otherwise knowne to the worlde, the same law that teacheth them, teacheth also with them such naturall duties as coulde not by light of nature easilie have bene knowne²²²

This means seeking out the meaning and implications of Scripture through a process of moral reasoning, rather than excising the “witness” God has embedded in the laws of nature and treating Scripture merely as a moral rulebook of divine commands.

Hooker's theology of the laws that govern creation does not provide an individual with the *adiaphora* grounds to invent his her own rules, or to co-opt Scripture into justifying her own ideological rendering of them. Instead, Hooker's careful parsing of how the concept of *adiaphora* ought to be applied serves as a rhetorical and logical basis calling Christians to exercise wisdom in judgment, even if that judgment often fails on

²²² Hooker, *Laws* I.12.3.

account of its contingency. This is an important point to keep in mind, as we shall find it reoccur repeatedly in Chillingworth's own work: the fact that many things are soteriologically *adiaphorous* does not mean they are unimportant for the good ordering of our lives or societies to their proper end in God. Freedom from the fear that one's moral actions are insufficient to obtain salvation (whether drawn from received custom or from Scripture) enables one to seek God with humility, recognizing the provisionality of human circumstances and the fallibility with which all human beings seek God in sometimes contradictory ways.²²³ This approach, in a sense, hearkens to the original vision of *adiaphora* developed by Erasmus.

Using logic and rhetoric, Hooker argues that the extremes of both Roman Catholic dogmatic infallibility and Puritan claims to Scriptural infallibility impose false human authority on God's actual design for his creation. In this design, all parts of creation are brought to their proper end in God through the operation of a web of interwoven laws. Hooker follows Augustine's and Erasmus's premise that, freed from a burden of fear concerning one's salvation, one is actually set free to *seek* the good of his neighbor, even in the midst of finitude and sin and a fallible Church and a fallible government.

Forming the People of the Commonwealth in the Christian Faith

During Hooker's lifetime, Luther's and Calvin's arguments had been and continued to be taken in directions that created tension with respect to the source of authority and

²²³ Williams, *Anglican Identities*, 43-56.

discipline in ordering the Church and its teachings. Hooker remained consistent with the Reformers' teaching in protecting the role of reason in the discernment of Scripture and of the moral life, and thus in formation in the faith. However, like the Reformers' arguments, Hooker's own argument was also liable to placing rational authority into the hands of a ruling sovereign, thus undermining the evangelical freedom proposed by Luther and Calvin. Mark Perrot argues that "The problem for Hooker was that since he claimed the Church laws were grounded on reason, his own argument allowed for the possibility of minority groups putting forward alternative suggestions to existing legislation on the basis of the same rational authority."²²⁴ Hooker's response was, as Daniel Eppley argues, an attempt to limit "the subversive potential of such reliance on reason by subordinating subjective, private judgments of what is 'reasonable' to public determinations."²²⁵

Eppley's use of the term "public determinations" implies a theory of consent as briefly discussed in the introductory chapter. There has been much debate about Hooker's own theory of consent, which is beyond the scope of the present work.²²⁶ The central issue of contention was whether authority could be derived immediately by the divine appointment of God, or whether it flowed from human laws developed from the

²²⁴ Mark Perrot, *The Problem of Authority in the Elizabethan Church* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2003), 54.

²²⁵ Daniel Eppley, *Defending Royal Supremacy and Discerning God's Will in Tudor England*. St. Andrew's Studies in Reformation (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2007).

²²⁶ See for example Alexander Rosenthal's *Crown Under Law: Richard Hooker, John Locke, and the Ascent of Modern Constitutionalism* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008); Eppley, *Defending Royal Supremacy and Discerning God's Will in Tudor England* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2007).

light of nature, with God's approval by virtue of his goodness and wisdom.²²⁷

In proposing a theory of consent, Hooker followed and yet adapted a conciliar approach to authority similar to that of Nicholas of Cusa (Cusanus), as described in the latter's *Catholic Concordance*.²²⁸ Cusanus had argued that the "divine harmony of the Church" flows from Christ, the "one King of Peace with infinite concordance," wherein a "sweet spiritual harmony of agreement emanates in successive degrees to all its members who are subordinated and united to him."²²⁹ Cusanus, like Hooker, presumed metaphysical laws originating in and with God and underpinning the created order of the world. From this order, human beings "by instinct" (natural inclination or desire would be appropriate terms for both Hooker and Cusanus) adopted laws to preserve and "improve human life":

It was clear [from nature] that by a marvelous and beneficent divine law infused in all men, they knew that associating together would be most beneficial to them and that social life would be maintained by laws adopted with the common consent of all – or at the least with the consent of the wise and illustrious and the agreement of the others ... so also when by common consent matters are discussed that concern the preservation of the commonwealth, the majority of the populace, citizens or illustrious men will not depart from the right way appropriate to the time. Otherwise it would happen that a natural appetite would be frustrated in many cases ... for we see that man is a political and civic animal naturally inclined to civilized life ... [and thus] Almighty God has assigned a certain natural servitude to the ignorant and stupid so that they readily trust the wise to help them

²²⁷ W.D.J. Cargill Thompson, 'The Philosopher of the "Politic Society": Richard Hooker as a political thinker,' *Studies in Richard Hooker: Essays Preliminary to an Edition of his Works*, in W Speed Hill, ed. (Cleveland, OH: The Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1972), 3-76.

²²⁸ Nicholas of Cusa, *The Catholic Concordance*, ed., Paul E. Sigmund (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

²²⁹ Nicholas of Cusa, *The Catholic Concordance*, Book I, p. 5.

preserve themselves”²³⁰

Following a scheme of Platonic emanation (more explicitly developed than Erasmus’s), Cusanus maintained that consent to authority by way of reasoning was legitimate. The contrary, proceeding on the basis of one’s own will, could not but “frustrate” the harmonious order of creation God had given through Christ in both his Church and in the commonwealth. And in frustrating that order, so too would an individual find herself subject to confusion arising from an appetite not directed by such laws to their proper end, given in God and discovered in created order. Hooker takes a similar position when he argues:

The laws which have bene hitherto mentioned [eternal, divine (scriptural) natural and positive], do bind men absolutely, even as they are men, although they have never any settled fellowship, never any solemne agreement amongst themselves what to do, or not to do. But for as much as we are not by our selves sufficient to furnish ourselves with competent store of things needful for such a life as our nature doth [innately] desire, a life fit for the dignitie of man: therefore to supply those defects and imperfections, which are in us living, single and solelie by our selves, we are naturally induced to seeke communion and fellowship with others. This was the cause of mens uniting themselves at the first in politique societies, which socieites could not be without government, nor government without a distinct kind of law from which hath bene alreadie declared.”²³¹

Laws governing the “common weale” or commonwealth are necessary in order that human beings in their state of sin, having “deprived minde[s]” because of their “deprived nature[s],” might be restrained from being a “hindrance unto the common good for which

²³⁰ Nicholas of Cusa, *The Catholic Concordance*, Book I, p. 205-6.

²³¹ Hooker, *Laws* I.10.I.

societies are instituted.”²³² Owing both to human finitude and the compromised state of human nature on account of sin, the commonwealth or civil society serves as a natural means by which to limit or at the least call persons to account for sinful acts. And that society, at least in England, is something already given and therefore received by each member of the nation with the monarch as its head:

Where the people are in no subjection but such as willingly themselves have condescended unto for their own most behoof and securitie. In Kingdoms therefore of this qualitie the highest Governour hath indeed universall dominion, but with dependence upon that whole entier body over the severall partes whereof he hath dominion so that it standeth for an axiome in this case, The King is *major singulis universis minor*.²³³

Hooker differs from Cusanus in placing the requirement for consent into the hands of the King, rather than into the hands of the pope. For Hooker, political bodies are trans-generational and therefore consent does not have to be obtained with each new ruler. Instead, “the cause of dependencie is in that first originall conveyance.”²³⁴ On the one

²³² Hooker, *Lawes* I.10.1. Hooker’s explicit notion of the laws of restraint here is important for our consideration of both Chillingworth’s and Hobbes’s conviction that governing laws ought to be established specifically to restrain the will of human beings. Hooker assumes, in keeping with an Augustinian and Reformed understanding of sin’s effect on both individuals and on nature itself, that coming to know God as one’s proper end is not an exercise in self-actualization or progress, but actually necessitates self-limitation and social limitation. Hooker writes, “Lawes politique, ordained for externall order and regiment amongst men, are never framed as they should be, unlesse presuming the will of man to be inwardly obstinate, rebellious, and averse from all obedience unto the sacred laws of his nature; in a word, unlesse presuming man to be in regard of his depraved minde little better then a wilde beast, they do accordingly provide notwithstanding so to frame his outward actions, that they be no hindrance unto the common good for which societies are instituted: unlesse the doe this, they are not perfect” (*Lawes*, I.10.1). Hooker will go on to address how it is that human beings can determine how to establish laws that govern a society, when all of nature is fallen. Chillingworth will adapt this insight from Hooker to his particular context, in which the authority for setting and enacting limitations (the Church primarily) has become a locus of contention and zealous contestation, in contradiction to the capacity to limit the effects of sin. So also does Hobbes take this approach in his *Leviathan*, again, because the Church in its divisions cannot enact such limitations without encouraging further divisions and – as occurs in the fourth decade of the seventeenth century – violence.

²³³ Hooker, *Lawes* VIII.3.2.

²³⁴ Hooker, *Lawes* VIII.3.2.

hand then, consent to what has been handed on through time in the Church is the starting place and is presumed in discernment as it was for Erasmus. On the other hand, Hooker also believes that in England, Parliament and Convocation serve as mechanisms of discernment for the ongoing expression of consent in the present.

As in parliaments, councels, and the like assemblies, although we be not personallie ourselves present, notwithstanding our assent is by reason of others agents there in our behalf. And what we do by others no reason but that it should stand as our deed, no lesse effectually to binde us then if ourselves had done it in person.²³⁵

When, like Cusanus, Hooker argues that laws must be made by wise men, he qualifies this statement, arguing that laws “do not take their constraining force from the qualitie of such as devise them, but from that power which doth geve them the strength of lawes.”²³⁶ What gives laws their power and validity is not simply their corporate rationality or the wisdom of tradition, but rather the moral agency of members of a commonwealth through authorized representatives.²³⁷

This does not mean that laws *cannot* be overturned. It means that overturning a law legitimately requires the same exercise of corporate agency that created it, and cannot, as posited by Puritans, be overturned or evaded by the dissent of individual members of a commonwealth, no matter how numerous: “Lawes that have bene approved may be (no man doubteth) again repealed, and to that end also disputed against by the authors therof themselves. But this is when the whole doth deliberate what lawes each part shal observe and not when a part refuseth the lawes which the whole hath orderly

²³⁵ Hooker, *Lawes* I.10.8.

²³⁶ Hooker, *Lawes* I.10.8.

²³⁷ Hooker, *Lawes* VIII.

agreed upon.”²³⁸

How then is the freedom of the human will preserved? As with Cusanus, Hooker presumes the validity of authority exercised in this way on the basis of its conformity to the framework of laws by which God has ordered his creation. Hooker argues that God, as law unto himself, is free; yet he is also bound to his eternal law, since this is the most perfect expression of himself and of rationality mirrored in the laws by which he has ordered all of creation. Thus human beings remain free even as they are bound by law, since this law is the perfection of a person’s own rational action. Put another way, obedience to the laws governing society and the Church, for Hooker, implies obedience to one’s own self:

[It is] unmeet that laws which being once solemnly established, are to exact obedience of all men and to constraine thereunto, should so far stoupe as to hold themselves in suspence from taking any effect upon you, till some disputer can perswade you to be obedient. A lawe is the deed of the whole bodie politike, whereof if ye judge your selves to be any part, then is the law even your deed also.²³⁹

Hooker’s purpose in the *Lawes* is to demonstrate that obedience to the laws of the King and the commonwealth, and to the Church of which the monarch is head, do not inhibit the freedom of having been justified by God articulated by the Reformers, as was feared by Puritans. An individual’s Christian liberty – specifically, that of willing submission – is preserved specifically because submission to such laws is a self-preserving act. Not only this, but it is an act by which one is sanctified or edified, as one comes to know through experience who God is (insofar as creatures can know) by how the world has

²³⁸ Hooker, *Lawes* Pref., 5.2).

²³⁹ Hooker, *Lawes* Pref., 5.2.

been ordered by him.

Hooker assumes, as do Erasmus and Cusanus before him, that God's laws are embodied in all levels of governance. In England, at least in the sixteenth century, this governing authority was located specifically in the king's office, and under him in the authority of the parliament, which, ordered by the law of charity, was granted for the building up of the nation of England. As such, those in leadership under the King (both in parliament and Church), are to be signs of God himself in their persons and in their respective offices, which they exercise through determining, implementing, upholding, and adapting laws to direct all people to their proper end in God. Hooker writes:

Wee agree that pure and unstained religion ought to be the highest of all cares apperteyninge to publique regiment: as well in regarde of that aide and protection, which they, who faithfullie serve God, confesse they receive at his mercifull hands; as also for the force which religion hath, to qualifie all sortes of men, and to make them in publique affaires the more serviceable, governors the apter to rule with conscience, inferiors for conscience sake the willinger to obey ... For if the coorse of politique affaires cannot in any good sorte goe forward without fit instruments, and that which fitteth them be their virtues, let politie acknowledge it selfe indebted to religion, godliness beinge the cheifest top and welspringe of all true virtues, even as God is of all good thinges. So natural is the union of Religion with Justice, that wee may boldlie denie there is either, where both are not. For how should they be unfainedly just, whom religion doth not cause to be such; or they religious who are not founde such by the prooffe of their just actions? If they, which employ their labour and travaile, about the publique administration of justice, followe it only as a trade, with unquenchable and unconscionable thirst of gaine, being not in harte perswaded that justice is Godes own worke, and themselves his agentes in this busines, the sentence of right Godes own verdict, and them selves his priests to deliver it; formalities of justice doe but serve to smother right, and that, which was necessarilie ordained for the common good, is through shamefull abuse made the cause of common miserie. The same pietie, which maketh them that are in authoritie desirous to please and resemble God by justice, inflameth everie way men of action with zeale to doe good (as farre as their place will permitt) unto all.²⁴⁰

²⁴⁰ Hooker, *Lawes* V.I.2.

For Hooker, as for Erasmus and Cusanus, these socially embedded offices, roles, and laws, ordering the affairs of civic and ecclesiastical common life, are not merely a means of obtaining civil peace (as it will become in later centuries). The framework of offices, roles, and laws, is specifically an aid to sanctification and the building and extension of the Christian community. Hooker continues this notion of common formation – one that preserves obedience to God, to the civil and ecclesiastical authorities, as well as one’s freedom in justification – when he argues against the Puritans that obedience to the ceremonies of the Church of England is not an invention, but is in itself edifying:

First therefore to the end that their nature [the ceremonies of the Church of England] and the use whereunto they serve may plainly appeare, and so afterwards their qualitie the better be discerned, we are to note that in every graund or maine publique duty, which God requireth at the hands of his Church, there is, besides that matter and forme wherein the essence thereof consisteth, a certaine outward fashion whereby the same is in decent sort administered.²⁴¹

Hooker first establishes that the matter of edifying people in the faith requires (from God) public gathering around visible symbols.

The substance of all Religious action is delivered from God him self in few words. For examples sake in the sacraments. *Unto the element let the word be added, and they both doe make a sacrament*, saith S. Augustine. Baptisme is given by the element of water, and that prescript forme of words which the Church of Christ doth use; the sacrament of the bodie and bloud of Christ is administered in the elements of bread and wine, if those mystelicall words be added thereunto. But the due and decent forme of administering those holy sacraments, doth require a great deale more. The end which is aimed at in setting downe the outward forme of all religious actions is the edification of the Church. Now men are edified, when either their understanding is taught somewhat whereof in such actions it behoveth all men to consider, or when their harts are moved with any affection suteable thereunto, when their minds are in any sorte stirred up unto

²⁴¹ Hooker, *Lawes* IV.1.2.

that reverence, devotion, attention and due regard, which in those cases seemeth requisite.²⁴²

And while particular words are given to us by God himself, particularly with respect to the sacraments of Eucharist and baptism, as Erasmus argues, more is required for these words to become edifying for Christians. Interestingly here, unlike Erasmus, Hooker imbues the ceremonies of the Church with formative capacity and therefore legitimate reason for obedience to Church requirements for using them. We know this in part because throughout history, we find the means of edification to have taken a universal approach through appeal to the physical senses such as sight, touch, and taste; and so too then have Christians taken this approach:

From hence have risen not onely a number of prayers, readings, questionings, exhortings, but even of visible signes also, which being used in performance of holy actions, are undoubtedly most effectual to open such matter, as men when they know and remember carefully, must needs be a great deal the better informed to what effect such duties serve. *We must not think but that there is some ground of reason even in nature, whereby it commeth to passe that no nation under heaven either doth or ever did suffer publique actions which are of waight whether they be civil and temporall or els spiritual and sacred, to passe without some visible solemnitie; the very strangeness whereof and difference from that which is common, doth cause popular eyes to observe and to marke the same.*²⁴³

Why have Christians appealed to the senses rather than simply to words? Hooker declares:

Wordes both because they are common, and doe not so stronglye move the phancie of man, are for the most parte but sleightlye heard: and therefore with singular wisdom it hath been provided that the deeds of

²⁴² Hooker, *Lawes* IV.1.2.

²⁴³ Hooker, *Lawes* IV.1.3 (italics mine).

men which are made in the presence of witnesses, should passe not onely with wordes but also with certaine sensible actions, the memory whereof is farre more easie and durable then the memorie of speech can be. *The things which so long experience of all ages hath confirmed and made profitable, let not us presume to condemne as follies and toyes, because wee sometimes knowe not the cause and reason of them.*

Once again, we see Hooker parallel Erasmus's argument that nature provides us with a correlation between words and things, but that words alone are not sufficient for conveying the truth. Truth must be embodied in physical and communal actions, relationships, and exchanges that are often made into shared ceremonies or practices.²⁴⁴

Finally, while participatory obedience to civil and ecclesiastical authorities is the means by which persons might be edified in the Christian faith, this should not be taken to mean that such ceremonies (the positive laws of Church order and worship) are immutable. It also does not imply, as the Puritans contested, that the Church ought to return to worshipping as did the Church of "Apostolic times." As indicated above, most laws are mutable, but changing them requires common consent for the sake of building up the people of God. Divisive rebellion and disobedience serve only to rend it asunder – an argument vigorously made by Erasmus against asserting certainty where it was not to

²⁴⁴ On the relationship between language, symbol and formation of a national character in England, see Cathy Shrank, *Writing the Nation in Reformation England 1530-1580*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), which traces the development of an English self-concept of nationhood. Shrank distinguishes what modern historians refer to as nationalism, using state power to achieve a nation's objectives, from national consciousness, where people of a "race, territory, or language, identify themselves as a group" (2). Shrank argues that language was one of the central features enabling the consolidation of a distinct identity in England, as its Church separated from the Roman Church. The development and enforcement of the use of common language in civil and religious life provided more than administrative convenience; it was understood to "express ... even shape national character" (16). Shrank demonstrates, over the course of her work, that the drive toward what she refers to as one "figurative" body – a people of common identity – works on an "oral as well as a semantic level ... knitting them into a seamless community of undifferentiated speakers." The often unique conceptual, geographic, cultural, demographic phenomena that language encodes and communicates is a means of creating a nation, "overriding issues of blood or longstanding alliances by its ability, practically and rhetorically, to gather potentially disparate groups into one cohesive national community, using and understanding one tongue" (17).

be found:

Our ende ought always to be the same, our waies and meanes thereunto not so. The glorie of God and the good of his Church was the thing which the Apostles aymed at, and therefore ought to bee the marke whereat we also level. But seeing those rites and orders may be at one time more, which at an other are lesse availeable unto that purpose: what reason is there in these thinges to urge the state of one onely age, as a patterne for all to followe?

Hooker delivers his final charge to the Puritans, whom he implies are in danger of trying to tear down through sin and violence the “Ecclesiasticall and Civill states” which God has sustained. It is not that these aspects of creation have sustained themselves or ever could, but rather that “heaven it selfe hath by this hand [Jesus Christ] sustained them” by enabling

the worke of reformation ... which [by] grace and favor of divine assistenace having not in one thing or two showed it selfe, nor for some dayes or yeares appeared, but in such sortee so long continued, our manifold sinnes and transgressions striving to the contrarie, what can we lesse thereupon conclude then that God would at leastwise by tract of time teach the world that thing which he blesseth, defendeth, keepeth so stranglie, cannot choose but be of him? Wherefore if any refuse to believe us disputing for the veritie of religion established, let them believe God himself thus myraculouslie working for it, and wish life even for ever and ever unto that glorious and sacred instrument [the Church] whereby he worketh.²⁴⁵

Grounded in the triune God, a “law unto himself,” the laws of Scripture as well as the natural and positive laws that order creation and every contingent event of history form a framework for the governance of civil and ecclesiastical common life. For Hooker, obedience to these laws, even as they change through time, is not simply political obedience; it is obedience foremost to one’s own self, one’s created end, and therefore it

²⁴⁵ Hooker, *Lawes* IV.14.7.

is a willing self-offering to God.

Proper Ends: Knowledge, Reason, Sin, the Commonwealth and the Role of Law

The Reformation debates about sin and human capacity necessarily involved examining what people could know about God and about how to act in accordance with God's law within the society they lived. This section demonstrates the way Hooker conceives of the possibilities and limits of human knowing; how consent mitigates the effects of both individual and collective fallibility in knowing; and finally, how this consent preserves common space necessary to direct toward God, the corporate decision-making about matters that affect all members of a society.

Hooker does not believe that knowledge is directly obtainable from objects, events, propositions, or rules without consideration and discernment. They are not directly or immanently knowable, primarily because objects of the will and of the appetite often create conflictual or at the least confused desires. This is on account of the finite nature of human life, and of sin, but also because nature itself is fallen. Nor does he hold that natural knowledge can provide knowledge of supernatural things or make one capable of being justified.

How is it that a human being can come to know something not apparent to the senses? Hooker contends that first, there must be an object (end) to be known; and secondarily, the person must desire to know it:

By reason man attaineth unto the knowledge of things that are and are not sensible. It resteth therefore that we search how man attaineth unto the knowledge of such things unsensible as are to be knowne that they

may be done. Seeing then that nothing can move unlesse there be some ende, the desire whereof provoketh unto motion; how should that divine power of the soule, that *Spirite of our mind* as the Apostle termeth it, ever stir it selfe unto action unlesse it have also the like spurre?”²⁴⁶

He continues that we are sometimes moved to work by perceiving goodness in the work itself while sometimes “that which we do is referred to a further end, without the desire whereof we would leave the same undone”²⁴⁷ What is essential is that one first perceive what one chooses as good: “And to will is to bend our soules to the having or doing of that which they see to be good.” One challenge for finite human beings consists in naturally arising objects of the appetite. These objects cause human responses that are beyond immediate control of a person’s use of reason, and thereby demand some form of reasoned assessment before one proceeds with a practical action. These cases include “whatsoever sensible good[s] may be wished for which are manifest in affections such as joy, grief, fear, and anger, which can arise or not arise quite beyond the immediate control of a person.”²⁴⁸ This is contrasted by Hooker with the object of the will, which is “that good which reason doth leade us to seeke.”²⁴⁹

Where “it is not altogether in our power, whether we will be stirred with affections or no . . . actions which issue from the disposition of the will are in the power therof to be performed or staid.”²⁵⁰ Therefore, both the appetite and the will ought to

²⁴⁶ Hooker, *Lawes* I.7.1.

²⁴⁷ Hooker, *Lawes* I.7.1.

²⁴⁸ Hooker, *Lawes* I.7.3.

²⁴⁹ Hooker, *Lawes* I.7.3.

²⁵⁰ Hooker, *Lawes* I.7.3.

operate together as a person decides what actions to undertake and learns from actions what “the good is.” Hooker writes, “Where understanding therefore needeth, in those things reason is the director of mans will by discovering in action what is good. For the laws of well doing are the dictates of right reason.”²⁵¹ Thus reason is a guide to performing good acts (those acts ordered to their proper end), when reason is formed by and bound to “the lawes of well doing.”

This raises the question of the role of sin in compromising the exercise of reason ordered to the good. Hooker argues that human beings will always desire that which is their highest good: “... as every thing naturally and necessarily doth desire the utmost good and greatest perfection, whereof nature hath made it capable, even so man. Our felicity therefore being the object and accomplishment of our desire, we cannot choose but wish and covet it.”²⁵² The first difficulty with the pursuit of that good is, as indicated, that all human beings have sinned through the sin of Adam.²⁵³ However, this individual good cannot – by virtue of the existence of other created things – be sought in isolation and must therefore be shaped and limited by the governed society within which one belongs as we have seen Hooker argue above.

Thus for Hooker, coming to know the good and act in accordance with it through the exercise of reason – bound to and *constrained* by laws – enables the refinement of knowledge necessary to act for the common good. This knowledge, however, is insufficient explicitly because it does not refer a person to the ultimate or highest good

²⁵¹ Hooker, *Lawes* I.7.4

²⁵² Hooker, *Lawes* I.8.1.

²⁵³ Hooker, *Lawes* I.9.1.

for which she longs, nor does it make her capable of performing the acts necessary to obtain that end. Sin and human finitude combine to prevent a person from abstaining from their appetitive desire and of directing their will in accordance with God's purposes.²⁵⁴

Hooker argued that even if all the perfections of this world were in the possession of one person, that person would still seek for something more perfect. And the thing sought is "the last and highest estate of perfection," which is "received of men in the nature of a reward." This reward must be for works that are themselves "rewardable." So the "natural meanes therefore unto blessedness are our workes," which are the only means of our salvation.²⁵⁵

As we've already confirmed, Hooker follows both Augustine and the Reformers, closely elucidating the problem with this requirement: "Seing then all flesh is guiltie of that for which God hath threatened eternallie to punish, what possibilitie is there this way to be saved?"²⁵⁶ Had human beings continued in relationship with God without sin, they would have learned the supernatural way to salvation naturally,

in the natural path of everlasting life the first beginning is that habilitie of doing good, which God in the day of mans creation indued him with; from hence obedience unto the wil of his creator, absolute righteousness and integrity in al his actions; and last of al the justice of God rewarding the worthiness of his deserts with the crowne of eternall glory. Had Adam continued in his first estate, this had been the

²⁵⁴ Hooker presumes sin's effects to be pervasive, since they distort nature, the operations of a commonwealth, and individual lives therein (*Lawes* I.10.1).

²⁵⁵ Hooker, *Lawes* I.11.4-5.

²⁵⁶ Hooker, *Lawes* I.11.5.

way of life unto him and all his posteritie.²⁵⁷

Sin and human finitude combine to prevent human beings from living in accordance with their nature, once ordered to God. Natural and human laws, then, serve not to illuminate one's "path to God," nor do they restore human nature. Thus, knowledge capable of leading a person to follow God's will – even knowledge of divine law (Scripture) – is not itself justifying; it reveals only what God does with people and how we are to respond in faith. The role of the laws, according to Hooker, is instead to restrain a person, and the commonwealth as a whole, from pursuing disordered ends as if these are their proper and fitting end in God. This is so in order that by grace, one might be freed to seek and receive edification in the Christian faith embedded in his laws.

The Role of Divine Law and Christ Jesus in Forming People in the Faith

In light of humanity's condition – sin both marring nature and distorting knowledge of one's proper end and purpose – the only solution must be provided by God himself, the creator, end, and perfecter of all things: "There resteth therefore eyther no way unto salvation, or if any, then surely a way which is supernaturall, a way which could never have entered into the heart of man as much as once to conceive or imagine if God him selfe had not revealed it extraordinarily."²⁵⁸

According to Hooker, human beings are no longer capable of doing the ultimate good, since their very natures are corrupt. It follows that they are no longer capable of knowing the ultimate good to which all things and all actions are directed. Hooker

²⁵⁷ Hooker, *Laws* I.11.5.

²⁵⁸ Hooker, *Laws* I.11.5.

follows the Reformed tradition, affirming that God alone could reveal the way “mysticall and supernaturall” to direct unto the same ende of life by a course which groundeth it selfe upon the guiltiness of sinne and thorough sinne desert of condemnation and death. For in this way the first thing is the tender compassion of God respecting us drowned and swallowed up in myserie; the next is redemption out of the same by the pretious death and merit of a mightie Saviour, which hath witnessed of himself saying *I am the way*, the way that leadeth us from myserie into blisse.”²⁵⁹

The capacity for one’s acts to be acceptable to God is obtained solely in that they are done in Christ, whose death and resurrection are the ontological foundation (that which transforms fallen nature) for their acceptability to God, and for human responses of faith, hope, wisdom and charity. In line with Article XII in the Book of Common Prayer, Hooker argues that apart from God’s justification, any works of response are made righteous solely through the Son’s having come into the world to redeem human nature. So also for the human capacity for reasoned deliberation:

This supernaturall way had God in himself prepared before all worldes. The way of supernaturall dutie which to us he hath prescribed, our Saviour in the Gospell of Sainte John doth note, terming it by an excellencie the worke of God: *This is the worke of God that ye believe in him whome he hath sent*. Not that God doth require nothing unto happiness at the hands of men saving onely a naked believe (for hope and charitie we may not exclude) but that without believe all other things are as nothing and it the ground of those other divine virtues.²⁶⁰

It is God alone who makes human faith, hope, and charity – those things necessary for

²⁵⁹ Hooker, *Lawes* I.11.5.

²⁶⁰ Hooker, *Lawes* I.11.5.

salvation according to St. Paul – righteous acts:

ther is not in the world a syllable muttered with certaine truth concerning any of these three, more than hath been supernaturally received from the mouth of the eternall God. Lawes therefore concerning these things are supernaturall, both in respect of the maner of delivering them which is divine, and also in regard of things delivered which are such as have not in nature any cause from which they flow, but were by the voluntarie appointment of God ordained besides the course of nature to rectifie natures obliquitie withal.²⁶¹

While he emphasizes Christ's life of obedience, death, and resurrection as the sole basis of humanity's justification, Hooker argues that God does not negate the real contingencies of human life (relationships, actions, events) or subsume them within divine reality (as if they had no existence ultimately of their own). Instead God gives these acts place in his economy by joining them to himself, in Christ, through a web of laws that direct the most individual acts of reason to the most complex events of historical phenomena.

Deliberation and acts that are bound within a complex framework of laws are the sanctifying means of living out testimony to God in Christ, although they do not justify an individual. Only in coming to know Christ – a necessarily communal act encompassing both civil and ecclesiastical formation – can one learn to act in accordance with the nature and will of God. For Hooker, seeking the truth is a corporate exercise in which every individual within a society takes part. The function of individual consent to the tradition embodied and sustained in a united ecclesiastical and civil framework of governance provides for Hooker a limited arena of corporate discernment. It is this

²⁶¹ Hooker, *Lawes* I.11.5.

particular ‘corporate arena’ that mitigates of the effects of human finitude and sin so often asserted by those who presume to have epistemic certainty. The tradition embodied in corporate social life serves to challenge assertions and requires those making them to provide evidence that can be corporately weighed as to its consistency with God’s will.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have examined the implications of a core dispute with respect to authority between conformist and Puritan dissenters in particular.²⁶² Arguments centered around the issues of valid sources of authority, demands for obedience in light of the Reformation arguments for the freedom gained in justification, and the role of *adiaphora* in the civic and ecclesiastical spheres. Littlejohn writes:

The authority of ministers was to be an interpretive authority, bound to the word of God, which was the only sure guide as to what should or should not be done in the *adiaphora*. Yet increasingly, this authority was to acquire judicial, rather than merely epistemic weight. The need for certainty, confronted with the contradictory demands upon the believer to use the *adiaphora* to edification, rather than to destruction, had prompted the call for a new authority who would adjudicate the conflict of loyalties by recourse to Scripture, which could, after all, be relied upon to tell us all that was necessary. Of course, it also followed then that if such a judging authority was itself necessary, Scripture must have told us about it. It was thus possible to argue that Church polity was not a matter of indifference after all, that divine law in fact required an autonomous, scripturally-regulated clerical jurisdiction with responsibility for all ecclesiastical affairs. Needless to say, such a resolution, far from resolving the conflict of loyalties,

²⁶² See for example the Vestiarian controversy during the English Reformation. It began with Bishop John Hooper’s (ca. 1495-1500 – 9 February 1555) rejection of clerical vestments in the Church of England under Edward VI, and was revived under Elizabeth I. This controversy demonstrates emerging concerns over the nature of authority and specifically the source of authority and the legitimate boundaries or limitations on the actions and consciences of Christians. See Nicholas Ridley’s response to John Hooper’s notes: C. Hopf, “Bishop Hooper’s ‘Notes’ to the King’s Council,” *Journal of Theological Studies*, 44 (April, 1943), 194–99; the actual response in Latin begins on page 196; for Ridley’s reply in English see, “Reply of Bishop Ridley to Bishop Hooper on the Vestment Controversy, 1550,” in John Bradford, *Writings*, ed. A. Townsend, (Cambridge: Parker Society, 1848, 1853): 2.373–95.

simply transposed the locus of the conflict and heightened the stakes.²⁶³

Indeed, Luther's and Calvin's followers had shifted the origin of authority from the realm of justification to that of Scripture. In their followers' writings, it was often assumed that "freedom" implied that one was freed for the purpose of *being enabled by grace to either* obey every word of Scripture, or to obey *only that which is necessary for salvation*.

Outside of this, an individual had the capacity to choose whatever he desired. Of course, as was the case almost immediately in the sixteenth century, debate arose as to the "proposed catalogue" of essentials, the proper interpretation of Scripture directing moral actions, and who had the authority to edify Christians.

Hooker begins his response to these conflicts by situating human freedom within the realm of justification. Only from this perspective could one convey Scripture's authority in such a way as to preserve the believer's edified and thereby willing response to God. Hooker proposed that the first eternal law is one to which God willingly submits himself as the fulfillment of his own wisdom and goodness. The limit of this first eternal law is mirrored in the individual and communal submissions to laws embodied in his second eternal law. For the individual within the commonwealth, such submission sustains individual existence; but so too, it enables persons to seek and to be drawn into the fullness of what God made them (their essence) and thereby to the truth. Hooker demonstrates that an individual ordered to and by God can only come to understand and know God's will for herself (because of the inherent limitation of finitude and of sin) in light of the limitations of living within a society ordered to God. True liberty begins in

²⁶³ Littlejohn, "The Freedom of a Christian Nation: Richard Hooker and the Problem of Christian Liberty," 68.

justification, in coming to know over time that one is forgiven and set free by God's perfect love to serve one's neighbor – a service which cannot but redound to one's own life with fruitfulness, enmeshed as that life is in the "commonweal." Hooker's type of comprehension follows Erasmus's own in arguing for consent to those political bodies charged with teaching and protecting the faith through time. Hooker provides a far more elaborate and systematic framework of law, by which God has bound all created things to himself. This is perhaps a necessary elaboration of theory, as we saw with Nicholas of Cusa's arguments, when a given theorist is faced with social, political and ecclesiastical turmoil. Yet at the core of both men's arguments was the basic understanding that the pursuit of religious understanding was to be a common exercise in discernment. Furthermore, due to finitude and sin, this exercise in common sanctification required an arena of discernment that demanded limits: obedience or consent to the articulations of those in authority.

In subsequent chapters we will examine the reformulation of intellectual developments responsible for a shift from Hooker's Christologically driven theology to Wilkins's and Chillingworth's more epistemologically oriented theologies. The significance and the redevelopment of first-order doctrinal concepts are responses more to contingent historical events than they are to a natural evolution of ideas. These contingent events include the division of the Christian Church and violence that ensued in subsequent efforts to exercise both political and ecclesiastical authority.²⁶⁴ They also include efforts at balancing diverse political and religious responses to the breakdown of a socially, politically, and religiously more homogenous society; and finally, the

²⁶⁴ By "first order" doctrinal concepts, I mean those doctrines directly related to God's nature, his act of creation, his self-revelation, and his consummation of time and history.

consequent grappling with the nature of the relationship between truth and knowledge in the midst of social and religious uncertainties.

The following chapters on Chillingworth and Wilkins will demonstrate some of the intellectual issues raised by the changing conditions of the English Church and society subsequent to Hooker's writings, and some attempts at addressing these issues in the wake of these changes. More important, however are the concrete social and ecclesial events which stimulated the need to adapt Hooker's arguments concerning the role of the law in forming people in the Christian faith.

Chapter 3: William Chillingworth

Introduction:

In this chapter, I will examine the work of seventeenth-century theologian William Chillingworth, who took up several key ideas from Hooker, but reapplied them in ways that reflected the new social and ecclesial pressures of his day. Chillingworth engaged key Erasmian notions of common deference and discernment even as these notions were exposed in some of their limitations. Several of Chillingworth's ideas were developed by later English thinkers like philosopher John Locke, and, Deist Matthew Tindal, to provide a basis for their own arguments for toleration and the use of reason in determining the foundations or essentials of Christian belief.²⁶⁵ However, these later thinkers used Chillingworth's arguments in different historical circumstances, and therefore, with the result of driving for different ends than Chillingworth who sought to determine a basis for a comprehensive Church. Chillingworth's circumstances required a solution to increasing pressure from some Protestant groups for greater reform on the one hand, and on the other, to enforced (if necessary) deference to King and Church by those loyal to these latter two. Simultaneously, Chillingworth found it necessary to fend off Roman Catholic claims to the falsity of any Church but their own.

Hooker had laid out an exceptionally comprehensive and systematic case for deference to the Church, headed by the English monarch. He had demonstrated a strong

²⁶⁵ John Locke, *Vindications of the Reasonableness of Christianity*, ed., Victor Nuovo, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2012), 91, (and see footnote 1); On Chillingworth's influence on Tindal see: Jeffrey R. Wigelsworth, "'God can require nothing of us, but what makes for our Happiness': Matthew Tindal on Toleration" in *Atheism and Deism Revalued: Heterodox Religious Identities in Britain, 1650-1800*, ed., Wayne Hudson, Diego Lucci and Jeffrey R. Wigelsworth, (London and New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2014), 150.

philosophical and theological case for God's providential ordering of society through the Church and monarch, and that deference to the commonwealth embodied and sustained by this order was in fact the sole means through which Churches and their members could in fact pursue the truth since this order inhibited the distorting effects of sin in decision-making; a corporate process that necessarily entailed discernment of things that required reasoning probabilistically (qualitatively, rather than quantitatively).

Unlike Hooker, Chillingworth's writings do not provide the former's comprehensive vision of God's providential social ordering by interwoven laws. Chillingworth's central task is far more focused than was Hooker's: the former intended to demonstrate the failure of trying to provide historical evidence to substantiate the loci of authority, on the basis of absolute certainty about the evidence being used. In this way, his work follows one strand of Hooker's own argument against both Catholics and extreme Puritans seeking to establish the loci and grounds for their authority on the basis of their own respective combinations of hermeneutical variables. Simultaneously, Chillingworth attempted to provide a reasonable foundation for comprehension, which could in turn serve as an arena for corporate religious discernment and formation in Christian truth.

Erasmus and Hooker, in distinct ways, had presumed that the civil and ecclesiastical spheres would work together to provide the common space for discernment and the limit on acceptable teachings and practices. Chillingworth drew on both thinkers. Ultimately, he argued that one ought to defer, in external acts, to a comprehensive, national Church, as both Erasmus and Hooker had. Indeed, Chillingworth's type of comprehension had in common with both Erasmus and Hooker the desire to maintain a

common space for corporate religious discernment aimed at achieving religious understanding.

Throughout his arguments, however, we begin to see how this central notion of comprehension shifts in the wake of increased concern with and actual proliferation of Christian division. In response, Chillingworth contends that any claim to infallibility will prevent the Church (and her members) from reforming in accordance with Scripture, the latter of which alone provides absolute certainty in its existence, but not in its interpretation. Therefore, Chillingworth maintains that while one's beliefs can be held privately when they are at odds with official Church teaching, one should still defer, in his external actions, to a national Church that specifically limits claims to have infallible or epistemically certain interpretation of Scripture. What is unique to Chillingworth's approach is his argument against some of the traditional essentials (such as the Creed) that define a true Church. While a good strategy for pressing his belief that constant discernment and seeking is required to live faithfully before God, this does also broaden the limits or boundaries of those Christian particulars that define the Church's common life.

In what follows, I will begin by outlining the context of Chillingworth's concerns. I will then demonstrate Chillingworth's central argument: the inability for any Church to make infallible claims about being the locus of truth and thereby the sole guarantor of articulating God's will. We will move on to trace the distinctions he makes between the types of certainty that exist, and the limitations of epistemic certainty in one's knowledge due to the effects of human finitude and sin. This will lead us into his discussion of Scripture as the sole locus of authority, and the necessity of using epistemic probability to

discern even this sole authority. Finally, we will see how these previous sections lead Chillingworth to conclude that while a national Church has no basis for asserting infallibility in its articulations of the faith, it is still the essential locus of discernment because it prevents presumptions of epistemic certainty that diminish continued searching for truth and the ensuing reform in Christ this seeking brings.

Background:

Chillingworth was a member of what is known as the Tew Circle, a group of literary figures and theologians who gathered at the Manor House belonging to Lucius Cary, the 2nd Viscount Falkland, in the parish of Great Tew in Oxfordshire during the 1630s.²⁶⁶ The most notable among its members included Chillingworth himself, Henry Hammond, Walter Raleigh, and Jeremy Taylor. Dodds maintains that this diverse range of thinkers were pejoratively classified as Arminians by their radical Puritan opponents, because of the former's rejection of the "absoluteness of God's grace," their affinity for understanding the English Church as "connected to the true Catholic tradition, and their demand for episcopal authority."²⁶⁷ Of all those classified by their opponents as Arminian, it is the Tew Circle that "most accurately reflected an Erasmian world view and style."²⁶⁸

²⁶⁶ Remer, *Humanism and the Rhetoric of Toleration*, 144.

²⁶⁷ Walter Raleigh of the Tew Circle, was a priest and the nephew of the more famous, Sir Walter Raleigh, who amongst other things, led expeditions to South America in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, and who funded and sent others to Virginia to establish settlements for the colonization of North America; In the quoted passages, Dodds is referring to the doctrine of assurance concerning predestination to eternal life or to damnation; Dodds, *Exploiting Erasmus*, 203.

²⁶⁸ See for example Bruce Mansfield, *Phoenix of His Age*, 148-151; Roper, *Catholics, Anglicans and Puritans*, 190-93; and Martin Griffin, *Latitudinarianism in Seventeenth Century England*, 89-90.

The Tew Circle went further than Hooker and Lancelot Andrewes in their adoption of Erasmus's rhetoric. And yet Dodds cautions that too much affirmation of their appropriation of Erasmus's work would be inappropriate, since they were responding to distinct historical circumstances. Most notably, their society was ensconced in nearly one hundred years of contentious battle for control over both civil and ecclesiastical forms of authority – a battle that had occurred in the wake of the Church's division.²⁶⁹ Evidence for Dodds's caution is contained in the various polemics written against Puritans and Roman Catholics alike from members of the Tew Circle.²⁷⁰

Indeed, Brydon argues that if there was a central core to the writings of members of the Tew Circle, it was in their common argument against claims made by any Church group to have authority in forming the life of Christians on the basis of having exclusive, absolute, dogmatic, and/or infallible truth. They did appeal to Hooker's work. But their transposition of his work to their time was narrowed somewhat to focus on Hooker's provision that reason had "a vital role in the authentication of scripture and the construction of suitable forms of ecclesiastical polity."²⁷¹

Dodds demonstrates that members of the Tew Circle, along with King Charles I, Archbishop Laud, Peter Heylyn (known as the "Laudian attack dog"), and moderate Calvinists such as Joseph Hall and Thomas Fuller, also employed the Erasmian rhetoric of toleration and moderation, like Hooker a half century before them. However, they employed it not as a *via media* of toleration for theological heterodoxy, but rather as a

²⁶⁹ Dodds, *Exploiting Erasmus*, 204.

²⁷⁰ See for example Edward Hyde, *History of Rebellion and Civil Wars in England* (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1826), <https://archive.org/details/england01claruoft>. (Accessed January 17, 2017).

²⁷¹ Brydon, *The Evolving Reputation of Richard Hooker*, 52.

position from which to excise from the Church those who claimed infallible authority or asserted certainty about religious truth on the basis of Scripture or tradition.²⁷² Dodds argues against scholars like Hugh Trevor-Roper who claim that Reformation to mid-seventeenth-century Anglicanism was a *via media*: “[t]he legacy of Erasmian rhetoric in England was not an acceptance of broad diversity in religion, but part of an agenda to marginalize and eliminate public dissent. Not surprisingly then, the push for [peace and concord] contributed to dangerous divisions in an increasingly uncontrollable public sphere [from the 1620s – the civil wars beginning in 1642].”²⁷³

As discussed in chapter 1, Erasmus was certainly advocating a polemical position from *within* the Church. The purpose was to demonstrate the untenable risk to the Church of fragmentation, perpetrated by those who sought certainty at the expense of ensuring the space for theological deliberation in epistemically uncertain matters. But Protestants of the seventeenth century using Erasmian rhetoric (the so-called Arminians as well as Royalists), were using it polemically to vilify those bodies of Christians who had divided from or who were near to division with the Church of England and her King were advocating a false Christianity altogether. As Dodds points out, Puritans would come to see the calls for peace and tolerance, advocated on the surface by Arminians and particularly of the Tew Circle, as “a cover for repression, intolerance, and repudiation of Christian truth.”²⁷⁴

²⁷² Dodds, *Exploiting Erasmus*, 203.

²⁷³ Dodds, *Exploiting Erasmus*, 225.

²⁷⁴ Dodds, *Exploiting Erasmus*, 204.

According to Dodds, there has been some debate about the actual classification of Arminian thinkers, particularly over their causing or contributing to English civil war. The first interpretation to which Dodds refers is in the so-called “revisionist literature” of twentieth-century thinkers such as Nicholas Tyacke, who sees Arminianism as an attempted innovation to the normative Reformed character of sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century English theology.²⁷⁵ When King Charles and Archbishop Laud supported this supposed innovation, and when Laud especially attempted to enforce a heightened religious ceremonialism and conformity, Arminianism was perceived as a threat to Protestant orthodoxy and to the faithful. This in turn pushed England into civil war.²⁷⁶

Dodds cites Peter White, Julian Davies, and Kevin Sharpe as pushing back against this interpretation, contending that Arminianism had always been a part of English theology from Elizabeth through the Stuarts, and was therefore simply one stream of post-Reformation theology in England. According to this interpretation, in Laud there was a shift in emphasis from concerns with predestination and free will to order and conformity.²⁷⁷

²⁷⁵ Nicholas Tyacke, “The Rise of Arminianism Reconsidered,” in *Past and Present*, 115, (May, 1987), 201-16; and *Anti-Calvinists: The Rise of English Arminianism, c. 1590-1640* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

²⁷⁶ Tyacke, *Anti-Calvinists: The Rise of English Arminianism, c. 1590-1640*.

²⁷⁷ Peter White, *Predestination, Policy and Polemic: Conflict and Consensus in the English Church from the Reformation to the Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Julian Davies, *The Caroline Captivity of the Church: Charles I and the Remoulding of Anglicanism 1625-1641* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992); Kevin Sharpe, *Remapping Early Modern England: The Culture of 17th Century Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 348-57. See also David Como, “Puritans, Predestination and the Construction of Orthodoxy in Early Seventeenth Century England,” in *Studies in Modern British Religious History: Conformity and Orthodoxy in the English Church, c. 1560-1660*, ed., Peter Lake and Michael Questier (Rochester, NY: The Boydell Press, 2000), 65, esp. footnote 2.

A third interpretation asserts that of the former two, the second more accurately depicts the pragmatic and theological landscape in the mid sixteenth to early seventeenth century. Dodds argues that an appeal to longstanding Erasmian influence, especially from Hooker through to the Arminians, would mean that a place for Arminian free-will had been well established early in the history of the English Church. He counters, however, that “[a] careful scrutiny of Erasmian publications also indicates a general English uneasiness with Erasmian theology, a theology which was clearly not congruent with mainstream Calvinism. In fact [...] a number of Erasmian publications were heavily reworked to make them fit better with Calvinist theology.”²⁷⁸ Nonetheless, Erasmian theology presents an important key for understanding the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century. This is because differing interpretations of the relationship between authority, Scripture and certainty amongst so-called Arminian and Puritan groups demonstrate aspects of continuity with Erasmus’s concerns in their respective struggles over the “meaning and value of religious peace, consensus and moderation.”²⁷⁹ Dodds’s argument for this third interpretation is supported by David Como’s essay, “Puritans, Predestination and the Construction of Orthodoxy in the Seventeenth Century England.” Dodds, along with Como argue that by the early 1620s, Puritan/Calvinist theology had already begun to diverge into contested responses to the issue of certainty about salvation. In particular, the responses surrounded the scriptural certainty of the doctrine of assurance concerning election and predestination.

²⁷⁸ Dodds, *Exploiting Erasmus*, 173.

²⁷⁹ Dodds, *Exploiting Erasmus*, 173.

Como traces Puritan William Twisse's response to Puritan John Cotton's unpublished (and lost) manuscript on predestination written around 1625. Twisse's response, *A Treatise of Mr. Cottons, Clearing certaine Doubts Concerning Predestination Together with an Examination Thereof* (1646),²⁸⁰ was first written in 1634 but unpublished until 1646. In it we can see contestation developing around the doctrine of assurance of election and predestination. Twisse accuses Cotton of "embrac[ing] the sower leaven of Arminianisme."²⁸¹ At issue were not simply soteriological doctrines. The more important point of contestation was over the matter of scriptural perspicuity. Did Scripture provide the epistemic certainty of one particular doctrine that, it was argued, ought to ground and form the life of Christians? Or, in light of a lack of scriptural perspicuity about assurance, election, and predestination, ought there to be room within the Church for a variety of perspectives concerning soteriological issues? One hundred years after the debate between Luther and Erasmus over the nature of free will in relationship to salvation, we see the same underlying struggle that we also saw between Hooker and English Lutherans and Calvinists: epistemic certainty in scriptural interpretation and the role of authority in adjudicating this core issue.

²⁸⁰ William Twisse, *A Treatise of Mr. Cottons, Clearing certaine Doubts Concerning Predestination Together with an Examination Thereof* (London: Printed by J.D. For Andrew Crook, 1646), http://eebo.chadwyck.com/search/fulltext?source=configpr.cfg&ACTION=ByID&ID=D00000132967750000&FILE=../session/1537812869_27729&DISPLAY=default&RESULTCLICK=default (Accessed January 24, 2018). Cotton's manuscript on predestination, which Twisse refutes in this response, has not survived. However, Sargent Bush, in commenting on Cotton's writings in *The Correspondence of John Cotton* (2001), claims that Cotton's original manuscript had been published in early 1625. Sargent also suggests that this original manuscript was not indicative of Cotton's full theology of predestination. While Cotton's final position on the matter may not have been communicated in this early work, Como's essay examining Twisse's response does demonstrate that there were a variety of contested positions within Puritanism, beginning at least in the early 1620s. Como's argument about contestation amongst Puritans is supported further by the responses of other Puritans, as indicated above.

²⁸¹ Twisse, "The Fifth Doubt: Question 5," in *A Treatise of Mr. Cottons, Clearing certaine Doubts Concerning Predestination Together with an Examination Thereof*, (no page number available).

Thus, it would seem the struggle to define the proper origin of authority for ordering the life of Christians, even around the issue of salvation, continued to be a central issue for English thinkers from Elizabeth through to Charles and Laud and to their Puritan and Latitudinarian contemporaries.²⁸² The search was not for a *via media* within which any degree of theological diversity could exist. Instead, we see emphasized something first brought to systematic attention in Hooker's own work: particular responses proposed as evident solutions to contested claims about the locus and legitimacy to form members of the English nation in the Christian faith. So too, we see contested claims about the proper limitation on both scriptural interpretation and the moral life of Christians.

Along with a variety of interpretations of Erasmus in the seventeenth century, there were competing claims to have discovered the essential components of Richard Hooker's *Lawes*. As we examined above, Hooker's understanding of justification and how it related to sanctification and edification in the faith was complex. That which was

²⁸² John Spurr, "'Latitudinarianism' and the Restoration church," in *The Historical Journal*, 31, 1 (1988), 61-82. See in particular p. 69 for a list and following explanation of inclusion and exclusion. See pp. 72-3 for the difficulty in including John Wilkins, whom we will examine in the third chapter of this work. He has often been placed into the latitudinarian-toleration grouping by scholars. Spurr concludes his assessment of the use of latitudinarianism as a descriptive category of seventeenth-century thinkers in this way: "'Latitudinarianism' will never be pinned down. Modern, synthetic definitions carry little conviction for students of Restoration religious history, and when we delve into the original uses of this stigmatizing nickname we are soon caught up in a tangle of meanings and connotations. However, among those, principally dissenters, who employed the epithet during this period it clearly signified the conformism and apostasy of its turncoat targets. Those tarred as 'latitudinarians' were indeed sloughing off Calvinism, but they, like most Restoration Englishmen reacting against the experience of the 1640s and 1650s, preferred to see themselves as impartial, free, moderate, rational, moral and new. No specifically 'latitudinarian' party or outlook can be distinguished among the Restoration churchmen. 'Latitudinarian' was their opponents' word. It was an attempt to brand the theological repudiation of Calvinism as a deficiency of character or a lack of principle. But the renunciation of the old orthodoxy, associated as it was with the younger generation of churchmen, was fast becoming 'the dominant theological school' of the day. It is this dominant temper of Restoration Anglicanism, and not the chimera of 'latitudinarianism,' which should claim our attention if we are to understand how England came to terms with her puritan legacy" (Spurr, "'Latitudinarianism' and the Restoration church," 82). For further detail see: Richard Ashcraft, "Latitudinarianism and Toleration; Historical Myth Versus Political History," in *Philosophy, Science, and Religion in England 1640-1700*, ed., Richard Kroll, Richard Ashcraft, and Perez Zagorin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 151-177.

required for salvation was given in the divine law revealed in Scripture. But while *adiaphora* with respect to salvation, the moral life was not merely superfluous to God's ordering of creation. It was a necessary consideration in the Reformation claim to have been freed *from* the fear of uncertainty with respect to salvation, *for* the purpose of being able to serve one's neighbor. Hooker's argument, as we saw, involved consideration of being formed from within a framework of laws by which God was both self-governing and governor of all his creation, including the ordering of human reason and positive laws governing society.

In support of Dodds's third contention – that there was reluctance to accept Erasmianism despite its continued place within English theological thinking, as a prototype of ceremonial Laudianism in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries – Brydon maintains that there was substantial critique of Hooker's arguments for what Calvinist or Puritan opponents claimed was a “crypto-papalism.” The common theme critiqued in both thinkers is that of conformity to Church ceremony, with the “false” assumption that ceremony or liturgy is itself edifying.²⁸³

Brydon cites Andrew Willet, an English clergyman, as representing a group of Reformed thinkers who were highly critical of Roman Catholic demands for conformity but remained loyal to the Church of England and advocated conformity to her.²⁸⁴ In discussing Hooker's works on the Church, Willet claims that Hooker is a “crypto-papist”

²⁸³ Brydon, *The Evolving Reputation of Richard Hooker*, 26.

²⁸⁴ Brydon, *The Evolving Reputation of Richard Hooker*, 23.

who directs “dangerous pushes of the pikes, against the [J]erusalem of God, the holy Christian Church of England.”²⁸⁵

Brydon states that it is Hooker’s advocacy for the use of reason in interpretation of Scripture that most inspires Willet’s critique. Reason “weakens the doctrine of predestination” and the power of sermons to convict and conform their hearers to Christ.²⁸⁶ Willet asserts that Hooker departed even from Archbishop Whitgift in essential points of Reformed doctrine. And in light of this, his work should not be considered as offering a middle way, consistent with English or continental Reformers, within which learning (from catechisms and hearing sermons) could take place. Instead, according to Willet, Hooker offered a polemical position that would inevitably lead back to the Roman Catholic Church.²⁸⁷

Willet perhaps foreshadows Protestant concern with Hooker’s work – ascribing to the latter’s theological legacy a sort of “crypto-papalism” – since it is indeed Chillingworth’s claim that Hooker’s work led him (that is, Chillingworth) to the Roman

²⁸⁵ Brydon, *The Evolving Reputation of Richard Hooker*, 23; see Andrew Willet, *A Christian Letter of Certain English Protestants, Unfained Fauourers of the Present State of Religion, Authorised and Professed in England: Unto that Reverend and Learned Man, Mr. R. Hoo. Requiring Resolution in Certain Matters of Doctrine (which Seeme to Ouerthrow the Foundation of Christian Religion, and of the Church Among Us) Expresslie Contained in His Fiue Boks of Ecclesiasticall Pollicie*, (place of publishing unknown: Richard Schilders, 1599), [http://eebo.chadwyck.com/search/full_rec?SOURCE=pgimages.cfg&ACTION=ByID&ID=99843261&FILE=.session/1537815000_3340&SEARCHSCREEN=CITATIONS&VID=7977&PAGENO=24&ZOOM=75&VIEWPORT=&SEARCHCONFIG=var_spell.cfg&DISPLAY=param\(DISPLAY\)&HIGHLIGHT_KEYWORD=undefined](http://eebo.chadwyck.com/search/full_rec?SOURCE=pgimages.cfg&ACTION=ByID&ID=99843261&FILE=.session/1537815000_3340&SEARCHSCREEN=CITATIONS&VID=7977&PAGENO=24&ZOOM=75&VIEWPORT=&SEARCHCONFIG=var_spell.cfg&DISPLAY=param(DISPLAY)&HIGHLIGHT_KEYWORD=undefined) 46, (Accessed January, 23, 2018). Cited throughout this dissertation as, *A Christian Letter*.

²⁸⁶ Willet, *Christian Letter*, title-page, 7–17, 20–4, 31–3, cited in: Brydon, *The Evolving Reputation of Richard Hooker*, 23.

²⁸⁷ Brydon, *The Evolving Reputation of Richard Hooker*, 23-4.

Catholic Church.²⁸⁸ Willet suggests that the faith of the Roman Catholic Church rests on false claims that can be disproved through examination of the “scriptures, fathers, councils, imperial constitutions, pontifical decrees, and their own writers and our martyrs, and the consent of all Christian Churches in the world.”²⁸⁹

As we shall see, in his return to the Church of England (1637-8)²⁹⁰ Chillingworth (along with other members of the Tew Circle) advances several of Willet’s critiques not simply against the Roman Catholic Church, but also against conformity to all infallible ecclesiastical claims without considered deliberation.²⁹¹ And yet he simultaneously attempts to use Willet’s target, Hooker, in order to argue for the efficacy of reason, limited by a common civil body, in moving one to consent to the saving faith.

Chillingworth emphasizes the use of reason as the divinely given and ordered means to weigh contested claims to certainty about interpretations of Scripture and ensuing doctrines. He in turn challenges assertions about the absolute certainty of the historical

²⁸⁸ See William Chillingworth, “Life of Mr. Chillingworth,” in *The Works of W. Chillingworth, M.A.*, 12th ed. (London: printed for B. Blake, 13 Bell Yard, Lincoln’s Inn, MDCCCXXXVI [1836]), viiii-xvi.

²⁸⁹ Andrew Willet, *Synopsis Papismi*, that is a general view of the papistrie: wherein the whole mysterie of iniquitie, and summe of antichristian doctrine is let downe, which is maintained this day by the Synagogue of Rome, against the Church of Christ, together with an antithesis of the true Christian Faith, and an Antidotum or Counterpoison out of Scripture, against the Whore of Babylons filthy cup of abominations, confuted by Scriptures, fathers, counsels, imperiall constitutions, pontifical decrees, their owne writers and our martyrs, and the content of all Christian Churches in the world divided into five books or centuries that is so many hundreds of popish heresies and errors (London: Printed by Thomas Orwin for Thomas Man, 1592), preface, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A15422.0001.001?view=toc> (Accessed February 15, 2018).

²⁹⁰ Chillingworth left the Roman Catholic Church to which he had converted in 1630, the following year. It was not until 1634 that he declared himself a Protestant. Initially, he refused to profess belief in the Anglican Articles of Religion. It was not until 1637-8 that he would subscribe to the Articles, persuaded by Archbishop Laud, and was made chancellor of Salisbury in 1638, the year his famous work, *The Religion of Protestants, A Safe Way to Salvation*, was published. For more biographical details see: Orr, *Reason and Authority – The Thought of William Chillingworth* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967).

²⁹¹ Brydon, *The Evolving Reputation of Richard Hooker*, 52; see also R. Eccleshall, “Richard Hooker and the Peculiarities of the English: The Reception of the *Ecclesiastical Polity* in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries,” in *History of Political Thought 2* (1981): 63-117; 71-2.

evidence, thus Church authority built from such evidence.²⁹² This mitigated use of Hooker is perhaps an attempt to mediate the poles of Puritan and Laudian extremes, although neither Chillingworth nor any of his biographers or commentators that I am aware of make this claim.

According to Brydon, Arminians in general were unconcerned with the specifics of Hooker's complex treatment of justification.²⁹³ Instead, he argues, Laudians in particular used Hooker's theology to move away from the Puritan notion that one could achieve certainty about one's salvation through personal hearing and response to the

²⁹² According to his most recent biographer, Robert Orr, Chillingworth suggested that knowledge obtained "by direct mathematical demonstration, or sense experience, or by divine revelation is knowledge of which we may be absolutely certain." Chillingworth readily admits that mathematical demonstration can provide absolute certainty; that God could directly act on human knowing providing certainty; and finally, that one can see, for example, and know that what one sees is an apple. These are examples from which metaphysical or absolute certainty can be obtained. Orr, however, indicates that Chillingworth was not particularly interested in establishing a metaphysics of knowledge, nor of engaging in a debate about whether these were actually means of obtaining absolute certainty. Orr writes, "[n]owhere does [Chillingworth] tackle the problem of the validity of sense experience, or the nature of mathematical proofs. Nor does he probe very deeply into the problems raised by the very possibility of 'absolute certainty,' believing as he did that the religious controversies which were current were all attempts to clarify matters which could be only morally certain. The Cartesian method of systematic doubt was alien to his temperament, with his practical and ethical preoccupations. He was trying to discover how men came to know divine truth, and the status of their knowledge in terms of its degree of warrantable certainty" (Orr, *Reason and Authority*, 53).

With Orr, I believe this has to do with Chillingworth's pragmatic desire simply to demonstrate that the religious issues under contention cannot specifically be demonstrated to be absolutely certain, and can attain only to moral certainty. Claims, for example, to have historical precedent, Chillingworth will challenge on the basis of other data of historical evidence. Claims to authority, Chillingworth will demonstrate as using faulty logic or faulty evidence, as another example. In the case of both Puritan and Catholic claims, Chillingworth has presumed that most of what actually divides Christians from one another are matters that fall into the realm of moral certainty. Since moral certainty, "is begot in us, by presumption and probabilities, which either by their strength ... or by their multitude, make up a moral demonstration," which necessitates consideration and discernment over time, and which could be overturned by the introduction of new evidence, any claim to infallible authority or absolute certainty on the basis of moral certainty, could only prove divisive to those seeking the truth. This finally, is the crux of the matter: Chillingworth's ultimate concern is to prevent the collapse of both an 'arena' of and the capacity to engage in discernment by a false presumption of absolute or infallible authority (William Chillingworth, Henry Wharton Manuscript Collection, Volume 943, f. 871, Lambeth Palace Library; cited by Orr, *Reason and Authority*, 51-2, and see Orr, p. 206 for full listing of Chillingworth's works in the Wharton Manuscript Collection).

²⁹³ Brydon, *The Evolving Reputation of Richard Hooker*, 47.

Bible and to preaching.²⁹⁴ They pressed Hooker's work in such a way as to emphasize the "collective nature of the Church where all possessed the ability to be saved or, indeed, to fall from grace."²⁹⁵ John Cosin, for example, cites Hooker in his *A Collection of Private Devotions* to emphasize the critical formative nature of prayer, the recognition of holy days, fasting, and the litany. Importantly, as we shall come to see, he also emphasizes the centrality of the Eucharist and (extending beyond Hooker's own emphasis) moral preparation for it.²⁹⁶

In the *Relation of the Conference between William Laud and Mr Fisher the Jesuit*, Laud argues that if the spiritual Church (as advocated for by Puritans) is not located in the physical Church, it "is tied to no duty of Christianity. For all such duties are required of the Church as it is visible and performed in the Church as it is visible."²⁹⁷ Laud asserted that Hooker had recognized that Scripture had to be read and could only be understood in conjunction with the reason and the received customs of the Church; the latter of which provided a starting point for discernment. As Brydon states, the Church "although of human creation, was a form of reason, and therefore led towards the divine

²⁹⁴ Tyacke, *Anti-Calvinists*, xiii.

²⁹⁵ Brydon, *The Evolving Reputation of Richard Hooker*, 47.

²⁹⁶ John Cosin, *A Collection of Private Devotions*, ed. P. G. Stanwood, and Daniel O'Connor, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), Preface, 9–13, 15, 18–19, 171–2, 191, 198, 203–4, 208, 232, 318–20, 322, 345, 346, 347–8, 351–2, 354; D. O'Connor, "John Cosin: A Collection of Private Devotions 1627," in *John Cosin. From Priest to Prince Bishop. Essays in Commemoration of the 400th Anniversary of his Birth*, ed., M. Jonson, (Durham: Turnstone Ventures, 1997), 194–5, both cited in Brydon, *The Evolving Reputation of Richard Hooker*, 48.

²⁹⁷ William Laud, *A Relation of the Conference between William Laud Late Lord Archbishop of Canterbury, and Mr Fisher the Jesuit, by the Command of King James of Ever Blessed Memory*, in *The Works of the Most Reverend Father in God, William Laud, D. D. Sometime Lord Archbishop of Canterbury, Works II* (Oxford: University of Oxford Press, 1839), https://archive.org/stream/a589787100lauduoft/a589787100lauduoft_djvu.txt. (Accessed February 16, 2018), 156, cited in Brydon, *The Evolving Reputation of Richard Hooker*, 48.

rationality.”²⁹⁸ For Laud and his followers, the Church’s ceremonies and common worship constituted the visible Church, and he invested this visible Church with the promise against universal error. Laud concludes, “if the whole elect cannot err in fundamentals, the whole visible Church in which the same elect are, cannot err.”²⁹⁹ This was a step away from Augustine’s and the Reformers’ notion, as well as Hooker’s own, that it was the invisible Church alone that was preserved from error, while it simultaneously existed in a visible Church, which could and *in fact did err*.

There is a clear historical thread of continuity from the early sixteenth through to the early seventeenth centuries that concerns the search for common space for corporate understanding of religious truth, the nature of epistemic certainty in so doing, and the ways in which civil and ecclesiastical authorities are loci of or perhaps even inhibitors of seeking truth. Erasmus’s conceptualization of how God worked through the governance of nations caused him to prioritize peace in both the civil and ecclesiastical spheres. Without peace, the discovery of truth – a communal exercise given a *telos* in Christ and lived form through the exercise of particular roles of governance, responsibility, and obedience – could not be sustained.

At the heart of Chillingworth’s (and so also Erasmus’s and Hooker’s) perspectives is the presumption that human beings do not have epistemic access to certain or infallible truth. They require some process of discernment over time to reach a conclusion that brings a society as close to the truth as possible: in other words, to the

²⁹⁸ Brydon, *The Evolving Reputation of Richard Hooker*, 48.

²⁹⁹ William Laud, “Conference with Fisher,” in *The Works of the Most Reverend Father In God William Laud, D.D. Sometime Lord Archbishop of Canterbury* Vol. II, (Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1849), 155, note n, <https://ia802807.us.archive.org/32/items/workswillaud02lauduoft/workswillaud02lauduoft.pdf> (Accessed September 24, 2018).

most probable conclusion concerning God's truth. In light of sin and finitude – both aspects of created life that eliminate epistemic certainty – both Erasmus and Hooker argued that consent to civil and ecclesiastical authorities were a necessary limit to acts done under the false presumption of certainty. Both thinkers argued that this consent, even to problematic rulers and their decisions, ultimately preserved truth because it preserved the common body of persons who could re-evaluate, and correct erroneous truth claims and resulting actions over time.

A modern reader's first encounter with Chillingworth's works might cause her to believe he wanted to overthrow the idea of a common search for truth in the wake of epistemic uncertainty. Chillingworth makes up the bulk of his response against the infallibility claims of the Roman Catholic Church. While it may be presumed his work opened the door to a prioritization of the individual's search for truth over the retention of the idea that understanding the truth requires common discernment, this is not the case. Instead, Chillingworth is in continuity with the work of Erasmus and Hooker in attempting to excise from the Church claims to epistemic uncertainty. He argues with his interlocutor in much the same fashion as Erasmus did with Luther over the certainty of the doctrine of free will, and as did Hooker with both Puritan and Lutheran followers over the certainty of liturgical and ecclesiastical practices.

There is a clear difference from Hooker in Chillingworth's arguments, however, having to do with the latter's reluctance to specify any particular markers of Christian truth *apriori*. Chillingworth held that such claims about the truth lead to further division and ensuing civil unrest, with the loss of social capacity for formation in the faith. Chillingworth then does not overturn the idea of a common search for truth, but instead

seeks to establish the consequence of finitude and sin – epistemic uncertainty that itself requires a certain kind of common space in order to be faithfully engaged. Thus his argument for comprehension is resituated so that while the Church remains the common body to which English Christians ought to defer, its limits or boundaries are given less particular definition with respect to things like the Creed. Chillingworth saw this as a concrete reality for his particular context of ecclesiastical division within England, where the divisions themselves were based in the acceptable ecclesiastical locus of authority, and so too, on an appropriate hermeneutical approach to Scripture and tradition. It is likely that Chillingworth’s response was influenced by his own shift of ecclesiastical loyalties.³⁰⁰ In 1628, Chillingworth renounced his obedience to the Church of England and became a Roman Catholic. Orr shows that Chillingworth’s reason for departing the Church of England was consistent with his subsequent arguments against the Roman Catholic Church. Chillingworth saw the Church of England, empowered by ‘state positive law,’ as using coercive force to press people to adhere to its beliefs. The Catholic Church, he thought, allowed for exploration, seeking and exploring the faith,³⁰¹ and therefore, providing what Orr notes importantly was, “sufficient reason,” for him to believe that there was some Church that did not and could not err. What this meant, Orr points out in his opening chapter on Chillingworth’s conversion, was that Chillingworth believed the Roman Catholic Church *was not* grounding its requirement for belief in a presumption of having absolute epistemic certainty.³⁰² Chillingworth did not remain in

³⁰⁰ Orr, Reason and Authority, 2-22.

³⁰¹ Orr, Reason and Authority, 15-17.

³⁰² Orr, Reason and Authority, 15.

the Roman Catholic Church for long. Within a year or two of his conversion, he later writes that he had realized its claims that one must adhere to particular beliefs or face damnation were grounded in a presumption that its pronouncements were absolutely certain. He would go on in his subsequent writing upon reconversion to the Church of England, to attack and demonstrate the flaws in such claims.³⁰³

Certainty: Absolute, Moral and Mitigated

In his examination of the Latitudinarian movement, of which William Chillingworth is a part, W.M. Spellman maintains that the former believed that infallible certainty was both unattainable and unnecessary, with one exception.³⁰⁴ Certain knowledge could be demonstrated as universally true only in mathematics, where one would not fail to assent to the data presented once the representing symbols were understood. This kind of assent is what Spellman refers to as absolute certainty. Spellman's assessment of Chillingworth's notion of absolute certainty here is more limited than is Orr's. Orr believes that Chillingworth included as sources of absolute certainty both direct sense experience and divine revelation.³⁰⁵ While direct sense experience could provide absolute certainty, unless that experience is indeed direct, the senses could be deceived not necessarily intentionally but due to a failure of the faculties or of the arrangement of circumstances themselves, as we saw in Hooker's own reasoning. Unfortunately, as

³⁰³ Orr, Reason and Authority, 23-44.

³⁰⁴ Spellman, The Latitudinarians and the Church of England 1660-1700, 21.

³⁰⁵ Orr, Reason and Authority, 53.

indicated by Orr, Chillingworth does not delve deeply into a discussion of what he means by “direct sense experience” and how this is different from sense experiences that could have been deceived.³⁰⁶

The second type of certainty that Chillingworth discusses, and the one with which he is mostly concerned is that of “moral certainty.”³⁰⁷ He makes the following distinction between absolute and moral certainty:

The schools distinguish of two kinds of certainty; Metaphysical, whereby we know that a thing is so, and cannot be otherwise; and Moral, whereby we are assured a thing is so and cannot be otherwise, though there is no absolute impossibility nor contradiction, but that it may be. Metaphysical and absolute certainty must proceed either from sense, or demonstration or revelation. For by all these means and no more we may know, that a thing is so, and cannot be otherwise. I say by divine revelation, because there is no doubt that God can make me know anything immediately without the interposing of sense or reason, as he did the prophets; but then to make me undoubtedly certain thereof, it is requisite, not only that God reveal the truth, but also assure me, that it was his revelation and not fancy nor illusion; Moral certainty is begot in us, by presumption and probabilities, which either by their strength ... or by their multitude, make up a moral demonstration, to which being well considered ... no prudent and sober man can possibly refuse to yield a firm, certain, undoubting, reasonable assent and adherence. I say as firm and reasonable as if he had seen it with his eyes, or had proved it by a mathematical demonstration.³⁰⁸

Chillingworth associates moral certainty in the quote above, with probability (along with “presumption,” the latter of which are drawn from the customs or traditions of a given society). Probability for Chillingworth is opposed to infallibility. Where absolute certainty would be the required condition for infallible certainty, Chillingworth proposed that the things under religious dispute (those things not essential to salvation), could only

³⁰⁶ Orr, *Reason and authority*, 53.

³⁰⁷ Chillingworth, Wharton Manuscript, 943, f. 871, cited by Orr, *Reason and Authority*, 52.

³⁰⁸ Chillingworth, Wharton Manuscript, 943, f. 871, cited by Orr, *Reason and Authority*, 52.

be known with moral certainty. All other matters for religious consideration required that Christians weigh evidence to determine the most probable conclusion. This evidence could include historical interpretation of Scripture, or historical laws or customs practiced widely in the Christian world. Evidence could also include witness statements to events that could provide greater insight as to how an event actually occurred. Finally, where the discernment of Scripture was involved, those things that were necessary for salvation were considered by Chillingworth to be clear and evident in Scripture.³⁰⁹

Of particular note is Chillingworth's reluctance to suggest that Christian Creeds were sources of infallible certainty and thus the 'essentials' necessary for salvation. The Creeds both did and did not provide the necessities to be believed.³¹⁰ The Creeds laid out the basics of the Christian gospel. However, to say that believing what was in the Creeds alone was sufficient in seeking the truth could in fact be dangerous. It could not then, serve as a definitive marker of the 'true Church,' since defining the Church in this most basic way might not press someone to seek God in a way consistent with that person's own capacities, failures, and limitations and thus more deeply into the pursuit of God's truth. In other words, to provide too much definition of truth might in fact inhibit truth seeking. Scripture serves as a rule for Chillingworth, but not as a judge. As such, with the exception of things necessary to salvation, it requires discernment, grappling, and reasoning, in order to apply it to particular situations.³¹¹

³⁰⁹ William Chillingworth, *The Works of William Chillingworth*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1838), 416. For the rest of the dissertation this will be cited as, Chillingworth, *Works*, page number. 91, 96, 197

³¹⁰ Chillingworth, *Works*, 70-71, 282-3.

³¹¹ Chillingworth, *Works*, 95, 197.

However, in Scripture, many places, according to Chillingworth, were not clear with respect to dictating moral actions or church government, as two examples. It might be ambiguous in a variety of points, particularly in application to a current situation.³¹² Chillingworth argues that if someone knowingly opposes a clear point of Scripture, this could lead to damnation. However, if the person is not aware it is there, she cannot be held responsible for not obeying it. And following this, because the matter under discernment is unclear (since there isn't universal agreement), where there is disagreement in discernment, people must rely on comparing Scriptural passages, generally with first recourse to traditional interpretations to guide them in determining the most probable course of faithful action.

Chillingworth's primary contention is that when a Church tries to enforce a point of only moral certainty as something that must be believed with absolute certainty – as was the case with both Catholic and Puritan claims – that Church might in fact lead a person astray in seeking the truth. One group is inevitably wrong, Chillingworth claims, because God cannot make a contradictory 'thing.' But if each group is being faithful in holding the point they think is correct, space ought to be made for them to hold this point. But *only*, when that point is contestable and not clear in Scripture. Damnation will not occur even in the case of following an unfaithful course, since human beings are frail, and God is merciful.³¹³ Chillingworth's lack of focus on the definition of absolute certainty then, had to do with his pragmatic desire to demonstrate the impossibility of deriving absolute certainty and the falsity of trying to establish a Church's identity and

³¹² Chillingworth, *Works*, 92-97.

³¹³ Chillingworth, *Works*, 70

distinction from other Churches on what he asserted was false certainty. His tactic was to expose flaws in the evidentiary claims (both historical and logical flaws) of both Catholics and Puritan predestinarians.³¹⁴

Since obtaining absolute certainty was impossible, and dangerous when pretended, Chillingworth focused his arguments on demonstrating the need to work in the realm of moral certainty.³¹⁵ This was due to his understated yet presumed understanding of the Fall of humankind. What the Fall brought into question for Chillingworth was the reliability of *human judgment* required to draw conclusions from sensory perceived and interpreted data, and of reliable witness testimony.³¹⁶ When responding to his Roman Catholic interlocutor Knott's question, "Shall I hazard my soul on probabilities, or even wagers?" Chillingworth replied,

as if whatsoever is but probable, though in the highest degree of probability,³¹⁷ were as likely to be false as true! Or because it is but morally, not mathematically certain, that there was such a woman as Queen Elizabeth, such a man as Henry the Eighth, that in the highest degree probable, therefore it were an even wager there were none such!³¹⁸

Chillingworth makes a subtle point here: when it comes down to pragmatic responses, the actual epistemological capacity we have to act in light of the data we have received is identical whether we are dealing with moral or absolute certainties. This has to do with his recognition of the limits of finitude and of sin. The difference between the two has to do with the presumption of infallibility of the knowledge we have as it is tied to

³¹⁴ Orr, *Reason and Authority*, 52-4.

³¹⁵ Orr, *Reason and Authority*, 52.

³¹⁶ Orr, *Reason and Authority*, 53; c.f. Chillingworth, *Works*, 412-19.

³¹⁷ Chillingworth, *Works*, 416.

³¹⁸ Chillingworth, *Works*, 279

ecclesiastical authority. Chillingworth is concerned that what the Church claims to be absolutely certain must be assented to on pain of damnation. It is not open to testing, to correction or to criticism, and it can thereby be used by the Church to mislead the faithful. For Chillingworth, with few exceptions, it is moral certainty – which requires weighing the evidence in support of something being true – which is used in day-to-day decision-making by those reasonable persons who properly evaluate all the available evidence:

Now nothing is more repugnant, than that a man should be required to give most certain credit unto that which cannot be made appear most certainly credible; and if it appear to him to be so, then it is not obscure that it is so. For if you speak of an acquired, rational, discursive faith, certainly these reasons which make the object seem credible, must be the cause of it, and consequently the strength and firmity of my assent must rise and fall, together with the apparent credibility of the object ... And for you to require a strength of credit, beyond the appearance of the object's credibility, is all one as if you should require me to go ten mile an hour upon an horse, that will go but five; to discern a man certainly through a mist or cloud that makes him not certainly discernable; to hear a sound more clearly than it is intelligible; and he that doth so, I may well expect that his next injunction will be, that I must see something that is invisible, hear something inaudible, understanding something that is wholly intelligible.³¹⁹

For Puritans who wished to affirm an assurance of election or salvation, and for Catholics who wished to anchor certainty within their Church's doctrines and pronouncements, this inability to anchor claims about the faith in some certainty (the Church itself or the Word of God as perspicuous to its hearer) was unacceptable. Chillingworth, however, was not asserting that truth was relative, simply that we could have only moral and not absolute certainty as finite creatures.³²⁰ Weighing evidence in accord with tradition could provide moral certainty; but in light of the ultimate *telos* with which one is concerned – God – it

³¹⁹ Chillingworth, *Works*, 416.

³²⁰ Chillingworth, *Works*, 2, 18, 31, especially, 34; see also Griffin, *Latitudinarianism*, 96.

was best to treat basic claims about God's existence as if they had absolute certainty.³²¹

And why would Catholics or Puritans question whether human beings would be willing to seek after God without the assurance of the Church or the infallible Word of God as proclaimed from the pulpit? After all:

... who sees not that many millions in the world forego many times their present ease and pleasure, undergo great and toilsome labours, encounter great difficulties, adventure upon great dangers and all this is not upon any certain expectation, but upon a probable hope of some future gain and commodity, and that not infinite and eternal, but finite and temporal?³²²

If people were willing to make sacrifices on the basis of probable hope rather than certainty for things that are finite and temporal, then why would Catholics and Puritans believe they would not do so with things eternal, given the ultimate importance of the Christian faith for their eternal lives:

Who sees not that many men abstain from many things they exceedingly desire, not upon any certain assurance, but a probable fear, of danger that may come after? ... what reason then or sense is there, but that a probable hope of infinite and eternal happiness, provided for all those that obey Christ Jesus, and much more a firm faith, though not so certain, in some sort, as sense or science, may be able to sway our will to obedience, and encounter with all those temptations which flesh and blood can suggest to avert us from it? Men may talk[sic] their pleasure of an absolute and most infallible certainty, but did they generally believe that obedience to Christ, were the only way to present and eternal felicity, but as firmly and undoubtedly as that there is such a city as Constantinople ... I believe the lives of most men, both papists and protestants, would be better than they are.³²³

As with all human decision-making, then, "experience demonstrates" and "reason confirms" that obedient following may be able to overcome our "will and affections," and

³²¹ Griffin, *Latitudinarianism*, 96.

³²² Chillingworth, *Works*, 414.

³²³ Chillingworth, *Works*, 414-15.

lead to a “saving faith.”³²⁴ This does however raise the question of the role of finitude and sin in Chillingworth’s anthropology, and these are considerations to which we will now turn.

The Effects of Finitude on Human Capacity to Reason:

In *Religion of the Protestants*, Chillingworth entered into a written exchange between Edward Knott (whose real name was Matthias Wilson) and Christopher Potter, the provost of Queen’s College, Oxford. Chillingworth defended Potter’s assertion that Catholics were not simply uncharitable but wrong in asserting that Protestants could not be saved.³²⁵ Knott had written *Charity Mistaken* (1630), in which he attempted to demonstrate why Protestants could not be saved since they were outside the Catholic Church. Potter responded in 1633 by attempting to demonstrate the insufficiency of Knott’s logical claims about the Roman Catholic Church’s possessing the sole means of salvation. Knott replied to Potter with *Mercy and Truth*, which Chillingworth sought to answer (while defending himself against Knott’s charge of Socinianism) with *The Religion of the Protestants*. In the latter work, Chillingworth is set on demonstrating to Knott that Scripture is the sufficient and sole basis for coming to know and believe what is necessary for salvation:

... [t]hat it is sufficient for any man’s salvation, that he believe the Scripture; that he endeavour to believe it in the true sense of it, as far as concerns his duty; that he conform his life unto it either by obedience or repentance. He that does so (and all protestants according to the *dictamen* of their religion should do so) may be secure that he cannot err fundamentally. And they that do so cannot differ in

³²⁴ Chillingworth, *Works*, 415.

³²⁵ Chillingworth, *Works*, x-xi.

fundamentals. So that, notwithstanding their differences, and³²⁶ presumption, the same heaven may receive them all.³²⁷

At the same time, Chillingworth recognizes the effect of inherent human finitude. In responding to Knott, he argues that we encounter things in nature that are “not at all mentioned in Scripture,” or that are in Scripture but arouse “contrary belief about some place of [it] which is ambiguous, and with probability capable of diverse senses.” There are also cases where “correct interpretation of” Scripture, “with probability,” may be “alleged on both sides.” In these cases, God will not damn persons as he would were these persons wilfully opposing what they find in Scripture.³²⁸ Instead, “in charity [God] will acquit and absolve [human beings ...] who endeavour to find the truth but fail of it through human frailty.”³²⁹ Chillingworth recognizes the inherent limitation of human knowledge when encountering phenomena in both Scripture and in nature. Like Erasmus, he presses a particular point: the active pursuit of truth.³³⁰ Chillingworth will differ from Erasmus, in terms of the latter’s belief in where the limit of belief and practice lies. As suggested above, however, this is because both he and Erasmus want to preserve the capacity for a common search for the truth. This capacity had been vitiated in Erasmus’s

³²⁶ See: Chillingworth, “Life of Chillingworth,” and “Religion of the Protestants,” in *Works*. “The Religion of the Protestants,” was finally published in 1638 after it was ordered to be critically reviewed by Archbishop Laud. Laud was worried about Chillingworth’s critique of deference to the Church and upholding the capacity of reason in coming to know what was necessary to salvation.

³²⁷ Chillingworth, *Works*, 50.

³²⁸ Chillingworth, *Works*, 70.

³²⁹ Chillingworth, *Works*, 70.

³³⁰ Chillingworth, *Works*, 34, 36.

day because of the Church's division and continued threat of dividing further on the basis of presumptions or assertions of interpretative absolute certainties.

Chillingworth argues that interpreting matters within the Christian faith can produce only moral certainty in a person, as opposed to metaphysical certainty. This is the case since the faith rests on a confluence of evidences that are both historically and interpretatively derived. He writes:

... I do heartily acknowledge and believe the articles of our faith to be in themselves truths, as certain and infallible as the very common principles of geometry and metaphysics. But that there is required of us a knowledge of them and adherence to them, as certain as that of sense and science ... this I have already demonstrated to be a great error, and of dangerous and pernicious consequence ... and to satisfy you that this is no singularity of my own my margent presents you with a Protestant divine of great authority ... who hath long since preached and justified the same doctrine.³³¹

To support this assertion, Chillingworth draws on the following passage from Hooker,

The assurance of things which we believe by the Word is not so certain as of that we perceive by sense ... Yea I taught, that the things which God doth promise in His word, are surer than any thing we touch, handle, or see. But are we so sure and certain of them? If we be, why doth God so often prove his promises unto us, as he doth, by arguments taken from our sensible experience? We must be surer of the proof than the thing proved, otherwise it is no proof³³²

God himself, Chillingworth implies, is certain and sure. It is our capacity to grapple with what he has revealed, those confluences of evidence from experience, even from our senses, that he challenges. Here again we find him in agreement with Erasmus in the latter's debates with Luther over free will. Chillingworth writes:

I say, that every text of scripture which makes mention of any that were weak, or anything that were strong, in faith; of any that were of little, or any that were of great faith; of any that abounded, or any that were rich in faith; of increasing, growing, rooting, grounding, establishing, confirming in faith; every such text is a

³³¹ Chillingworth, *Works*, 412.

³³² Chillingworth's citation of Hooker: *Lawes*, (Preface, vi.3), in Chillingworth, *Works*, 413.

demonstrative refutation of this sin proving that faith, even true and saving faith, is not a thing consisting in such an indivisible point of perfection as you make it, *but capable of augmentation and diminution.*³³³

At first glance Chillingworth's methodological approach to determining the certain interpretation of a passage may seem rationalistic. However, what the passage above actually demonstrates is hardly this. Rather it asserts that creatures are inherently contingent in being (without omniscience, omnipresence, infinite life, etc.), precisely because they are not God. They are temporally and intellectually contingent or finite and must come to know – to “name” – that which comes into being and is not yet known and thus named. That is: they exist in a world that is filled, for a contingent and finite being, with uncertainty at the level of being itself. As such, determining the meaning of the created phenomena of nature and right acts with respect to them, while deferring to Scripture, also requires the exercise of reasoning in the asymptotic striving to discover, in relationship with these things, the conclusion most probably consistent with the will of an *infinite* God. Chillingworth is not making a systematic metaphysical claim about how God has ordered all things because he believes that he cannot grasp this, even knowing the canon of Scripture. Instead, he is demonstrating how we might falsify claims about what God is not doing in order to arrive at the most probable conclusion to what he *is doing* on the basis of the evidence available.

Chillingworth's method presumes that experience provides the human mind (the intellect and will) with access to the real and the true: God's ordered world of created things (nature), along with the phenomena of nature, interpreted through Scripture. Reason, for Chillingworth, is a gift from God written on the hearts of those whom he has

³³³ Chillingworth, *Works*, 414 (italics mine).

created, to enable human beings to understand the proper response to created objects or acts. Countering the assertion of his Jesuit interlocutor, Knott – that following the Roman Catholic Church’s “infallible statements” is the only means of preserving the faith from erroneous individual interpretations – Chillingworth writes,

... if you mean by discourse, right reason grounded on divine revelation and common notions written by God in the hearts of all men, and deducing according to the never failing rules of logic, consequent deductions from them; if this be it which you mean by discourse, it is very meet and reasonable and necessary, that men, as in all their actions, so especially in that of the greatest importance, the choice of their way to happiness [salvation] should be left unto it; and he that follows this in all his opinions and actions and does not only seem to do so, follows always God; whereas he that followeth a company of men [the Church], may oft-times follow a company of beasts³³⁴

Chillingworth begins by presupposing God’s existence as the creator of all things and that the relationship between created things and God is already known by human beings; yet only in potency.³³⁵ On the basis of these two presuppositions, Chillingworth presumes that what is necessary for salvation *can* be universally known by virtue of this innate principle of knowledge: God’s existence and his ordering all creation and their reasoning capacities to Him.³³⁶ However, on the basis of human finitude alone and the lack of

³³⁴ Chillingworth, *Works*, 8-9 and “The Ninth Sermon,” in *Works*, 655-69.

³³⁵ Chillingworth never develops an argument about the relationship between material things and our knowledge of them. I cannot therefore deduce the particular philosophical claims he is making about the mechanisms of coming to know God.

³³⁶ Chillingworth’s presumption of “innate knowledge” here must be contrasted to Locke’s, as the latter is the first to challenge the notion of innatism. In an essay on Locke’s rationalism, Antonia LoLordo argues that Locke was responding directly to ideas within English rationalism, specifically those of Chillingworth and Cherbury, concerning innate principles, rather than directly to Descartes’ understanding of innate ideas. Locke’s concern, argues LoLordo, is that innate principles shield social and political acts derived from those principles from critical scrutiny (principles like “whatever is, is,” or that parents should preserve and cherish their children). Against Chillingworth’s presupposition concerning the universality of “common sense” as the means through which people might be assured of knowing what is necessary to salvation, Locke argues that “there are no principles which can be shown that all men accept.” Locke in his *Essay*, uses the example of different cultures having entirely different moral systems, which in turn produce different conclusions about “good moral acts.” Thus, if we encounter a culture that is not familiar with the

perspicuity in Scripture for things not necessary to salvation – again, at least reminiscent of Erasmus’s claim that God makes Scripture intentionally obscure – the individual’s particular response to God’s justifying act, the movement from potency to act, is a matter of using inductive logic, something dependent on the limiting realities of personal and social circumstance. This inductive logic God orders in accordance with his purposes. In order that a person might grasp God’s intentions, the latter condescends to the individual’s capacities to reason. The mind’s participation in God’s ordered cosmos requires grace and then continued acts of reasoning to the most probable conclusion rather than relying on the immediate capacity to know God’s will.

The Effects of Sin

The sometimes divergent and mitigated uses of both Erasmus and Hooker point to a central feature of post-Reformation English intellectual thought. That feature is a contestation concerning the means by which people come to know the Christian faith with sufficient certainty – both in its salvific and moral aspects – and the legitimate exercise of ecclesiastical authority for forming people in that faith. This central concern raised the question of exactly by what means a person or a whole ecclesiastical body could come to know the truth. As we saw foreshadowed and then fulfilled in Hooker’s own arguments with Calvinists and Lutherans, actual division and the threat of division among Protestant groups undermined Protestant claims for the capacity of Scripture to

trine God of the Scriptures, we will find that there is no innate knowledge of *this God*. Locke argues that the culture itself will have a moral system in place with presumptions and ensuing actions entirely distinct from a Christian nation. Locke develops two other objections concerning innate principles on the grounds that they use circular logic and have demonstrable exceptions that preclude the conclusion that there are such things as innate ideas (*Essay* 1.2.5, cited in LoLordo, “Chapter 7: Locke,” in *A Companion to Rationalism*, ed., Alan Nelson, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 128-131.

serve as the sole basis for the rule of faith. On the one hand, Roman Catholics, continuing the tradition of Erasmus's own arguments, asserted that the only means of securing certainty in the truths of the faith was adherence to the teachings of the Church. Of course, for these Catholics, it was explicitly and solely the Roman Church that retained the true faith and was therefore preserved from error (an argument Erasmus does not make). In response, some Church of England thinkers countered that reason and recourse to early Church tradition could avoid the mistake of false claims to absolute certainty, while also testing the claim that truth was to be discovered by an inner light.

But these proposals by English thinkers ran up against yet another challenge posed by the theology of the Reformers and their followers. In *The Fall of Man and the Foundations of Science*, Peter Harrison underlines a fundamental disagreement arising from "different assessments of the Fall and of its impact on the human mind," beginning in the sixteenth century and proliferating among Christian groups in the seventeenth. He argues that the competition among groups to define the proper origin of truth with respect to the faith, and of authority in teaching the faith, coincided with a renewed Augustinian focus on the Fall and its effects on human nature and the limitations of the intellect.³³⁷ How, then, could one rely on reason, a human faculty affected by the Fall, to seek God's truth?

Harrison maintains that efforts to eliminate error in knowledge during the seventeenth century led not to an utter skepticism about the possibility of determining the truth, but instead to attempts to determine "the conditions under which knowledge would

³³⁷ Harrison, *The Fall of Man and the Foundations of Science*, 3.

be possible and, more particularly, what kinds of things could be known and by what methods.”³³⁸

We saw that Erasmus viewed reason, though distorted by the Fall, as elevated by the death and resurrection of Christ so that a person could co-operate in seeking truth (although not obtaining justification through that seeking). Yet reasoning took place within a presumed emanation of order consisting of spiritual, moral, and positive laws of authority that bound civil and ecclesiastical society together. Reason was not a tool an individual could autonomously exercise to understand truth on account of human finitude and sin. Deference to ecclesiastical and civil authorities mitigated these dual constraints, such that the whole society could be drawn to God in his capitulation to human frailty. His act in Christ, worked out in the ecclesiastical and political orders of a nation, enabled members of the society to learn, grow, and thereby act faithfully given their particular circumstances.

For Hooker, the acquisition of knowledge for human beings subject to the effects of sin and finitude, demanded recourse to a framework of laws within which reason was operative. These laws mitigated the cumulative effects of sin in the civil and moral sphere through legal constraints enforced civilly and ecclesiastically. These positive laws, furthermore, also enabled formation in the divine laws through common worship in a liturgy shaped entirely by scriptural immersion. In this sense, reason for Hooker did not provide direct access to knowledge of God. The capacity to reason in accordance with God’s life was formed through civil and ecclesiastical mitigation of the deleterious social and individual effects of the human tendency to sin. This in turn provided the capacity to

³³⁸ Harrison, *The Fall of Man and the Foundations of Science*, 5.

hear the Word of God in worship and to respond to his grace through one's own formed desire. There was no assumption by Hooker that one could know the will of God with absolute certainty. Instead, we see Hooker argue that God, acting through his Word, would make clear to people attending worship what was necessary for salvation. These worshippers would have the sure knowledge of salvation learned through God's being revealed in the Scriptures that they heard in worship. They would thus be freed to exercise divinely given reason, embedded in the divine law of Scripture and in the laws ordering civil and ecclesiastical life, in order to serve their neighbors.

Arminians and in particular Laud continued to focus on the essential nature of deference to the Church and her Monarch. However, as noted by Brydon, they did not retain the complex perspective of justification, or of the means by which deference to ecclesiastical and civil authorities preserved rather than destroyed one's freedom in Christ. This did not sit well with those who followed a more Reformed perspective concerning the capacity of Scripture alone, heard in worship or in study, to lead one to true faith through their liberation in Christ. For members of the Tew Circle, the exercise of reason – a divinely ordered human capacity – could in fact be impaired by deference to a Church that claimed either Scriptural or structural infallibility in their claims that people must believe *a priori*, a particular set of essentials. This presupposition was untenable since it denied the Church's susceptibility to the effects of the fall.

As we saw above, Peter Harrison contends that responses to the problem of obtaining certainty for moral action can be traced to various thinkers' underlying theological anthropologies.³³⁹ Those who believed that the Fall of man completely

³³⁹ Harrison's argument in *The Fall of Man and the Foundations of Science* challenges late twentieth-century claims about the nature of the relationship between philosophy, science, and religion in the

destroyed human nature would challenge that “intrusive investigative techniques” would be required to make plain what prelapsarian man would have naturally known.³⁴⁰ Those who believed that the triumph of the passions over reason took place at the Fall believed that if the passions could be controlled, reason could operate effectively as intended. Finally, those who believed that the Fall brought with it a dulling of human senses also believed this could be overcome with a “technological fix”: the use of instruments to assist and correct sensory inquiry. So also, according to Harrison, was there variation in the extent to which seventeenth-century thinkers believed the Fall had compromised human capacities.³⁴¹

Chillingworth articulates an interesting position in relationship to Harrison’s classification of three responses – experimental, speculative, and illuminative – and to the problem of knowledge in the seventeenth century raised by reconsideration of the effects of the Fall. He insists that reason is the means through which God has ordered human beings to receive and to acquire knowledge of him. At first glance, this would imply, according to Harrison’s scheme, that Chillingworth did not believe the effects of sin to have severely affected either human nature or the faculties involved in human reason. However presuming this would be to miss the subtleties of Chillingworth’s argument. It

seventeenth century. Harrison argues that, contrary to much of the literature in the history of science and theology into the 1990s, the work of seventeenth-century thinkers was not concerned primarily with issues of epistemology and method. Rather, they were concerned with theological anthropology: the nature of pre- and postlapsarian humankind and the effects of the Fall on created things. He attempts to overturn the belief that the seventeenth century marked a turning point from metaphysics to epistemology, and in turn to a battle between the rationalism of Descartes and the empiricism of primarily English thinkers (which involved the experimental science of thinkers from Chillingworth through Wilkins and others of the Royal Society). Harrison argues that this standard view presumes the inevitable triumph of reason over faith, which provides the basis for the Enlightenment to follow. See Harrison, *The Fall of Man and the Foundations of Science*, 9.

³⁴⁰ Harrison, *The Fall of Man and the Foundations of Science*, 6.

³⁴¹ Harrison, *The Fall of Man and the Foundations of Science*, 6.

would also miss the reason he is compelled to use Hooker's own arguments about reason, with some adaptation.

While he appealed to reason with less discussion of the effects of sin in *The Religion of Protestants*, Chillingworth's sermons written both during and after the former work also demonstrate that he advocated reasoning to the most probable conclusion on the basis of evidence provided. He believed probable reasoning to be the best means of mitigating the distortions human finitude and sin created in human capacity to know and respond to the grace of God. Consistent with the Reformers, Chillingworth writes that as a result of Adam's disobedience to the law of God, all human beings were condemned for their inability to fulfill the law perfectly:

This law, in the rigour thereof might easily have been performed by Adam: he had that perfection of grace and holiness given him, which was exactly equal and commensurable to whatsoever duties were enjoined him; but by his willful, voluntary (God forbid we should say enforced, or absolutely decreed) prevarication, he utterly undid both himself and his posterity, leaving them engaged for his debts, and as much of their own, without almost any money to pay them. Without Christ we are all obliged to the same strictness and severity of the law, which by reason of our poverty and want of grace, is become impossible to be performed by us.³⁴²

How then can human beings be reconciled or elevated in order to participate faithfully in creation, through reasoned acts, as God intended? Chillingworth sides with the Reformers, arguing that it is solely by the act of God who sent his Son into the world to atone for human sin and to reconcile human beings to himself:

accepting of the voluntary exinanition[*sic*] and humiliation of his dearly beloved Son, who submitted himself to be made flesh, to all our natural infirmities (sin only excepted) and at last to die that ignominious, accursed death on the cross, for the redemption of mankind; who in his death made a covenant with his Father, that those, and only those, who would be willing to submit themselves in obedience of a new law, which he would prescribe unto mankind, should for the

³⁴² Chillingworth, "The Eighth Sermon," in *Works*, 641.

merits of his obedience and death be justified in the sight of God, have their sins forgiven them and be made heirs of everlasting glory.³⁴³

Human submission and obedience to God, given in the new law laid down by Jesus Christ himself, is the means of entering into Christ's own justified life, Chillingworth proclaims to his congregation here. Countering the notion of certainty of salvation, as asserted by Puritans, Chillingworth argues in his sermon that it is hope and faith in what God alone continues to do in human beings that ought to sustain their seeking him:

The event [of Adam's Fall] shows, he could not have an infallible faith of his perseverance. If then such a contented, settled mind could accompany Adam in paradise, even when he knew it was in his power, with but reaching out his hand, and tasting an apple; yea with a sudden, wicked word, or an unsanctified thought, utterly and irrecoverably to degrade himself from that happy estate; surely, we Christians have much more reason to rejoice in our hope, since we know assuredly, that as God has been so gracious to begin this good work in us, so he will not be wanting to perfect it even to the end, if we will but perform our parts, which he has already given us more than sufficient grace to do, and will never fail to supply us with more for the asking; nay, more (which are surer grounds to build upon, than ever Adam had) since we know, that not one, nor ten, nor a hundred sins, shall be able, so irreparably to cast us out of God's favour, but that he will be willing, upon our repentance, especially calling to mind his old mercies, to restore us again to our lost happiness.³⁴⁴

Chillingworth does not understand human works as meritorious. With the Reformers he affirms that a person's salvation is "not for any merits of ours, but only for thy [God's] free undeserved mercies in our blessed Saviour Jesus Christ, in whom alone thou art well pleased . . ." Even so, God's grace requires human response, made effective not by human agency but by the agency of God in Christ, through the Holy Spirit:

And from hence may appear how full of danger the former doctrine is, which teacheth that actual remission of sins is procured to God's elect immediately upon Christ's death; and how dishonourable it is to the Spirit of grace, excluding him

³⁴³ Chillingworth, "The Eighth Sermon," in *Works*, 641.

³⁴⁴ Chillingworth, "The Eighth Sermon," in *Works*, 641.

from having any concurrence or efficacy in our salvation; for if this should be true, the powerful working of the Holy Spirit can in no sense concern either our justification, or everlasting happiness. For how can it be said that the Holy Spirit doth co-operate to our salvation, since all our good and happiness was procured by Christ's death; not only before, but without all manner of respect had to our regeneration and sanctification, by the power of the blessed Spirit³⁴⁵

Chillingworth's intent is to establish that certainty resides with the agency of the triune God alone. Finite and sinful human beings approach God and come to know the order of his creation through God's revelation in his Son Jesus Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit. And yet, apart from those things necessary for salvation, people can only know this ordering of created phenomena in relationship to one another and to God through discerning the Scriptures using epistemic probability. This is so even as they have received the Spirit who is at work in them. For Chillingworth, Scripture is the sole source for knowledge of the saving faith. We see almost this precise claim in Erasmus's own writing. Epistemic uncertainty requires constant pursuit of God, not to obtain justification by merit but to learn the proper response to the one who first loved us: obedience.

Again, as Erasmus maintained, Scripture provides the sole source of knowledge about God revealed in Jesus Christ, and ultimately this is the one to whom all ought to defer. This is because Scripture conveys to human beings God's self-revelation. This revelation is, first, of the way in which they have been reconciled to life with God, and second of the means by which, on knowing this, human beings can approach God through the use of probabilistic reasoning. They must weigh different passages of Scripture in an attempt to clarify the most probable course of faithful response where there are

³⁴⁵ Chillingworth, "The Fifth Sermon," in *Works*, 591-2.

contradictions between passages, where there is ambiguity in meaning, or in application to the present, or where there is a diversity of interpretation in the Church's tradition.

What appears evident for Chillingworth, as for Erasmus and Hooker, is that God in Jesus Christ has the sole agency for bearing and overcoming the penalty due to human beings for their sin, and thus reconciling them to life with God upon their faith in him. This faith of human beings, by the Holy Spirit's work, is manifest in submission and obedience.

[F]or, as excluding Christ's satisfaction, he hath no power or authority, as man of sending the Holy Ghost, thereby to work in us an ability of performing the conditions of the second covenant; and, by consequence of making us capable of the fruit and benefit of his satisfaction. Therefore, blessed be God, the Father, for the great glory which he gave unto Christ; and blessed be our Lord Jesus Christ, for meriting and purchasing that glory at so dear a rate; and blessed be the Holy Spirit, who, when Christ (who is flesh of our flesh and bone of our bone) did send him, would be content to come down and dwell among us.³⁴⁶

Despite human sin and finitude, the effect of God's coming into the world in Christ – his dying and being raised from the dead, and this act being recounted in Scripture – is the only certain revelation on which human beings can base their faith and hope.

We find in holy scripture that our salvation is ascribed to all the three persons of the blessed Trinity, though in several aspects: to the Father, who accepts of Christ's satisfaction, and offereth pardon of all our sins; to the Son, who merited and procured reconciliation for his elect faithful servants; and to the Holy Ghost, the comforter, who, being sent by the Son, worketh in us the power to perform the conditions of the new covenant, thereby qualifying us for receiving and actual remission of our sins, and a right to that glorious inheritance purchased for us.³⁴⁷

Here Chillingworth has presumed both Erasmus's and Hooker's Christology as grounding every other claim he will make. He has also presumed Scripture as a divine

³⁴⁶ Chillingworth, "The Fifth Sermon," in *Works*, 591.

³⁴⁷ Chillingworth, "The Fifth Sermon," in *Works*, 591.

law, given first to assure those who believe, of their salvation, and second to examine and assess what is discovered in nature/creation as it pertains to one's moral life. As with Hooker, this continues the Reformers' desire to free believers from concern with justification, to reason probabilistically and freely about things that affect moral life but that are *adiaphora* to salvation.

On the Role of Scripture, sin and probabilistic reasoning

While at first glance Chillingworth and Hooker implicitly assume that Scripture is a law to be interpreted rather than a law that interprets the reader, this conclusion fails to account for both thinkers' taking human sin and Christ's justification seriously. God in fact demands that human beings willingly offer themselves, not because they have certainty about who God is, or their status before Him, but because recognizing their fallen and finite state mitigates the pride of assurance. This recognition also elicits the humility needed to endure in faith and hope. Faith and hope for Chillingworth involve pragmatic acts, which require the use of reason. While he is not as explicit as is Hooker, it would seem that Chillingworth pursues Hooker's own logic on this point: human reason is grounded in God's own self-determination, being a law to himself and to all things. Justification and knowledge of what is necessary for living in accordance with the gospel are passively received in Christ and revealed in Scripture through God's own act. Chillingworth argues that it is in Christ alone that human beings are freed from slavery to sin and enabled to learn what it means to live faithfully in that freedom. This learning itself is the willing response or love of God:

... God himself has engaged himself by promise, that if he would love him and keep his commandments, and pray earnestly for his Spirit, and be willing to be

directed by it, he should undoubtedly receive it, even the Spirit of truth, which shall lead him into all truth; that is certainly, at least, into all necessary truth, and suffer him to fall into no pernicious error. The sum of his [a doctor of the Church's] whole direction to him briefly would be this: believe the scripture to be the Word of God, use your true endeavor to find the true sense of it, and to live according to it, and then you may rest securely that you are in the true way of eternal happiness ... because, not knowing absolutely all truth, nay, not all profitable truth, and being free from error; *but endeavouring to know the truth and obey it, and endeavouring to be free from error, is by this way made the only condition of salvation.*³⁴⁸

As indicated in the section above, this act of searching is not meritorious, according to Chillingworth: "all our sins are already remitted, and that only for the virtue of Christ's satisfaction and yet, unless we believe, our sins shall never be forgiven us."³⁴⁹ So while our searching is not meritorious, it is the very means by which a person is obedient in fulfilling her duty, which ought to have been fulfilled by human beings at the outset of their creation. It is the capacity to seek, through Christ's justifying act in fulfilling God's covenant with humanity, that has enabled a life of obedient response from human beings.

In one example, we see Chillingworth aim to support Potter arguing to Knott that Potter certainly wasn't leading Protestant Christians into false hope of salvation, claiming they need not repent or seek to do God's will. Rather God's act through Christ is the anchor through which the hope of salvation is grounded. It is God's act in Christ and his condescension to a person's capacity, that motivates her seeking:

... seeing the hope of salvation cannot be ungrounded, which requires and supposes belief and practice of all things absolutely necessary unto salvation and

³⁴⁸ Chillingworth, *Works*, 277; see also, 353, 367. Chillingworth again says, "[Protestants] have reason to esteem it a principal and necessary duty of a Christian to place his hope of justification and salvation, not in the perfection of his own righteousness (which, if it be imperfect, will not justify), but only in the mercies of God, through Christ's satisfaction, and yet, notwithstanding this, nay, the rather for this, may preserve themselves in the right temper of good Christians which is a happy mixture and sweet composition of fear and confidence," (Chillingworth, *Works*, 499).

³⁴⁹ Chillingworth, *Works*, 585.

repentance of those sins and errors which we fall into by human frailty: nor [is Mr. Potter] friend to indifferency in religion, seeing [Potter] gives them only hope of pardon of errors who are desirous, and according to the proportion of their opportunities and abilities, industrious to find the truth; or at least truly repentant, that they have not been so. Which doctrine [faith grounded in the act of Christ] is very fit to excite men to a constant and impartial search of truth, and very far from teaching them, that it is indifferent what religion they are of; and without all controversy, very honourable to the goodness of God, with which how it can consist, not to be satisfied with his servants' true endeavours to know his will, and do it, without full and exact performance, I leave it to you [Knott] and all good men to judge³⁵⁰

A person cannot obtain salvation through his works. This is not solely because the totality of a human being's acts are not perfect, but because the certain knowledge required to fulfill a perfect life cannot be obtained by finite, sinful creatures. For Chillingworth, human beings in Christ – who in his obedience is the fulfillment of the law – are equipped to search the Scriptures so they might learn of God, and come to willing obedience in response to him. In discerning God's will, it is God who accommodates himself to the seeker's capacity, in order that one is able to respond in love, whatever one's capacities and circumstances. The contingency and distinction of the latter is the very nature of finitude and thus of uncertainty, in which all creation has its existence. Here once again we are reminded of Erasmus's own argument: the human being is set free from sin *so that* he can, by grace, seek God. In the case of both thinkers, this seeking involves participation in a society ordered ultimately to God and is the fitting (because free) response to God's love. It is also a fulfillment, in Christ, of the first commandment.

Indeed, Chillingworth follows Hooker in understanding Scripture as a rule (divine law) by which, through the faculties involved in reason, one comes to know God and discern his will. Neither Hooker nor Chillingworth understood Scripture to provide a

³⁵⁰ Chillingworth, *Works*, 34.

physical and efficacious encounter with God. To encounter Scripture for both thinkers, and as we shall see for Wilkins, was not to have direct unmediated participation in the divine cosmic order. For both thinkers, reason – exercised within a common, corporate society – had the role of mediating access to God’s providential ordering of human beings through yet another mediating law: Scripture. But this required ongoing engagement, scrutiny and testing. Scripture was God’s Word, but that Word functioned within the limited circumstances of the created world, which meant that Scripture’s reception demanded the use of human reason.³⁵¹

This was especially so for Chillingworth since Scripture was *not* a perfect rule whereby “all things absolutely may be proved, which are to be believed.”³⁵² For example, Scripture cannot prove to a “gainsayer” that there is a ‘God’ or that the book called Scripture is the Word of God. Thus when Chillingworth speaks of Scripture as “the perfect rule of faith,” what he means is that for those who hold it to be divine and a rule of faith – as Catholics and Protestants both do – it contains “all the material objects of faith in a complete and total rule and not only an imperfect and partial rule.”³⁵³ Chillingworth’s starting point then is fideistic: Catholics and Protestants *believe* Scripture to be a perfect rule, which means that it contains all things necessary to salvation *and* all things necessary to living faithfully, in a common body, before God.³⁵⁴

Nonetheless, because Scripture is a rule to guide people in discernment and *not a judge* that dictates directly what one ought to know, it is essential for an individual to

³⁵¹ Chillingworth, *Works*, 95.

³⁵² Chillingworth, *Works*, 92-3.

³⁵³ Chillingworth, *Works*, 93.

³⁵⁴ Chillingworth, *Works*, 92-3, 248.

exercise reason as Scripture is heard (or read) and taught in and through the civil and ecclesiastical society of which one is a part.³⁵⁵ In both Hooker and Chillingworth, reason was still divinely given and ordered; but both also seem to have understood experience – within the context of God’s providentially ordered civil society – as an essential aspect of the reality of God’s ordering of nature (his creation).

The lack of formation in a singular ecclesiastical body aroused skepticism about all claims to legitimately form people in the faith.³⁵⁶ Addressing that skepticism required deference to experience within a common social body, which itself required the weighing of competing claims about almost all aspects of the created order. The exception, for the majority of seventeenth century Western Christians, was God as the origin of all created things.³⁵⁷

On Certainty: Origin and Function

W.M. Spellman, in his work on seventeenth-century Latitudinarianism, argues that Chillingworth responded to the problem of uncertainty in scriptural interpretation and doctrinal formulation by attempting to establish a common locus or origin from which to derive true knowledge about God. He did so without recourse to contested ecclesiastical doctrines. In his argument against Knott, Chillingworth sought to demonstrate the

³⁵⁵ Chillingworth, *Works*, 95.

³⁵⁶ For a comprehensive treatment of the role of and distinctions between forms of skepticism in early modernity, see Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Savonarola to Bayle*.

³⁵⁷ For a comprehensive analysis of how this shift to experience as mediator takes place, see Susan Schreiner, *Are You Alone Wise? The Search for Certainty in the Early Modern Era*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); and Harrison, *The Bible, Protestantism, and the Rise of Natural Science*.

fallibility of Roman Catholic presumptions to be the sole locus of authority in norming the interpretation and doctrinal formulations of Scripture.

Spellman summarizes Chillingworth's deference to Scripture as the sole locus of authority for ordering Christian life: "Chillingworth believed that since both Catholics and Protestants accept the divine inspiration of Scripture, it alone must serve as the standard by which to settle controversies, this despite the problems involved in accurately translating texts and the apparent contradictions to be found in certain passages."³⁵⁸

Citing Scripture in order to demonstrate how it undermined the claims Roman Catholics were making about their Church being the locus of certainty, Chillingworth argues:

I say no more than St. Paul, in exhorting all Christians to "try all things, and hold fast that which is good"; than St. Peter, in commanding all Christians "to be ready to give a reason of the hope that is in them": than our Saviour himself, in forewarning all his followers that "if they blindly follow blind guides, both leaders and followers should fall into the ditch and again, in saying even to the people, "yea, and why of yourselves judge ye not what is right."³⁵⁹

Chillingworth's body of works is, in fact, a response to Roman Catholic claims that one cannot be saved outside the Roman Catholic Church. The core assertion he wishes to confront is that the truth can only be revealed somewhere, and that one can only therefore be obedient to the truth if in fact one is an assenting, believing member of the Roman Catholic Church where that revelation purportedly has taken place.³⁶⁰

In responding to Knott's arguments, Chillingworth attempts to dismantle claims to the credibility of infallible or certain doctrinal assertions by the Catholic Church. He

³⁵⁸ Spellman, *The Latitudinarians and the Church of England 1660-1700*, 21; on ambiguity in Scripture see, Chillingworth, *Works*, 69-70.

³⁵⁹ Chillingworth, *Works*, 9.

³⁶⁰ Chillingworth, *Works*; see whole Preface, 1-52 in particular.

argues that these cannot be “weighed” with other assertions and thereby verified as being more probabilistically true than other possible conclusions about a matter of doctrine.

What is expected from Roman Catholics, Chillingworth argues, is *a priori* assent. This cannot be given if someone is expected to consent to what cannot be evaluated in light of the available evidence, including Scripture – most particularly when it is contested by Christians:³⁶¹

Nor yet was I so unreasonable as to expect mathematical demonstrations from you in matters plainly incapable of them, such as are to be believed, and if we speak properly, cannot be known . . . nor yet was I so unreasonable a master, who requires a stronger assent to his conclusions than his arguments deserve; so I conceive him a forward and undisciplined scholar who desires stronger arguments for a conclusion than the matter will bear. But had you represented to my understanding such reasons of your doctrine, as being weighed in an even balance, held by an even hand, with those on the other side, would have turned the scale and have made your religion more credible than the contrary; certainly I should have despised the shame of one more alteration and with both mine arms and with all my heart, most readily have embraced it³⁶²

Chillingworth attacks the very heart of Roman Catholic claims to absolute (as opposed to moral) certainty in their doctrinal formulations, charging that these are actually based, at best, on probable arguments derived from a confluence of evidences. These evidences include statements of the Church fathers and of their own interpretations of Scripture, and the tradition and practices thereby derived. Chillingworth argues that this confluence of

³⁶¹ Chillingworth begins with a personal reflection on the nature of the relationship between truth and knowledge: “But I for my part, unless I deceive myself, was, and still am so affected, as I have made profession, not willing, I confess, to take anything upon trust and to believe it without asking myself why, no, nor able to command myself (were I never so willing) to follow, like a sheep, every shepherd that should take upon him to guide me; or every flock, that should chance to go before me: but most apt and most willing to be led by reason to any way, or from it, and always submitting all other reasons to this one, God hath said so, therefore it is true” (Chillingworth, *Works*, 2). Again, it must be remembered that for Chillingworth, the truth of what created objects or phenomena mean is not immediately ascertainable, as asserted by spiritualists. When Chillingworth states “God hath said so,” Chillingworth presumes that a person or a Church must weigh not only several different ways of interpreting, but also other passages from the canon of Scripture before being able to draw a probable conclusion about what “God hath said.”

³⁶² Chillingworth, *Works*, 2, 102.

evidence cannot be the basis for proving an assertion with certainty and thereby requiring immediate assent. The evidences are all limited and thus fallible sources of truth. They are, he challenges, only derived from limited human reason, or from circular argument:

But universal tradition (you say, and so do I too) is of itself credible; and that hath in all ages, taught the Church's infallibility with full consent. If it have, I am ready to believe it; but *that it hath*, I would hope you would not have me take upon your word; for that were to build myself upon the Church and the Church upon you.³⁶³

It is *not* that a universal tradition does not exist, says Chillingworth. Rather the tradition of interpretation and of practice that has been handed on must be examined and weighed, in accordance with the canon of Scripture, prior to assent to any proposition or teaching concerning the faith. This is so because (as Hooker argued), for one to be directed to one's proper end in God, a person must examine the faith handed on in light of potentially new civil and ecclesiastical circumstances, as well as the inherent epistemological uncertainty of God's providential ordering of finite things, and of course in light of sin. For Hooker this demanded not simply individual discernment, but ecclesiastical discernment within the context of a civil common body: the nation of England. Positive laws that developed or divine laws derived to order one to God in a particular time may no longer function in new social/political orders. The universal tradition is sustained by the agency of God alone, while human discernment must be directed and redirected continually to seek that tradition not through deference to unchanging civil or ecclesiastical positive laws, but through the continual discernment of phenomena in their accordance with Scripture.

³⁶³ Chillingworth, *Works*, 137.

Dodds offers that, in keeping with members of the Tew Circle, Chillingworth sought, along with Erasmus and Hooker before him, to undermine the arguments to certainty or infallibility of both Roman Catholics and Puritans.³⁶⁴ Like Erasmus, Chillingworth argued that beyond a few simple truths required for salvation – truths plain to the “common man” – all other things were *adiaphora* with respect to salvation. In Hooker’s³⁶⁵ and Chillingworth’s cases, this was considered a direct attack by Catholic and Calvinists alike.³⁶⁶

Chillingworth works to undermine the notion of obtaining absolute certainty once again when he challenges the notion of a universally evident tradition, as indicated above. Here he examines the circularity of evidentiary claims made by Roman Catholics: if they believe this tradition to be universally evident and thereby a basis for their certainty of being the origin of true faith, “let it appear so to all,” for otherwise like a “silent thunder”

³⁶⁴ Dodds, *Exploiting Erasmus*, 209-10; see also, David Como, “Puritans, Predestination and the Construction of Orthodoxy,” wherein he examines the early divisions amongst Calvinists concerning salvation and predestination and the way in which these are related to theological and political tensions within the second through fourth decades of seventeenth-century English life. Como argues against Tyacke’s assertion that there was a Puritan or Reformed consensus of orthodoxy in England. Como contends that a division was already well underway in the 1620s within Puritanism, between those who held predestinarianism views and those more inclined to Arminian universalism (as we saw earlier in the exchange between Twisse and Cotton). Cotton’s work in the 1620s had influenced Calvinist thinkers like John Goodwin, Benjamin Whichcote, and later Richard Baxter (writing in 1649). This is an important trend, as Goodwin cites William Chillingworth’s own work as influential to his. Here we begin to see a crossover between more traditionally Calvinist thinkers and Arminian-leaning thinkers (David Como, “Puritans, Predestination and the Construction of Orthodoxy,” in *Studies in Modern British Religious History: Conformity and Orthodoxy in the English Church, c.1560-1660*, ed. Peter Lake and Michael Questier (New York: The Boydell Press, 2000), 64-87; see especially 64-5 and 85-7.

³⁶⁵ Remer, *Toleration and Rhetoric*, 9.

³⁶⁶ Dodds, *Exploiting Erasmus*, 209-10. For a scathing attack against Chillingworth, see Francis Cheynell, *Chillingworthi novissima. Or, The sickness, heresy, death and buriall of William Chillingworth* (London: Printed for Samuel Bellibrand, at the Brazen Serpent in Pauls Churchyard, 1644), <http://name.umdl.umich.edu/A79473.0001.001>. (Accessed February 15, 2018). Despite advocating for a Christian burial for Chillingworth against the wishes of many Presbyterians, Cheynell took the occasion of his funeral to denounce what he believed were Chillingworth’s Socinian tendencies and in particular Chillingworth’s supposed undermining of orthodox predestination theology.

it goes unnoticed.³⁶⁷ Even were it to appear by the evidence of the testimony of Church fathers, how could Roman Catholics guarantee – with absolute certainty – that there never was a Church Father who contested that tradition? Finally, Chillingworth undermines the very claim of deference to the Church fathers by the Roman Catholic Church. He asks how the latter could purport to have universal authority, when, in accordance with their own claim to have the support of the Church fathers, five centuries of fathers failed to recognize the Church of Rome as having infallibility:

Let then the tradition appear; for a secret tradition is somewhat like a silent thunder. You will perhaps produce for the confirmation of it, some sayings of the [Church] fathers, who in every age taught this doctrine (as Gualterius in his *Chronology* undertakes to do; but with so ill success, that I heard an able man of your religion profess, that in the first three centuries, there was not one authority pertinent): but how will you warrant that none of them teach the contrary? Again, how will I be assured, that the places have indeed this sense in them, seeing there is not one father for five hundred years after Christ, what does say in plain terms, the Church of Rome is infallible? ... This will be again to go into the circle, which made us giddy before; to prove this Church infallible because tradition says so; tradition to say so, because the fathers say so; the fathers say so, because the Church says so, which is infallible: yea, but reason will show this to be the meaning of them. Yes, if we may use our reason and rely upon it: otherwise, as light shows nothing to the blind ... so reason cannot prove anything to him that either hath not seen or useth not his reason to judge of them.³⁶⁸

For Chillingworth, the sorts of evidences to which human beings have access when encountering phenomena of any sort – whether Scripture, the Church, tradition, or a collection of logical or historically derived arguments – cannot provide absolute or mathematical certainty. Therefore, he argues, people have the capacity to derive only moral certainty, which must be weighed according to the credibility of the evidence

³⁶⁷ Chillingworth, *Works*, 137.

³⁶⁸ Chillingworth, *Works*, 137.

gathered: “our assent must be equal to our evidence.”³⁶⁹ It is not merely the conformance or assent of one’s external acts to one’s understanding of truth that Chillingworth is considering; rather, it is the internal operation of the mind, or the conscience, to which he refers. Citing Hooker and adding his own gloss, Chillingworth remarks:

For though [Hooker] says that “men are bound to do whatsoever the sentence of final decision shall determine,” as it is plain men are bound to yield such an obedience to all courts of civil judicature; yet he *says not*, that they “are bound to think” that determination lawful, and that sentence just. Nay, it is plain, he says, that “they must do according to the judge’s sentence, though in their *private opinion* it seem unjust.”³⁷⁰

What Chillingworth here denies, as we have seen above, is that we have perspicuous access to and thereby epistemological warrant for demanding infallibility in our beliefs about what God requires. He denies this even if one’s external acts, following Hooker, *must conform to a Church’s teaching*.

This is a critical point to note: internal lack of assurance, or internal dissent, is inevitable given human finitude and sin. This requires, however, that an individual have a protected common space to evaluate, weigh, and wrestle with his own ideas. The Church *cannot* be an infallible interpreter of Scripture, Chillingworth has thus far argued.³⁷¹ However, the Church *is* a necessary introduction to the Christian faith revealed in Scripture and interpreted by the Church through time (customs). The Church therefore is the body from which Christians learn. And if it admits to its fallibility and does not attempt to enforce internal consent or belief on pain of damnation (as do both the

³⁶⁹ Chillingworth, Chillingworth, Wharton Manuscript, 943, f. 871, cited by Orr, *Reason and Authority*, 52

³⁷⁰ Chillingworth, *Works*, 385.

³⁷¹ Chillingworth, *Works*, 197

Catholic and extreme Calvinists), then even where Scripture is silent, it makes sense to consent to the Church's teaching since it can be corrected over time.³⁷²

It is precisely this limit – deference *in actions* to a Church that permits a variety of *internally held* beliefs concerning many parts of Scripture – that enables individual and corporate discernment of the whole canon of Scripture and tradition, and over time, reformation of erroneous conclusions. Put another way: the assent given is grounded in moral certainty, which, for Chillingworth, is still fallible and therefore requires constant testing over time, and in nearly every case, reformation or re-articulation for new circumstances. Hence, there must be a protected common space to do this. Toleration permitted by this common space, for diverse interpretations of most parts of Scripture is not, Chillingworth challenges, the same as allowing sin. Nor is it for the purpose of political “peace and quiet.” Instead, it is a mutual commitment to “suffering any affliction ... rather than consent to the division of the Church.”³⁷³ Again, as we have seen Dodds point out, Chillingworth's is a polemical argument against those – Catholics and Calvinists both – who demand internal assent (belief) on the basis of their presumed and sole infallible authority. It is the presumption of certainty, and grounding one's authority in it, that prevents Christians from faithfully seeking the truth of God's revelation in the limited creation in which human beings live and that threatens to divide the Church further.

³⁷² Chillingworth, *Works*, 197-8. Chillingworth argues that the Church's authority is warrant enough to follow some things on which Scripture is silent; but *not* to believe those things on the authority of the Church that are repugnant to Scripture (Chillingworth, *Works*, 198). It is the latter demand by Catholics and extreme Calvinists, tied to their respective presumption of certainty, that Chillingworth believes actually justifies leaving both Churches. They would be asking someone to potentially knowingly, and thus willingly commit sin (Chillingworth, *Works*, 331).

³⁷³ Chillingworth, *Works*, 332.

The Role of the Church:

Chillingworth's most comprehensive biographer, Robert Orr, argues that the former presupposes certain elements of natural and divine law as articulated by someone like Richard Hooker. Yet Chillingworth departs from making his arguments through the lens of a systematic metaphysical framework of laws (divinely given and humanly appropriated through natural and scriptural revelation) as the governing structure of creation. Instead, Orr claims that Chillingworth focuses almost exclusively on the epistemological matter of how a saving truth might be known and obeyed by human beings.³⁷⁴

Chillingworth seems to implicitly (if not explicitly) presume parts of Hooker's framework, while also adapting aspects to it. As argued throughout this chapter, his purpose in adopting and adapting Hooker's framework was to propose a solution to the pragmatic concern of how to evaluate evidence – especially evidence to support truth claims contested by various Christian Churches or groups after nearly a century of civil and ecclesiastical breakdown.

His adaptation of some of Hooker's own work develops a means for evaluating truth claims in the midst of ecclesiastical and civil contestation. Chillingworth worries that deference to a Church that claims infallible authority and capacity to pronounce on matters of the faith with certainty can only become a "crutch" that does not demand that believers seek for God in a way that mitigates the effects of human finitude and sin.

³⁷⁴ Robert Orr, "Chillingworth Versus Hooker: A Criticism of Natural Law Theory" in *Journal of Religious History*, 2, 2, (December 1962), 120-132, 130.

Claims to certainty may, as we have seen Chillingworth point out to Knott, mask sin or overreach with respect to the reality of human finitude.

We can see this concern in how Chillingworth adapts Hooker's argument for obedience to the Church of England with the increased threat of factions all claiming certainty. Hooker contended that the Church was the first cause leading people to belief and to be "of a contrary mind without cause" was an "impudent thing for any man."³⁷⁵ Hooker was clear that the Church had authority in religious matters, since he argued that "for redress of professed errors and open schisms it is and must be the Church's care that all may in outward conformity be one"³⁷⁶ Furthermore, writes Hooker:

And by experience we all know, that the first outward motive leading men so to esteem of the scripture is the authority of God's Church. For when we know the whole Church of God has that opinion of the scripture, we judge it even at the first an impudent thing for any man bred and brought up in the Church to be of a contrary mind without cause. Afterwards the more we bestow our labour in reading or hearing the mysteries thereof, the more we find that the thing itself does answer our received opinion concerning it. So that the former inducement prevailing somewhat with us before, does now much more prevail, when the very thing has ministered farther reason.³⁷⁷

Knott had used Hooker's work to insist that even Church of England thinkers wanted to establish the Church as the legitimate seat of authority in determining matters certain *and* uncertain. Knott quotes the following passage from Hooker: "And by experience we all know, that the first outward motive leading men so to esteem of the Scripture is the authority of God's Church," to which Chillingworth responds that Knott has confused Hooker's assertion concerning the source of a doctrine with its truth:

³⁷⁵ Chillingworth, *Works*, 103, citing Hooker, *Laws*, (III.8.14).

³⁷⁶ Hooker, *Laws*, (V.68.7).

³⁷⁷ Hooker, *Laws*, (III.8.13).

Mr. Hooker hath not one syllable to your pretended purpose, but very much directly to the contrary ... he tells us, indeed, “that ordinarily the first introduction and probable motive to the belief of the verity is the authority of the Church”³⁷⁸; but that it is the last foundation whereupon our belief hereof is rationally grounded, that, in the same place, he plainly denies.³⁷⁹

According to Chillingworth, the Church for Hooker was essential to forming people in the faith; but the Church itself could not provide adequate means of verifying its interpretations of Scripture, and thereby the particular teachings it upholds, merely on the basis of making an infallible assertion about its own authority or its own interpretation.³⁸⁰ Rather, the Church as a body, as well as its individual members, would have to do as the Church fathers and “maintain the authority of the books of God, by arguments such as unbelievers themselves must needs think reasonable, if they judge thereof as they should.”³⁸¹ Reasonable deduction and verification is “neither ... a thing impossible or greatly hard, even by such kind of proofs so to manifest and clear that point, that no man living shall be able to deny it, without denying some apparent principle, such as all men acknowledge to be true.”³⁸²

³⁷⁸ Hooker, *Lawes*, (III.8.14).

³⁷⁹ Chillingworth, *Works*, 102-3.

³⁸⁰ Hooker, argues, as we saw Chillingworth do above, that it is not ‘automatic’ that people will believe Scripture to be divine and the means of knowing God and thus of salvation: “Scripture teaches all supernaturally revealed truth, without the knowledge whereof salvation cannot be attained. The main principle whereupon our belief of all things therein contained depends is, that the scriptures are the oracles of God himself. This in itself we cannot say is evident. For then all men that hear it would acknowledge it in heart, as they do when they hear that *every whole is more than any part of that whole*, because this in itself is evident. The other we know that all do not acknowledge when they hear it. There must be therefore some former knowledge presupposed which does herein assure the hearts of all believers” (Hooker, *Lawes*, III.viii.13).

³⁸¹ Chillingworth, *Works*, 102-3; citation of Hooker, *Lawes* (III.8.14).

³⁸² Chillingworth, *Works*, 102-3; citation of Hooker, *Lawes* (III.8.14).

Chillingworth adds a footnote and gloss to his citation of Hooker's text above, clarifying the point he is driving at: "Therefore the authority of the Church is not the pause whereon we rest; we had need of more assurance and the intrinsical arguments afford it. Somewhat, but not much, until [the Church's assertion] be backed and enforced by farther reason; itself therefore is not the farthest reason and the last resolution."³⁸³ On the one hand, it might appear that Chillingworth is attempting to press Hooker's whole argument to show that reason is the foundation that provides verification of ecclesiastical interpretations of Scripture. Again, in a footnote that glosses Hooker's assertions, he writes, "natural reason, then, built on principles common to all men, is the last resolution, unto which the Church's authority is but the first inducement."³⁸⁴ As such, the authority of the Church ought not hamper the exercise of reason. Its authority would then rest on false and illegitimate assent that might, as argued in the previous section, in fact be damnable.

On the other hand, sustaining an arena in which corporate discernment could take place required some boundaries or limits on people's external behaviors and so indeed, on acting out those things about which they had reasoned. As Dodds indicates, Chillingworth took up Erasmus's polemical argument to provide precisely this argument: a comprehensive, national Church can provide substantial room for corporate discernment and diverse understanding and the necessary seeking for truth Chillingworth believed essential. The sole limit to this was any body that wished to instill practices or force conformity of belief on pain of damnation, on the basis of infallible authority and/or

³⁸³ Chillingworth, *Works*, 102-3 (in two notes); referring to Hooker's whole argument in, *Laws* (III.8.14).

³⁸⁴ Chillingworth, *Works*, 103.

absolutely certain interpretation of Scripture. In the wake of contestation about the legitimate body for ordering the life of Christians, let alone the meaning of Scripture on various points of doctrine, Chillingworth's polemical tactic seems one of the only pragmatic ways of preventing further division of the Church.

Remer extends this argument.³⁸⁵ He notes Chillingworth's concern that making the ground of salvation dependent upon internal assent to a Church's infallible doctrines would prevent the possibility of reuniting Christians divided at the Reformation. Further, the demand for assent would require belief in things potentially false or believed to be false (if rationally weighed), which in both cases would demand assent to something (potentially) damnable. From Chillingworth's perspective, Remer notes, assent to something one believes to be false would constitute sin because it would be to follow other human beings rather than God. But Remer's insight into Chillingworth's thought also portrays something else: the very assertion of certainty about aspects that are *adiaphora* to salvation cannot but divide the Church, which is an act of sin. Chillingworth writes:

This presumptuous imposing of the senses of men upon the words of God, the special senses of men upon the general words of God, and laying them upon men's consciences together, under the equal penalty of death and damnation; this vain conceit that we can speak of the things of God, better than in the words of God: this deifying our own interpretations and tyrannous enforcing them upon others; this restraining of the word of God from that latitude and generality and the understandings of men from that liberty, wherein Christ and the Apostles left them, is, and hath been, the only fountain of all the schisms of the Church and that which makes them immortal; the common incendiary of Christendom, and that which tears into pieces, not the coat, but the bowels and members of Christ ...

³⁸⁵ Remer, *Humanism and the Rhetoric of Toleration*, 2-4. Remer includes Chillingworth as a seventeenth-century humanist whose primary concern was with using persuasion over force as a means to resolve religious disagreement. Probability, according to both Remer and Orr (Orr, *Reason and Authority*, 45-7), was directly opposed to infallibility for Chillingworth and other humanists like him, as both the more faithful and more fruitful means of coming to sufficient agreement to reunite the divided Church.

take away these walls of separation and all will quickly be one. Take away this persecuting, burning, cursing, damning of men for not subscribing to the words of men, as the words of God; require of christians only to believe Christ and to call no man master but him only; let those leave claiming infallibility that have no title to it and let them that in their words disclaim it, disclaim it likewise in their actions. In a word, take away tyranny ... and restore christians to their just and full liberty of captivating their understanding to scripture only ... so it may be well hoped ... that universal liberty [moderated by God's blessing] may quickly reduce Christendom to truth and unity.³⁸⁶

Echoing Erasmus, Chillingworth recognizes that the assertion of certainty has led to “a fountain of schisms” and brutal treatment that constantly threatens to tear apart the Church, rather than enabling reconciliation. Chillingworth argues here that pursuing truth requires that persons have a protected space where they are at “liberty” to examine the Scriptures in order to discern the truth in their meaning. Anything other than this permissive liberty might have the twofold effect of producing sin: first, the sin of falsely holding to a teaching with certainty when the evidence does not permit certain conclusions; second, the sin of using a claim to doctrinal or propositional certainty as a “weapon” to create new or sustain existing divisions. The former was the case of the Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church; the latter, of Laudian and Calvinist groups within the Church of England.

For Chillingworth, relying on the dictates of a Church whose authorities are human (even if bound to Christ) is no guard against the distortions of sin. Yet he still thought that teachings of the Church, while not binding, should at least receive “an outward submission for publique peace-sake.”³⁸⁷ It was this body – fallible though it was, and in need of constant correction as it was – that permitted discernment and seeking of truth. Hooker had developed a complex system of laws to justify deference to the Church

³⁸⁶ Chillingworth, *Works*, 253-4.

³⁸⁷ Chillingworth, *Works*, 255.

with England's monarch as its head. Those laws included positive laws requiring Christians to "do whatsoever the sentence of judicial and final decision shall determine."

Chillingworth challenged Knott's presumption that Hooker had argued for the Church as an infallible authority. Chillingworth sought to demonstrate Knott's error as we saw above and further, he maintained that although one ought to consider Hooker's opinion on the matter, no man (including Hooker) ought to be followed without examining his arguments. Chillingworth writes, "[t]he question therefore being only what men ought to think, it is vain for you to tell us what Mr Hooker says at all; for Mr Hooker, though an excellent man, was but a man."³⁸⁸ In fact, what Chillingworth asserts of Hooker is that the latter, while affirming outward conformance of acts, is surely not demanding inward assent on pain of damnation or at least injustice. Otherwise:

For though [Hooker] says, that men are bound to do whatsoever the sentence of final decision shall determine, as it is plain men are bound to yield such an obedience to all courts of civil judicature; yet he says not, they are bound to think that determination lawful, and that sentence just. Nay, it is plain, he says, that they must do according to the judges' sentences, though in their private opinion it seem unjust.³⁸⁹

While Chillingworth certainly draws a conclusion that is distinct from the one developed in this dissertation concerning person doing what is in his 'best interest before God' by consenting to the Church, it is not contradictory. For someone can believe, in private opinion, a judgment to be unjust, and yet still recognize the grace of God in simultaneous external obedience and internal dissent.³⁹⁰ To support his argument, Chillingworth

³⁸⁸ Chillingworth, *Works*, 385.

³⁸⁹ Chillingworth, *Works*, 385.

³⁹⁰ On this argument see Ephraim Radner's argument about external obedience and internal dissent in the Jansenists' writings, Ephraim Radner, *Spirit and Nature: The Saint-Medard Miracles in 18th Century Jansenism*, (New York: Herder & Herder The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2002).

appeals to the contradictory logic of what Knott proposes is necessary: an inward assent to something not believed. “To make [Hooker] say,” Chillingworth writes, “in effect, they must think thus, though at the same time they think the contrary,”³⁹¹ is not only unjust, it is illogical and therefore impossible.

Once again, Chillingworth emphasizes that the Church itself, while given authority to decide matters, discerns them solely through probable reasoning about the necessity and credibility of the evidence at hand. Chillingworth sought to trace Hooker’s argument – even challenging the latter’s own authoritative voice – to preserve the Church as a common space for corporate religious discernment to weigh the accordance of the evidence with Christian truth. Hooker had argued, against Puritans who opposed the polity of the English Church, that they had no demonstrative or necessary reasons for doing so. The Puritans argued on the basis of mere probabilities only, yet attempted to make their probabilities into necessary practices. The problem, Chillingworth, following Hooker, points out, is that assuming the Church to have infallible authority in matters that are known only probabilistically is to assign a false certainty to things that are actually uncertain, on pain of damnation if not believed. Instead, these things require constant examination with faith and hope by the Church:

For as for requiring a blind and unlimited obedience to ecclesiastical decision universally and in all cases, even when plain texts or reason seems to control them, Mr. Hooker is as far from making such an idol of ecclesiastical authority as the puritans, whom he writes against, “I grant [says Hooker] that proof derived from the authority of man’s judgment, is not able to work that assurance which doth grow by a stronger proof, and therefore although ten thousand general Councils would set down one and the same definitive sentence concerning any point of religion whatsoever; yet one demonstrative reason alleged, or one manifest testimony cited from the mouth of God himself to the contrary, could not choose but overweigh them all: inasmuch as for them to have been deceived, it is

³⁹¹ Chillingworth, *Works*, 385.

not impossible, it is that demonstrative reason or testimony divine should deceive.”³⁹²

And further, citing Hooker, Chillingworth admits that while Christians ought to assent by being obedient in their external acts, “sith equity and reason favour that which is in being, till orderly judgment of decision be given against it,” it cannot require internal assent of the conscience or will. This is so since the operative faculties of the mind are not capable of providing it if matters are “mere probabilities,” since logic dictates that only “an argument necessary and demonstrative is such, as, being proposed to any man, and understood, the mind cannot choose but inwardly assent.”³⁹³

Chillingworth is not presuming the individual a better interpreter than the Church, however. Responding to Knott’s accusation that Protestants had no sure ground for correct interpretation of Scripture outside the Church, Chillingworth argues that neither an individual or the Church could be a final arbiter for Scripture:

if by a private spirit, you mean, a particular perswasion that a Doctrine is true, which some men pretend, but cannot prove to come from the spirit of God: I say to referre Controversies to Scripture, is not to referre them to this kind of private Spirit. For is there not a manifest difference between saying, the spirit of God tels me that this is the meaning of such a Text (which no man can possibly know to be true, it being a secret thing) & between saying, these & these Reasons I have to shew, that this or that is true doctrine, or that this or that is the meaning of such a Scripture? Reason being a publique and certain thing and exposed to all mens tryall and examination.³⁹⁴

Thus the limitation for scriptural interpretation for Chillingworth was reason operative within a comprehensive national Church, the Church of England, that, while limiting a person’s practices, maintained space for working through the inevitable ambiguities of

³⁹² Chillingworth, *Works*, 385; citing Hooker, *Lawes* (II.7.5).

³⁹³ Chillingworth, *Works*, 385.

³⁹⁴ Chillingworth, *Works*, 133.

understanding Scripture in the wake of sin and human finitude.³⁹⁵ It was this particular form of ecclesiastical life that allowed evidence to be evaluated on the basis of sound reasoning and logic, which, in the midst of ecclesiastical contestation, he presumed to be the “safest way to salvation.” For how else could one overcome the sin embedded in the Church’s schisms, tied as each of these were to each group’s claims of having sole access to and authority in articulating infallible divine truth? How else could one move beyond claims to epistemic certainty, to test and seek the truth?

According to John Marshall, this “arena” of a comprehensive Church was not that of the Act of Toleration (1689) and its acceptance of distinct ecclesiastical bodies of meeting, worship, and governance.³⁹⁶ “Chillingworth’s Church” was envisioned as a singularly governed body permitting a variety of positions on doctrines and practices: the Established Church, separate from but coextensive with the civil government of the nation. Chillingworth conceived of this Church as teaching the faith, shaped and formed by the Creeds.³⁹⁷ Gregory Dodds, in his work tracing earlier work by Hugh Trevor-Roper, Martin Griffin, and Bruce Mansfield, contends that Chillingworth’s vision was for

³⁹⁵ Remer traces this movement – away from assent to ecclesiastical authority and toward assent to politically imposed authority – from Chillingworth to Thomas Hobbes. *Humanism and the Rhetoric of Toleration*, especially pp. 137-201.

³⁹⁶ The Toleration Act of 1689, while settling the debate between Toleration and Comprehension in favor of the former, still excluded Dissenters (Independents) from public office and retained the penal laws against Catholics and Unitarians. See John Marshall, “The Ecclesiology of the Latitude-Men, 1660-1689: Stillfleet, Tillotson and ‘Hobbism,’” in *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 36 (1985): 407-27; and Shapiro, *Probability and Certainty*, 110-11.

³⁹⁷ See also Griffin, *Latitudinarianism in the Seventeenth Century Church of England*; Spellman, *The Latitudinarians and the Church of England, 1660-1700*; Timothy Larsen, *Contested Christianity* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2004); Jeremy Gregory, *Restoration, Reformation and Reform, 1660-1828* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000).

a Church in keeping with Erasmus's polemical theology.³⁹⁸ The broad conclusion of this work is that none of the Great Tew thinkers were Erasmian in a direct sense. But like Erasmus and Hooker before them, they argued that the ecclesiastical demand for assent to *a priori* cognitive propositions about things *adiaphora* to salvation was detrimental not only to the Church but to the individual's own salvation. As we have seen, Chillingworth was concerned to undermine any absolute certainty derived from nature or even from Scripture (whether logical or historical, and whether derived by the Church or a presbyter) about things *adiaphora* to salvation. This concern amounts to what Dodds has termed a "polemical position." This position was argued initially by Erasmus but continued through Hooker, Chillingworth, and the Tew thinkers, and into the broader Latitudinarian stream of thinkers post-Restoration and pre-Glorious Revolution.³⁹⁹ In *Answer to some Passages in Rushworth's Dialogues*, Chillingworth cites Erasmus against Catholic claims to certainty in formulating dogmas:

Erasmus tells us himself, that though he did certainly know and could prove that Auricular Confession, such as in use in the Roman Church, was not of Divine Institution: yet he would not say so, because he conceived Confession a great restraint from Sin, and very profitable for the times he lived in; and therefore thought it expedient, that men should rather by Error hold that necessary and commanded, which was only profitable and advised, than by believing though truly, the non-necessity of it to neglect the use of that, as by experience we see most men do, which was so beneficial.⁴⁰⁰

³⁹⁸ Mansfield, *Phoenix of his Age: Interpretations of Erasmus c 1550-1750*; Griffin, *Latitudinarianism*; Roper, *Catholic, Anglicans and Puritans*; Dodds, *Exploiting Erasmus*.

³⁹⁹ Dodds, *Exploiting Erasmus*, 204-5.

⁴⁰⁰ Chillingworth, *Works*, 729

It is this line of argument that differentiated Chillingworth from non-conforming Puritans and aligned his work with conforming Puritans such as John Goodwin.⁴⁰¹ In examining the work of Erasmus, Goodwin maintained, like Erasmus, that where the Church left things *adiaphora* without the demand for assent, “space” was left to hold a variety of positions. This is a position we saw Erasmus take contra Luther, and one we saw Hooker take with Luther’s and Calvin’s more extreme followers. This “space” simultaneously preserved a civil arena and an ecclesiastical arena, within which contested claims about practices and interpretations of the faith could be weighed.

If Erasmus was willing to preserve auricular confession even though he knew it was not essential to the faith, then “why might he not think the like of other points, and yet out of discretion and Charity hold his Peace? And why might others of his Time do so as well as he?”⁴⁰² So that across all ages why could not people, “... though they knew and saw Errors and Corruption is in the Church, yet conceiving more danger in the remedy, than harm in the disease, were contented *hoc Catone* – to let things alone as they were, lest by attempting to pluck the Ivy out of the Wall, they might pull down the Wall itself, with which the Ivy was so incorporated.”⁴⁰³ Here we find Chillingworth repeat Erasmus’s own argument nearly word for word. Chillingworth deployed this argument, drawn from Erasmus, not only to undermine Catholic claims to infallible certainty, but also to

⁴⁰¹ See John Coffey, *John Goodwin and the Puritan Revolution: Religion and Intellectual Change in 17th Century England* (Suffolk, UK: The Boydell Press, 2006). Coffey traces Goodwin’s own influences to Acontius and Erasmus and articulates the common link between Chillingworth and Goodwin (despite both falling into different theological groups). The common link is the desire to undermine claims to epistemic certainty in things *adiaphora* to salvation, and thereby to prevent persecution and schism (or in the case of Chillingworth and Goodwin, the perpetuation of Protestant division; pp.160-61).

⁴⁰² Chillingworth, *Works*, 729.

⁴⁰³ Chillingworth, *Works*, 729.

undermine the Puritan argument to leave the Church of England on account of their assertion of scriptural certainty. We also find in this an echo of Hooker's argument deployed against the claims to certainty of Puritans and Catholics alike.

I posit that Chillingworth, like Hooker and Erasmus before him, was concerned with the preservation of the unity of the Church for its mission (even if fallible) in forming people in the Christian faith. Even more than this, he sought means by which Christians of a nation might be reconciled to one another in order to preserve common space for corporate religious discernment. In the opening of his essay comparing Hooker and Chillingworth on natural law, Orr remarks that Chillingworth's lifelong personal and theological project involved the search for a means to halt the "disintegration of organized Christianity ... [which] began with the Protestant reformation."⁴⁰⁴ Citing Chillingworth, Orr argues that the former's primary goal was to establish a "common profession of those articles of faith wherein all consent."⁴⁰⁵ Contrary to mid twentieth-century scholarship, this had little to do with Chillingworth's desire for a "free and liberal" religion. Instead, this was Chillingworth's response, along with his Tew Circle contemporaries and even Puritans like John Cotton, Nathaniel Culverwell, and John Goodwin, to the events of the previous century's (and their own) ecclesiastical divisions.⁴⁰⁶ In particular, Chillingworth was concerned to distinguish finite, sinful human decision-making – whether individual or ecclesiastical – from the presumption of

⁴⁰⁴ Orr, "Chillingworth Versus Hooker," 120 – 132; see in particular p. 121.

⁴⁰⁵ Orr, "Chillingworth Versus Hooker," 121; citing Chillingworth, *The Religion of Protestants*, (IV.40 [This is Orr's pagination of Chillingworth's *Works*]). See also Dodds, *Exploiting Erasmus*, 209-10.

⁴⁰⁶ See for example Como's essay, "Puritans Predestination and the Construction of Orthodoxy."

having secured divine truth and the ensuing warrant to excise or divide the Church further.

Conclusion

Chillingworth argues that one can make the assertion that Scripture is the word of God and that every word is true. But he cannot compel anyone's belief in this assertion, "for," he writes, "if I had a controversy with an atheist, whether there was a God or no, I would not say, that the scripture were a rule to judge this by; seeing that, doubting whether there be a God or no, he must needs doubt whether the scripture be the word of God."⁴⁰⁷ That being said, for those who *do* believe it to be the word of God, Scripture is "not a judge ... but only a sufficient rule for those to judge what they are to believe and what they are not to believe."⁴⁰⁸ In arguing this, Chillingworth does not believe reason to be operating independently of God's providential ordering of creation, as he was accused by his contemporary Catholic and Calvinist critics of having believed.⁴⁰⁹

I say [of Scripture as a rule, that it is] sufficiently perfect, and sufficiently intelligible in things necessary, to all that have understanding whether they be learned or unlearned. And my reason hereof is convincing and demonstrative, because nothing is necessary to be believed but what is plainly revealed. For to say that when a place of scripture, by reason of ambiguous terms lies indifferent between divers senses, whereof one is true and the other false, that God obliges men, under pain of damnation, not to mistake through error and human frailty, is

⁴⁰⁷ Chillingworth, *Works*, 153.

⁴⁰⁸ Chillingworth, *Works*, 130.

⁴⁰⁹ Chillingworth, along with other Tew Circle thinkers, was accused of being a Socinian by his contemporaries in both Catholic and Protestant circles. Faustus Socinus, who died in 1604, rejected the doctrine of the Trinity and taught that Christ was fully human, though without sin. The more general use of the term in the seventeenth century, cited by Roper, referred to anyone who used reason to guide matters of faith (Roper, *Catholic, Puritans and Anglicans*, 189). I disagree with Roper's caricature of Chillingworth and all members of the Tew Circle as Socinians. This is evidenced by Chillingworth's clear articulation of the doctrine of the Trinity in his sermons, particularly as cited above.

to make God a tyrant; and to say, that he requires us certainly to attain that end, for the attainment whereof we have no certain means; which is to say, that, like Pharaoh, he gives no straw and requires brick; that he reaps where he sows not; that he gathers where he strews not; that he will not be pleased with our utmost endeavors to please him, without full, and exact and never-failing performance ... that I were an impotent, foolish and unjust master, if I should be offended with him for doing so [for making an incorrect choice in weighing various potential truths where the one truth is not clear]? And shall we not tremble to impute that to God, which we would take in foul scorn if it were imputed to ourselves? Certainly I, for my part, fear I should not love God, if I should think so strangely of him.⁴¹⁰

Chillingworth argues that what Scripture provides is not infallible judgment about controversies (a statement that strikes both at Puritan and Roman Catholic claims to Scripture's perspicuous, propositional direction). But as a rule, "and that not an absolutely perfect rule, but as perfect as a written rule can be ... [the Scriptures are] the instruments of conveying [the gospel] to our understanding."⁴¹¹

When Chillingworth asserts that one need not believe that Scripture is the word of God or that the gospel is contained in the Scriptures, we should not presume him to be proposing a relativistic argument about the origin of truth. Such presumption would be anachronistic. As we have seen, he presumes that what is necessary for salvation will be discovered by the "common man," within Scripture, without having to cognitively affirm these things *a priori*. Instead God has revealed himself through the scriptural canon, whose words must in turn be weighed by Christians in order to make sense of the antimonies present even within, let alone the challenges of correlating nature to the scriptural witness. Assent and moral formation in Christ, he presumes, follow God's

⁴¹⁰ Chillingworth, *Works*, 130.

⁴¹¹ Chillingworth, *Works*, 152, 155.

agency in acting in a person's unique circumstances. They do not come with human coercion in forcing a person's consent.

Chillingworth's notion of the relationship between God (whom Hooker classified as an eternal law unto himself), Scripture (which Hooker classified as the divine law), nature (which Hooker classified as natural law), and the laws ordering the Church and civil society (positive laws) pressed Chillingworth to consider how it is that human beings are reconciled to God, and how they might discern how to live in light of being moved to God. For Chillingworth, God's condescension to human capacities of reasoning was not an "allowance" for sin; but in Christ, through the Spirit, it was an elevation and invitation to engage a way of life that demanded obedient seeking of God's will in one's own circumstances.

Chillingworth shunned the idea of a catalogue of essentials because he believed that faith, hope, and obedience, rather than affirmation of cognitive propositions, were the effective means by which a person was conformed to Christ's own life. Chillingworth instead challenged that Christians are required to "*perform* the entire condition of the new covenant, which is, [belief in] the matter of the gospel."⁴¹² To believe in the matter of the gospel and its truth may or may not begin with cognitive assent; but faith and hope, if that assent is to be sustained over time, must be sought as a lived experience of seeking, weighing, and obedience. Hence the use of divinely given reason is "scaled." What is necessary for salvation, Chillingworth claims with Hooker and Erasmus before him, is evident in Scripture to the most common of men. Those things that are essential to the proliferation of an individual and common life of moral faithfulness to God, things

⁴¹² Chillingworth, *Works*, 154 (italics mine).

adiaphora to salvation, are much more difficult to determine. They cannot necessarily be obtained perspicuously in Scripture, as both Erasmus and Hooker assert.

Chillingworth contends that those things necessary for salvation, and even for living a holy life, don't require absolute certainty to establish that the books of Scripture have divine authority. Nor is salvation or a moral life of faithfulness dependent upon the veracity of human certainty, and thus a Church's infallible teachings, about the meaning of Scripture. It is God alone who has the agency in salvation. He orders human beings in accordance with his self-revelation contained non-perspicuously in Scripture, and he sets human beings free in Christ to find their place in his self-revelation: "God requiring of us, under pain of damnation, only to believe the verities therein contained, and not the divine authority of the books wherein they are contained."⁴¹³

In other words, what is essential to Chillingworth is not that one affirm the veracity of claims made by the Church about itself, or about its interpretation of the Scriptures, or even that the matter of the gospel *is contained in* the books of Scripture. Rather, one is justified by God in Christ, and given the capacity to fulfill that adoption, by the Holy Spirit. This occurs through a constant exercise of reason within a common civil space aimed at a type of corporate religious discernment, free of ecclesiastical divisions bound to particular epistemic certainties. In this way, human beings are made able, as we saw with Hooker, to freely seek their own good, and to serve their neighbor, since all things – including his permission for finite sinful human beings to engage in probabilistic reasoning – are ordered to God by God.

⁴¹³ Chillingworth, *Works*, 155.

Chillingworth certainly is not at all novel in his argument that reason, ordered to and by God, must be exercised to one's fullest capacity in response to God's grace of forgiveness and of new life. In fact, both Erasmus and Hooker develop substantive arguments that matters *adiaphora* to salvation, but critical to the life of faith and the order and peace of society, require the creation of an arena of common space for corporate religious discernment of the truth. And like Erasmus and Hooker before him, Chillingworth maintains that a national Church that does not demand belief in the infallibility of the Church or of doctrines articulated (even if it requires conformance in practices) is the appropriate arena to provide a limit and the permissibility for truth seeking. Chillingworth, however, was unique in that he was grappling with an increasingly fragmented Church comparatively to Erasmus, and to some degree, than Hooker was as well.

This results in two things: first, Chillingworth defines very few essentials and qualifies them when he does. The Creed, for example, while providing a fine summary of the faith and those things which a Christian ought to believe, cannot be definitive as a marker of whether one has 'true faith,' for this would demand an assertion of certainty for which Chillingworth would argue we do not have sufficient evidence to compel assent. This assent must come solely from discernment. The second thing however, is that Chillingworth refuses to make the Church the 'end' point of discernment. This is because he believes it can and does err, and because such a body, if it cannot be reformed because it is presumed infallible, might in fact inhibit one from seeking and finding God. While Chillingworth's arguments to these ends certainly make sense in his context, they do broaden the limits or boundaries of the Church's ability to proclaim, and moreover, to

teach the particulars of the Christian faith. And this is a broadening of limits we shall see continue in the work of John Wilkins.

Chapter 4: John Wilkins

Introduction

In this chapter, we examine selected works of Royal Society member, and moderate Churchman, John Wilkins. Wilkins's reputation as a moderate thinker stemmed at least in part, from his willing movement between models of Church government from that of Cromwell's Interregnum, to that of a unified national Church. After the Restoration, Wilkins took the position, like Erasmus, Hooker, and Chillingworth before him, of arguing for deference to a comprehensive national Church in England. He also argued for limited toleration, particularly of Presbyterian groups. He argued that only radical Independents whose zeal prevented them from using reason in their discernment of Scripture and in consideration of doctrine, ought to be excluded from the National Church. But Wilkins's moderation had primarily to do with creating a framework for a national Church (some founding basis) that was demonstrably comprehensive. Like Chillingworth, and even more so post-civil war and post-interregnum, he was aware that coercion to consent to one Church could only lead to either civil violence or continued division. And yet, he was also well aware of the moral, civil, social and ecclesiastical chaos that ensued without peace and order, best governed under one ecclesiastical body for the one people of England. Wilkins's solution was twofold. First, he argued from natural religion for evident first principles that all 'rational men' could agree upon as true. These could serve as a general framework to bring together Christians now separated over Christian particulars. If divided Protestants were willing to accept this intellectual, rational and evident framework of facts, Wilkins argued, they could very easily see and agree to particular moral precepts drawn from Scripture (particularly

Scripture's wisdom literature); and this, secondly, could lead them to engagement about the particulars of Scripture since preaching in the one, comprehensive national Church was simplified to common or plain language, and focused more particularly through the lens of the moral principles having been drawn from natural religion.

While reducing the Church's preaching and teaching to a moral framework that could be generally agreed to by more moderate Christians certainly created greater common space for corporate discernment of the truth, it also broadened the definition or limit of what the Church is, and thus what its vocation in the world is. Before moving on to Wilkins's specific work, we will first review our discussion thus far. Then we will briefly explore some of the historical events that occurred between the beginning of the civil wars and the Restoration. These events are important to cover in brief because these, rather than a burgeoning liberal or scientific enlightenment, are what inspired many moderate Christian thinkers, like Wilkins, to develop the type of argument for a comprehensive Church in the way they did.

Review

In chapters one through three, we examined how Desiderius Erasmus, Richard Hooker, and William Chillingworth responded to the relationship between certainty, with respect to knowledge of the Christian faith, and authority in the civil and ecclesiastical spheres.

Without substantive articulation, Erasmus presumed a platonic emanation of governance through two spheres: the ecclesiastical and civil. Christ was the "goal" of both spheres; and as their center, he was the *telos* of common life to which all persons

were to defer. Erasmus held that clerics were closest to Christ in spiritual and moral authority and thus had the greatest responsibility for teaching and forming the monarch and magistrates, as well as the laity in the faith. The monarch and magistrates were to create and enforce positive laws to maintain the peace and order of the kingdom. Both orders aimed their efforts at pointing persons to Christ. Finally, common people were to obey the ecclesiastical and civil authorities, since sustaining social order was necessary for the discernment of Scripture. Scripture was intentionally obscure in many matters, argued Erasmus. God was responsible for this, as it would develop characteristics such as humility that were necessary for people to be formed in a faith that had only moral rather than absolute certainty about many aspects. For this discernment and formation in sometimes epistemically uncertain matters to take place, common corporate space had to be preserved.

The response of Hooker, both to certain Puritan factions and to Roman Catholics after the Church's division, outlined a framework of laws for common civil and ecclesiastical life within England. In the *Laws*, he sought to establish an intellectual case for a pragmatic concern: maintaining a common space for corporate religious discernment and formation in the Christian faith. His argument differed from Erasmus's in certain particulars. For Hooker, the monarch was the head of the Church. This assertion, whatever its theological justifications, maintained the political justification for England's separation from Roman authority over the Church of England. This would not have been acceptable to Erasmus, as he understood clerics to have greater moral and spiritual authority than monarchs and magistrates. He thus also understood the Church as spiritually superseding the confines of the positive laws of a given monarch and his

nation. According to Erasmus, all were of one spiritual body even prior to their membership in a nation, and therefore were all called to act within their particular nations as if they were one body in Christ. Yet both thinkers agreed that it was within the context of a nation with positive laws that peace and order could be sustained, protecting common space for corporate religious discernment. Hooker, therefore, also argued for deference to civil and ecclesiastical laws for English people, within the nation of England. With the Church's division, the latter's reach of global authority was reduced and bent to the laws of a given nation. Claims to religious certainty begin to take on a new role: being used to justify the teachings or practices of one Church (or one Church party) against another – a movement which, it shall be argued, contributed to reducing common space for corporate religious discernment.

Chillingworth proves an interesting figure in the way he adopts an Erasman approach. Like Hooker, he wished to preserve space in the civil sphere for evaluating or weighing matters of epistemic uncertainty in scriptural and natural matters. Unlike Hooker's, however, Chillingworth's work implicitly demonstrated that in division, the Church's factions (both those within and outside the Church of England) made deference or consent to any ecclesiastical body claiming infallibility or certainty of Scriptural interpretation, impossible. Chillingworth maintained that such bodies presumed certainty, often making claims against one another, which they were incapable of demonstrating. And when assent to infallibly asserted propositions or doctrines was demanded, not only could this jeopardize an individual's salvation, such a requirement could only further divide Christians. These divisions would thwart the public space for discernment and thus formation in the faith necessary for seeking religious truth. Chillingworth's response was

that the delimiter for scriptural discernment and doctrinal assent ought to be the Church of England. According to Chillingworth this comprehensive Church ought to require only a few essentials of belief made plain in Scripture to the common person (while sustaining requirement for consent in actions) for the sake of maintaining an arena of common space for corporate discernment of Christian truth. This would, he believed, circumvent the danger of falsely assenting to teachings of the faith for which mathematical certainty (asserted as necessary for salvation by each Church) could not be established. It would also create the space necessary for faithfully weighing the evidence as to its likelihood of being in alignment with God's will, seeking to respond to God's grace through perseverance in humility, faith, hope, and charity. As noted in the conclusion to the chapter on Chillingworth, this certainly provided room for holding broad beliefs and for engaging in contestation about them; it also, however, broadened the limits or boundaries of acceptable teaching thereby reducing the common articulation of Christian particulars.

Erasmus, Hooker, and Chillingworth all maintained a minimally defined essential knowledge necessary for salvation. Even in light of sin and finitude – by natural inclination (innate knowledge) – one was presumed naturally inclined to seek God. Following Erasmus, Luther, and Calvin, however, Hooker and Chillingworth understood salvation to rest solely within the agency of God. Here the revealed Word of God, incarnate in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, provided sole access to the knowledge necessary to receive and respond to God's act in Christ through the Holy Spirit. Knowledge of God could secure a person from fear of not being justified (fear born of not “doing” the right things), in order to serve her neighbor with freedom from that fear (learning to do so and acting through probabilistically derived knowledge).

The capacity to engage in weighing the evidence of Scripture and nature to determine the most faithful course of action about things *adiaphora* to salvation would enable contestation about Scripture and the faith to serve both to educate and to engage people in “thinking together” about religious truth. This emphasis on a limited body of salvific essentials – with most of Scripture *adiaphora* to salvation but critical to discerning aspects of moral life together – was not a *via media* of peace and toleration for these thinkers. It was a polemical position meant to demonstrate the falsity of claims first to scriptural doctrinal certainty and then (with Hooker and Chillingworth) to a Church’s being the sole and true Church.

Historical Background

Two years prior to Chillingworth’s death in 1644, any presumption of a comprehensive Church and peaceful civil sphere within which to engage the faith was shattered by civil wars that would span nearly a decade from 1642 to 1651. The wars developed out of the tensions of political factions holding contested positions concerning the Christian faith and the authority to adjudicate matters of worship and teaching.⁴¹⁴

With the civil war, Chillingworth’s vision of a comprehensive faith – free of coercive demands for assent to infallible teachings and limited by one broad, and so comprehensive Church in England – would have its weaknesses brought into stark relief by the disorder and violence of English Christians. The first and second conflicts of the war (1642-46; 1648-49) saw the Royalist troops (Cavaliers) of King Charles I clash with troops supporting the English Long Parliament (Roundheads), leading to Charles I’s

⁴¹⁴ On this see Spurr, *The Restoration Church of England 1646-1689*, particularly 1-28; Champion, *The Pillars of Priestcraft Shaken*.

execution in 1649. The third (1649-51) involved conflicts between the supporters of King Charles II and those supporting the Rump Parliament. The latter proved finally victorious in the Battle of Worcester in 1651, leading to Charles II's exile and replacement first with a commonwealth government (1649-53) and later with Oliver Cromwell's Protectorate (his rule without parliament) (1653-58) and his son's (1658-9). Although Parliament did not gain ruling power in England legally until the Glorious Revolution (1688), the wars constitutionally established a precedent that no English monarch could govern without Parliament's consent.⁴¹⁵

William Bulman argues that the eventual development of civil religion toward the end of the seventeenth century was not the outcome of the ascendancy of rationalism or of science. It was in fact an urgent demand for moral reform in response to the perceived national sin manifested in the civil wars.⁴¹⁶

In his address to Parliament in 1646, titled *The First and Second Part of Gangraena*, Presbyterian Thomas Edwards had expressed the prevailing sense of horror (of conformists and Presbyterians alike) at the immorality arising from the growth of Independent sects and unlimited toleration⁴¹⁷ during the wars of the 40s. Edwards's purpose in writing was to demonstrate contemporary historical correlates to events in Scripture, with the hope these would simultaneously humiliate and spur Parliament on to preventing further sectarian schism.⁴¹⁸ Edwards responded by pressing members of

⁴¹⁵ Dodds, *Exploiting Erasmus*, 227-233.

⁴¹⁶ Bulman, *Anglican Enlightenment: Orientalism, Religion and Politics in England and its Empire*, 157.

⁴¹⁷ Dodds, *Exploiting Erasmus*, 227.

⁴¹⁸ Thomas Edwards, *The First and Second Part of Gangraena, or, A Catalogue and discovery of many of the errors, heresies, blasphemies and pernicious practices of the sectaries of this time*. (London: Printed by

Parliament to act for the good of the nation to prevent the “evil” implicit in the “heresies and schisms” arising from sectarian divisions:

And I humbly pray your Honours to beare with me in my addresses this way, as having no other meanes but this, of acquainting You with the sad state of things in our Church: And yet 'tis necessary You should hear of these things, for as 'tis said in the Prophet *Jeremiah*, concerning the making of that Roll, *It may be the house of Judah will hear all the evill which I purpose to do to them, that they may turne every one from his evill way, it may be they will present their supplications before the Lord, that he may forgive their iniquity and their sin;* so it may be some good may come of this Book, to cause an humiliation for, and a suppression of heresies and schismes, as being a more free and full discovery of our times then ever yet was made, and therefore I send it abroad in this way, whereby it may be read by all *Judah* ... O the evil of these times would put zeal into the heart of any man, who hath any love to the glory of God, his truth, and the souls of people, and make the stammering tongue to speak and cry out.⁴¹⁹

The civil war, Edwards argues, was the result of a desire for greater movement toward reformed assertions concerning salvation, a continuation of the sixteenth-century movement. And yet while advancements in this direction were made, they came at a cost. Other “blasphemies and heresies” had grown up, and these had created a new “disorder and confusion,” building a figurative pendulum swing between extreme or zealous sectarian claims concerning the faith:

For now things are grown to a strange passe, (though nothing is now strange,) and every day they grow worse and worse, and you can hardly conceive and imagine them so bad as they are; no kinde of blasphemy, heresie, disorder, confusion, but either is found among us, or a coming in upon us; for we in stead of a Reformation, are grown from one extreme to another, fallen from *Scylla* to *Charibdis*, from Popish Innovations, Superstitions, and Prelaticall Tyranny, to damnable Heresies, horrid Blasphemies, Libertinisme, and fearfull Anarchy; our evils are not removed and cured, but only changed.⁴²⁰

T.R. and E.M. for Ralph Smith, 1646), Part 1, paragraph 1, <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A38109.0001.001/1:3?rgn=div1;view=fulltext> (Accessed March 1, 2018).

⁴¹⁹ Edwards, *The First and Second Part of Gangraena*, <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A38109.0001.001/1:3?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>, part 1, paragraphs 1-2.

⁴²⁰ Edwards, *The First and Second Part of Gangraena*, <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A38109.0001.001/1:3?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>, part 1, paragraphs 1-2.

Edwards provides for us a widespread response not only to “Catholic extremists,” but to the non-conformists or Independents during the 1640s through the 70s.⁴²¹ Almost a decade post-Restoration, Simon Patrick, a moderate, pejoratively referred to by Independents and strong conformists alike as, ‘Latitudinarian,’ published his *Friendly Debate Between a Conformist and a Non-conformist* in 1669, taking up Edwards’s charge against sectarian non-conformists. He characterized a non-conformist as one who “... did but light upon some new and pretty fancy in religion, or some odd unusual expression, or perhaps some swelling words of vanity, presently he set up for a preacher, and cried up himself for a man that had made some new discovery.”⁴²² He further contended that they would “... not fear to make a schism in the Church, being furiously bent to follow their own fancies, impatient of contradiction, conceited of their own gifts.”⁴²³

Edwards before the end of the wars, and Patrick, post-Restoration, expressed what would become an increasingly common sentiment of English Christians: the need for a restoration of some limit on practices, beliefs, and teachings of the Christian faith. Such a limit would impose positive law sanctions against the enthusiasms of non-conformist or dissenting Christian sects. The zealous and arrogant certainty in the claims of these sectarians is thought to have contributed to the civil wars, the social instability, and the

⁴²¹ Edwards, *The First and Second Part of Gangraena*.

⁴²² Simon Patrick, *Friendly Debate Between a Conformist and a Non-conformist* (London: Richard Royston, 1669), 5:291. <https://archive.org/details/frienbe00patr>. (Accessed February 12, 2017)

⁴²³ Patrick, *Friendly Debate Between a Conformist and a Non-conformist*, 5:280.

moral chaos of the Interregnum decade, tearing apart the social and ecclesiastical tapestry that had knitted together the English people.⁴²⁴

For the next decade Churchmen of Presbyterian, Conformist, and Latitudinarian leaning pressed for reform and renewal in the morals and ethics of society, attempting to navigate between permissibility and appropriate limits to enable common space for corporate formation in the faith. Their approach was to engage with greater effort at finding commonalities within catechetical material, rather than emphasizing doctrinal differences. And finally, their approach aimed at using education, rather than relying solely on explicit positive laws, in order to create common space for religious discernment.⁴²⁵

As even moderates contended, sin had been evident and prolific during the civil wars and Interregnum period (1642-1659). Thus even moderate writers during the Restoration period and thereafter held it as essential to somehow mitigate at least the worst effects of sin by restoring civil and ecclesiastical order.⁴²⁶ Seventeenth century thinkers whose moderation toward particular theological claims and/or politics allowed them to adapt to the changing circumstances of the restoration period – people like Edward Stillingfleet, Simon Patrick, and John Wilkins – still held to a traditional view of

⁴²⁴ Spellman, *The Latitudinarians and the Church of England, 1660-1700*, 37; see also Bulman, *Anglican Enlightenment*, 20.

⁴²⁵ Spellman, *The Latitudinarians and the Church of England, 1660-1700*, 37.

⁴²⁶ See Peter Harrison: in *The Fall of Man and the Foundations of Science*. Harrison examines several seventeenth century thinkers, including Thomas Jackson, Robert Ferguson, Robert Boyle, Jeremy Taylor, The Cambridge Platonists, (Harrison, *The Fall of Man and the Foundations of Science*, 141; citing Thomas Jackson, *An Exact Collection of the Works of Doctor Jackson* [London: 1654]; title page, p. 3002; Robert Boyle, *High Veneration, Works V*, 144; Jeremy Taylor, *Unum Necessarium* [1655], ch. 6); cited in Harrison, *The Fall of Man and the Foundations of Science*, 141-143.

the Fall.⁴²⁷ Wilkins, whom we will examine in a moment, for example, stated explicitly that “Adam’s sin was both imputed and naturally communicated to his posterity,”⁴²⁸ and it resulted in a “depravation upon our natures,” wherein we became “loathesome and abominable in God’s eyes.” Human beings are “corrupted vessels [that] pollute all the gifts that are poured into us.” Human beings are so corrupted by the effects of sin that they are “apt to slight and undervalue the thought of this original corruption.”⁴²⁹

One central theme that emerged during the period immediately after the Restoration was that of coming to recognize Adam’s intended natural state and the deleterious effects of the Fall, on both society as a whole and on individuals in particular. Education in the faith, preaching most especially, as well as catechesis, it was thought, ought to engender social and self-examination, which in turn would mitigate the sort of zealous assertions to certainty in scriptural interpretation or doctrinal formulations. Jean Gailhard, a Huguenot refugee living in England during the 1660s, wrote in his popular treatise on education that “this intellect hath its darkness and ignorance, it is naturally blind, because of Adam’s fall.” One of the central benefits of the broadened framework of a Church that could demonstrate its unity on the basis of evident principles of natural religion, is that it simplified the educational task, and thereby facilitated capacity to

⁴²⁷ Harrison, *The Fall of Man and the Foundations of Science*, 144; Harrison classifies these thinkers as “Latitudinarians.” However, the use of this term was pejoratively assigned to moderate English thinkers who either refused to articulate a clear doctrinal stance on particular matters like salvation, or who shifted easily in either academic or ministry positions from supporting the leadership of the interregnum, to supporting those of the Restoration Church of England. I will refer to these thinkers as “moderates,” since one could characterize their work as appealing to common sense and pragmatic matters of moral life against the more zealous claims of Independents and even some Roman Catholics.

⁴²⁸ Harrison, *The Fall of Man and the Foundations of Science*, 144.

⁴²⁹ John Wilkins, *A Discourse concerning the gift of Prayer* (London: Printed by T.R. and E.M. for Samuel Gellibrand, 1653), 75-80 <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A66029.0001.001?view=toc> (Accessed February 11, 2017); Wilkins’s comment here is cited by Harrison in, *The Fall of Man and the Foundations of Science*, 144.

determine whether an individual's life or a Church's life, was faithful to this simplified and evident truth. In line with Harrison, Spellman remarks that "a common Christian anthropology superseded differences over matters of lesser concern to the life of faith and that shared understanding informed all discussions of man's spiritual recourse *in light of the fall*."⁴³⁰ Holding this shared anthropology benefitted the whole society, since it allowed people to attain the most probable course of faithful response to God. The presumption of sin – manifest so potently and recently in the decade of civil war – demanded the acceptance of some common way to consider, evaluate and draw conclusions from often contested or ambiguous evidence, aimed at religious understanding. For sin, alongside human finitude, did not permit absolute certainty about those things *adiaphora* to salvation, most especially since Scripture only provided certainty about those things necessary to salvation.

In light of the serious impairment of the rational faculties (if not the entirety of human nature), evident in the violence of the civil wars and the social chaos brought about by non-conformists, moderate English thinkers took up various measures to think through mechanisms of achieving popular consensus on religious matters. In the case of many moderates, John Wilkins, included, these concerned establishing the rational and evident basis for a comprehensive national Church, whose task was focused on moral and social reform. A Church whose unity was grounded by universally evident first principles of natural religion could mitigate division associated with claims to zealously pronounced epistemic certainty. It was in this way, Wilkins proposed, that a Church and nation exhausted by war and civil and ecclesiastical unrest could reclaim common space for

⁴³⁰ Spellman, *The Latitudinarians and the Church of England, 1660-1700*, 69.

corporate religious discernment and the hoped-for moral and spiritual reform in God's truth, that this would bring.⁴³¹ We will now examine Wilkins's own life and works to see how he proposed that this reform take place.

John Wilkins

From 1668 until his death in 1672, John Wilkins served as Bishop of Chester and held tenures as the head of colleges (Wadham and then Trinity) at Oxford and Cambridge, the latter an appointment arranged by Oliver Cromwell. In addition to his ministry work, Wilkins was one of the early proponents of experimental science. He belonged to a particular group of English moderates whose efforts focused on the use of experimental science to mitigate the effects of sin. This group, known as the Royal Society (incorporated on July 15, 1662), were highly influenced by the work of Francis Bacon.⁴³² At its time of inauguration the group included well known members: Thomas Sprat, Robert Hooke, Robert Boyle, Joseph Glanvill, and of course Wilkins himself.

While its members maintained distinctive philosophical positions, they shared a common desire to continue Bacon's program of accumulating and collecting observations over time that might help, as Hooke explained it, overcome the "slipperiness and delusion of our memory": the effect of original sin.⁴³³ They hoped this methodological approach

⁴³¹ See: Green, *The Christian's ABC*; and Bulman, *Anglican Enlightenment*, 157.

⁴³² Thomas Sprat, *The history of the Royal-Society of London for the improving of natural knowledge* (London: J. Martyn and J. Allestry, 1667), <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A61158.0001.001?view=toc>, See parts 1 and 2 (Accessed February 8, 2018).

⁴³³ Robert Hooke, "Preface," in *Micrographia, or, Some physiological descriptions of minute bodies made by magnifying glasses with observations and inquiries thereupon*, (London: Jo. Martyn and JA. Allestry, [Reproduction of Original in Library of Congress], 1665), image 5. http://eebo.chadwyck.com/search/fulltext?ACTION=ByID&ID=D10000122821240005&SOURCE=var_sp_ell.cfg&DISPLAY=AUTHOR&WARN=N&FILE=../session/1538424492_28901, (Accessed February 8, 2018).

might contribute to educating the people of England and be a means of holding persons with disparate positions on the faith accountable for their reasoning about it. To this end, Wilkins's most well-known work – shared with Leibniz upon its completion – was *An Essay Toward a Real Character and Philosophical Language*,⁴³⁴ in which he proposed a universal language of symbols that would enable philosophers and scientists to communicate their ideas and findings unambiguously.⁴³⁵

While seeming to waffle in allegiance, or at least support, between Cromwellian non-conformists pre-Restoration and more high Church conformists post-Restoration, Wilkins's shift in support actually has to do with his central concern to establish the

⁴³⁴ John Wilkins, *An Essay Toward a Real Character and a Philosophical Language*, (London: Sa. Gellibrand, and John Martyn, 1668) http://eebo.chadwyck.com/search/full_rec?SOURCE=pgthumbs.cfg&ACTION=ByID&ID=12295865&FILE=.session/1436284346_14921&SEARCHSCREEN=CITATIONS&SEARCHCONFIG=var_spell.cfg&DISPLAY=AUTHOR, (Accessed February 8, 2018).

⁴³⁵ This work, along with his others, was well known in his own time. On this theme of frequent mention see: Thomas Birch, *The History of the Royal Society*, (London: A. Millar, 1756-57); the correspondence of Henry Oldenburg, and James Crossley's *The Diary and Correspondence of Dr. John Worthington*, ed., James Crossley, Vol. 1, (Manchester: Charles Simms and Co., MDCCC.XLVII [1847]), provide further context – contemporary and historical – for understanding Wilkins's role within the scientific, theological, and philosophical community of English thinkers of the period. Other works examining Wilkins's life and influence include William Lloyd's funeral sermon; Walter Pope's, *The Life of Seth Ward, Bishop of Salisbury*, ed., J.B. Bamborough, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1961); John Aubrey, "John Wilkins," in *Brief Lives I*, ed., Oliver Lawson Dick (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1957), 219-320; Anthony A. Wood, *Athenae Oxonienses: An Exact History of All the Writers and Bishops Who Have Had Their Education in the University of Oxford; To Which Are Added the Fasti, or Annals of the Said University* (new edition, with additions and a continuation; 4 volumes; London: F. C. and J. Rivington; et al., 1813-1820); -----, *Fasti Oxonienses and History of the Antiquities of the Colleges and Halls in the University of Oxford*, ed., John Gutch, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1786-1796); Pierre Bayle, *A General Dictionary, Historical and Critical*, (eds). John Peter Bernard, Thomas Birch, John Lockman, vol. X, (London: J. Bettenham, 1734-1741), 160-64. Hans Aarsleff, who provides a more recent biographic entry (1992), suggests that the best twentieth-century biography is given in Dorothy Stimson's, "Dr. Wilkins and the Royal Society," in the *Journal of Modern History*, 3 (1931): 539-563. Her work, Aarsleff suggests, provides superior analysis alongside a less "polemic" account of Wilkins's thought than do the accounts provided by E.J. Bowen and Sir Harold Hartley, "John Wilkins" in *The Royal Society, Its origins and Founders*, ed., Sir Harold Hartley (London: The Royal Society, 1960), 47-56. See Hans Aarsleff, "John Wilkins," in *John Wilkins and 17th Century Linguistics*, ed. Joseph L. Subbiondo (Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1992), 40-41. These sources have provided the substantial background for subsequent biographical and textual evaluation of seventeenth century theology. Discussion of how one might place Wilkins in his wider seventeenth-century context is given in the works of: Christopher Hill's *Intellectual Origins of the English Revolution* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965) and Frances A. Yates's *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment* (London: Routledge, 1972) provide an example of this partisan trend. This trend continues into the present with Mark Chapman's *Anglican Theology* (Doing Theology), (London: T&T Clark, 2012).

grounds for common discernment in religious understanding. He did not approve of the 1662 Act of Uniformity, which excluded many non-conformist ministers from the Establishment Church's ministry. And yet he conformed and tried to persuade others to do so in order that England might have a single national Church.⁴³⁶ He believed it foolish not to conform on the basis of difference in Church polity, ceremonies, and forms of prayer, for these differences were not required for salvation nor were there certain directions provided for these things within Scripture. To remain non-conforming, as more moderate non-conformists like Richard Baxter, John Howe, and Edmund Calamy did, was unreasonable and could only succeed in destroying the unity of the Church.⁴³⁷

But exactly what could serve as a basis for the unity of a national Church in England? The presumption that the "common man" would find that which was necessary for salvation and come to peace over other issues had failed so spectacularly over the previous two decades. Wilkins had two ideas. The first was to develop a universal language to reduce the linguistic and conceptual uncertainties involved in communicating the faith in the wake of both sin and human finitude. But Wilkins also sought to establish an intellectual framework that would provide common space for discernment of the Christian faith. His intellectual framework consisted of what he presumed was universal evidence of known truths about how the world was created and ordered, a natural religion. This natural religion could provide a common basis or starting point for Christians to engage in basic questions about God. Doing so would allow them to think

⁴³⁶ Barbara Shapiro, *John Wilkins 1614-1672* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969), 152.

⁴³⁷ John Wilkins, *Bishop Wilkins's Character of the Best Christians* (Dublin: Thomas Armitage in Draper's Court, 2nd Edition, 1759), 1-8 in particular.

together about how the Christian Scriptures, or revelation, had been revealed by God through time, as demonstrated through universal logic and teachings. Educating people in the national Church, particularly through preaching and catechesis communicated in plain language, involved helping them to see the parallels between common moral and logical principles and the Christian Scriptures. Wilkins believed this would lead to agreement on the essentials necessary to be believed for salvation; but more importantly, it would create the space necessary for corporate discernment of religious understanding.⁴³⁸

And where would this ‘natural religion’ be taught to Christians? What structure could provide the arena for this teaching to take place? Shapiro indicates that for ‘latitudinarians’ (whom I have termed in this dissertation, ‘moderates’), these matters were best taken up in a comprehensive national Church. As we saw with Chillingworth so with Wilkins, Shapiro contends that for the latter, “Church government was pragmatic rather than scriptural. The civil government, [latitudinarians/moderates] argued, had both the power and the authority to establish the forms of Church government and public prayer. The individual’s duty was to submit to the established forms even if inconvenient, provided of course, they were not patently un-Christian.”⁴³⁹ Shapiro notes that while Wilkins and other moderates did not particularly like Independent Churches or Presbyterianism – preferring “the established episcopal system of Church government ...

⁴³⁸ Wilkins, *Bishop Wilkins’s Character of the Best Christians*, 108; see also: Shapiro, *John Wilkins 1614-1672*, 152-3, and 156 in particular.

⁴³⁹ Shapiro, *John Wilkins*, 156.

constitution and liturgy” – they also did not assert that the former forms of Church government were “unacceptable.”⁴⁴⁰

As with Chillingworth, however, Wilkins was well aware of the corruption sin had on human reasoning even with respect to ecclesiastical order and decision-making. This was one reason for his moderation with respect to the particular form of Church governance. Since Scripture could not provide absolute certainty as to the particulars of Church governance uncontested, he supported his argument for episcopal governance from a pragmatic stance rather from a Scriptural or philosophical stance: what sort of governance structure will allow the widest comprehension to enable this nation to get to the fundamentals of the faith, and to the capacity to engage in deeper discernment of those things for which we can derive only moral certainties in directing our actions. If sin corrupts collective human understanding and decision-making, how do we best mitigate its effects in order to bring the broadest evidence into consideration that we can?

Indeed, as we have seen already, Wilkins held to a traditional Calvinist notion of sin as having corrupted human nature itself. Like Chillingworth, he held that any one Church could be as susceptible to error on this basis as another and thus he was less concerned about the particular structure of the Church, so long as it enabled broad discernment of Scripture. What then would serve as the definitive basis for such a ‘comprehensive Church? In light of his understanding of sin, his mission as a priest and thinker in the Church was twofold. First, he wanted to demonstrate the reasonableness of Christianity by showing its universal essentials as having been established by God and

⁴⁴⁰ Shapiro, *John Wilkins*, 156; she notes that Wilkins and other moderates were willing to let go of their preferences for public (over private) prayers and a very formally ordered liturgy for the sake of a more comprehensive (inclusive in this case), unity (Shapiro, *John Wilkins*, 156-7).

evident through history, even outside the Church. This would provide a common, neutral basis for corporate discernment, in which he argued for the legitimate use of probabilistic reasoning in discerning faithfully amongst the ambiguities of Christian scriptural particularities.

Second, he wanted to develop a universally useable linguistic framework to recognize and classify things. The ability to do this would help reverse the effects of Babel, which had confused the human capacity to recognize the natures of things, including human beings and thereby their proper place within God's order.⁴⁴¹ This language, he hoped, would be capable of providing a "help" for the memory and a means of bringing order to the linguistic confusion that inhibited communication of scientific ideas and which ended continually in religious discord. "... [t]he best way of helping the *Memory* by natural Method, the *Understanding* likewise would be highly improved; and we should, by learning the *Character* and the *Names* of things, be instructed likewise in their *Natures*, the knowledge of both which ought to be conjoined."⁴⁴² Wilkins's desire was to create a language with a simple set of basic terms or radicals, arbitrarily assigned to express simple properties. When combined, these symbols would express the nature of an object.

The presumption that a framework of universal symbols could be developed was predicated on an assumption in the seventeenth century that human beings agreed in their

⁴⁴¹ See Rhodri Lewis, *Language, Mind and Nature: Artificial Languages in England from Bacon to Locke* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 85-117; Jaap Maat, *Philosophical Languages in the 17th Century: Dalgarno, Wilkins, Leibniz*, (Dordrecht, Boston, London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2004), 8-31.

⁴⁴² Wilkins, *Essay*, 21.

fundamental concept of things, with distinctions only in how they labelled them.⁴⁴³ So

Wilkins writes:

As men do generally agree in the same Principle of Reason, so do they likewise agree in the same *Internal Notion* or *Apprehension of things* ... The *Names* given to these in several languages, are such arbitrary *sounds* or *words*, as Nations of men have agreed upon, either casually or designedly, to express their Mental notions of them. The *Written word* is the figure or picture of that sound. So that if men should generally consent upon the same way or manner of *Expression* as they do agree in the same *Notion*, we should then be freed from that Curse [the effect of sin, particularly the confusion of Tongues at Babel] in the Confusion of Tongues, with all the unhappy consequences of it.⁴⁴⁴

The Royal Society endeavoured to uncover, collect, and classify the components of God's providential ordering of things in order to weigh the evidence of their conformance or deviation from God's truth. This, they believed, would require a methodical and communal effort by scholars across Europe over time. As a member of the Royal Society, Wilkins was aware that his linguistic project was at best a starting point for discernment. As pointed out by Wilkins's contemporary critic Thomas Baker, Wilkins had presumed, like those before him, a premise that was problematic if agreement was to be the measure of moral or probabilistic certainties: the assumption that human beings could agree (or ever did) about the nature of a thing.⁴⁴⁵ But ensuring agreement took place was not Wilkins's foremost goal. Rather his purpose to provide a basis for common space to

⁴⁴³ Rhodri Lewis, "John Wilkins's Essay (1668) and the Context of Seventeenth-century Artificial Languages in England," (Ph.D Diss. Oxford: University of Oxford, 2003), ch. 4.

⁴⁴⁴ Wilkins, "Chapter V.1," *Essay*, 20. This was the position Aristotle had set out in *De Interpretatione*: "Now spoken sounds are symbols of affections in the soul, and written marks symbols of spoken sounds. And just as written marks are not the same for all men, neither are spoken sounds. But what they are in the first place signs of – affections of the soul – are the same for all; and what these affections are likenesses of – actual things – are also the same" (Aristotle, "*De Interpretatione*" 16a4-16a9; in *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, (Original publication: New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1984; [electronic publication: Jamie L. Spriggs, InteLex Corp. publisher, 1996]), 1:25.

⁴⁴⁵ We see Wilkins's recognition of this, for example, in his agreement with John Ray that biological taxonomies were artificial (Wilkins, *Essay*, 26-8).

engage in the arduous process of discernment; which, even if it did not lead to agreement, could, as Chillingworth had argued for, lead to deeper seeking in the Scriptures and to a deeper understanding of how these integrated the world and people's experiences, and thus deeper formation in the Christian faith.

Wilkins responds to this increasingly common concern in his last work, *Of the Principles and Duties of Natural Religion*. It is here that he laid out a program for discovering the fundamentals of religion he hoped could reconstitute common space for religious discernment of the truth. This would in turn lead to a recognition of the reasonableness of the Christian faith revealed in the Scriptures without the requirement to obtain absolute certainty.

His first step in establishing his case is to examine the evidence for a deity who orders all creation, as we saw touched on in his first sermon above. This he refers to variously as "God," "Deity," and "first principle." His assertion is consistent with that of philosophers throughout time who have argued that there must be an eternal "first principle," with no other originating factor from whom comes all other things. Any other explanation of the existence of things would merely lead to an infinite regress or to an eternal world, both of which, he argues, are logical impossibilities. He then moves to establish the evidence positively (rather than negatively as logical impossibility). Foremost to God's providential laws is that they govern all of creation universally. Thus universal consent might be the sign of true apprehension in any matter of discernment about the divine existence and God's excellences in governance.⁴⁴⁶

⁴⁴⁶ Wilkins, *Of the Principles and Duties of Natural Religion*, 40-41. Wilkins writes that an individual ought to consent to that which, "all men have generally consented to," because "it [has] the highest degree of evidence of [a probable] kind, that any thing is capable of ..." Furthermore, "... it must be monstrous

Wilkins begins this line of argument by asserting both that God must exist and that God must have universal laws of governance. This is the case since he can demonstrate the “consenting voice” of philosophers of various ages,⁴⁴⁷ the universal testimony of historical sources (the Scriptures and scriptural characters providing part of the confirmation here),⁴⁴⁸ the universal consistency of evidence gathered through historical and scientific testimony about the world,⁴⁴⁹ demonstrating signs of God’s providential ordering of events.⁴⁵⁰

Wilkins next defines what he means by religion: it is “a general habit and reverence toward divine nature when we are inclined to serve God according to his will to procure his favour and blessing.”⁴⁵¹ More specifically for him, “natural religion” is that “which men might know and be obliged unto by the mere principles of reason, improved by consideration and experience without the help of revelation.”⁴⁵² Wilkins’s goal here is to obtain evidence that has universal credibility, which he believes will open a person to her divinely given reason already inclined to the particulars of the Christian faith. And so from the outset Wilkins attempts to establish religion as a universal condition under and through which all created things are governed.

arrogance and folly for any single persons to prefer their own judgments before the general suffrage of Mankind.”

⁴⁴⁷ Wilkins, *Of the Principles and Duties of Natural Religion*, 40-41.

⁴⁴⁸ Wilkins, *Of the Principles and Duties of Natural Religion*, 44.

⁴⁴⁹ Wilkins, *Of the Principles and Duties of Natural Religion*, 62-82.

⁴⁵⁰ Wilkins, *Of the Principles and Duties of Natural Religion*, 85-89

⁴⁵¹ Wilkins, *Of the Principles and Duties of Natural Religion*, 39.

⁴⁵² Wilkins, *Of the Principles and Duties of Natural Religion*, 39.

This fit with his concern to mitigate the effects of sin by careful analysis and weighing of evidence within the common body of the national Church, in order to determine the most probable alignment of the evidence being gathered, with God’s truth revealed in Scripture. In the second collection of his *Occasional Sermons* he argues that all persons – whether apostles, Church fathers, or religious luminaries of his present – who act in ways consistent with God’s purposes, will nonetheless also stumble, building on the sure foundation of Christ with “hay and stubble” which will be burned away by the Holy Spirit in the present of at the final consummation.⁴⁵³ Human beings will inevitably fall into error for two reasons: the first has to do with human nature and the sinful and finite nature of a person’s life during which, “nothing is more incident than frailty and error.”⁴⁵⁴ The second reason has to do with the distinction between those things essential to salvation that are the “foundation” Christ provided to people, and those things that are circumstantial or accidental. The latter are still important to serving one’s neighbor – even if not considered essential; however, failing to do these inessentials is also not going to lead to damnation or social destruction. The implication is that while it is essential to have as a basis of the faith, those clear things taught by Christ (his death and resurrection, belief in this), those things that are ambiguous or difficult to determine in particular circumstances will not cause a loss in one’s salvific status. Therefore things not essential to salvation ought not to be the foundation for a comprehensive national Church. Wilkins

⁴⁵³ Wilkins here is referencing 1 Corinthians 3:12. The “gold, silver and costly stones” he compares with solid doctrine, whereas the wood, hay or straw are those things that are discerned and turn out to lead to erroneous or less faithful works that are burned away eventually by God himself.

⁴⁵⁴ Wilkins, “Sermon 2,” *Sermons preached upon several occasions by the Right Reverend Father in God, John Wilkins*, (London, Tho. Basset, Ric. Chiswell and Will. Rogers, 1682), 65-66.

<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A66062.0001.001/1:5?rgn=div1;view=fulltext> (Accessed February 11, 2018)

argues that the second reason many things people have presumed to be faithful will be found in fact, to be be unfaithful acts or courses of action, stems from the, “nature of Religion, which comprehends under it things of several natures and degrees. There are some things *essential, substantial, fundamental*; other things *circumstantial, accidental*. Religion is compared to a building, it is not a covering of the roof with thatch, or leaving a flaw in the wall, but only a failing or breach in the Foundation, that will cause the fall or ruine of it.”⁴⁵⁵ Religion, according to Wilkins, cannot be “pulled down” where one holds to the essentials. God is the grounding of these essentials; and it is for God and his capacity to order all things that Wilkins will seek to establish evidence in his *Natural Religion*, as a starting point for corporate discernment.

Certainly, as we saw with Erasmus, Hooker, and Chillingworth, essentials of belief were necessary for salvation. For Wilkins this included:

[A]n universal conformity to the moral Law, both first and second Table, with subordination to the grace of faith. Now this, as it concerns the duties of the first Table, is properly called *Holiness*; and as it refers to the second Table, *Iustice* or *righteousness*; who even allows himself in a neglect or violation of either of these, whatever he may think of himself, is not *accepted of God*.⁴⁵⁶

⁴⁵⁵ Wilkins, “Sermon 2” in *Sermons preached upon several occasions by the Right Reverend Father in God, John Wilkins*, 66.

⁴⁵⁶ “As for *Holiness*, we are told expresly that *without it no man shall see the Lord*. And elsewhere ’tis said, *the pure in heart shall see God*. He that doth either generally omit or neglect the duties of Gods worship, and hath not an holy awe and dread upon his mind towards matters of Religion, but can deal with sacred things with the same slight and common affection, wherewith he manages other ordinary matters, hath just reason to suspect himself as *coming short of the kingdom of God: 2*. And so likewise for that other righteousness of the second Table, referring unto *Iustice* in our dealings with one another: Tho the having of this be not enough to entitle us to the Kingdom of God, yet the want of it, is enough to barr us from it. ’Tis so sutable to the light of nature, so necessary to humane society, that there is not any one kind of failing that doth more scandalize the profession of Religion, or render it less approved amongst men, than offences of this kind, especially such as are done upon pretence of Religion” (Wilkins, “Sermon 2,” in *Sermons preached upon several occasions by the Right Reverend Father in God, John Wilkins*, 68).

However, for all of those things “circumstantial or accidental,” one should use prudence in responding so as not to “pull down the house” by mortally wounding those whom one opposes:

Now it is not a blackness of the visage, or deformity of the members, nor every hurt or wound of the body, that shall prove mortal, so long as the vital parts remain sound and intire: And on the other side a hurt in the vitals would prove mortal, tho the countenance were never so beautiful. But 'tis a principle this, so very obvious and plain and without any dispute, that it will be needless to insist any longer upon the confirmation of it.⁴⁵⁷

The difficulty with insisting on certainty in things uncertain or even in not allowing for variation or distinct beliefs on things uncertain is that it threatens to collapse the common space that mitigates the deleterious effects of human finitude on being able to learn the faith. According to Wilkins this particular difficulty arises “[f]rom the nature of *Man*, to which nothing is more incident than frailty and error. He was a good man that said, *Who can understand his errors?* not only of his practice, but his judgment too ... Now if mens integrity in the more substantial parts of Religion did not secure them notwithstanding these errors and failings, no man living could be saved.” In other words, human beings cannot save themselves and are dependent on God.

The “law,” as Wilkins describes it, is an essential to which all human beings are called to conform, for it is universally evident. It can serve therefore as the starting point or ground of the common space needed for corporate discernment of those things left uncertain or “circumstantial.” What will undermine this common starting point is an insistence on the certainty that one must consent to a specific Church or Church party’s teaching on things that go beyond this universal law by which God has ordered all his

⁴⁵⁷ Wilkins, “Sermon 2,” in *Sermons preached upon several occasions by the Right Reverend Father in God, John Wilkins*, 68.

creation. And so, Wilkins accused those who demanded certainty in all things of being “more censorious” to the point that they would grow “sour in their spirits” and actually fall away from the basic unifying fundamentals of religion – the moral law with its righteousness and justice (loving God and neighbor) – as they became obsessed with their own versions of the truth.⁴⁵⁸

Wilkins believed that the national Church was the best place for this discernment to take place for a largely pragmatic reason: it was still where the majority of English people worshipped and where the majority could therefore be formed in common faith.⁴⁵⁹ As this was the case, those to be “comprehended” ought to engage in mutual forbearance of one another’s differences in order to preserve this space:

There are several *Truths* which are not of so great consequence as *peace*, and *unity*, and *charity*. And therefore in such things, there ought to be a mutual forbearance towards one another; and men should endeavour by all means of amity and kindness to joyn together, for the promoting of those more substantial Truths and Duties, wherein they agree according to that Rule of the *Apostle*. Philip. 3.15, 16. *And if in any thing ye be otherwise minded, God shall reveal even this unto you: Nevertheless whereto we have already attained, let us walk by the same rule, let us mind the same thing.*⁴⁶⁰

In line with each of our thinkers so far, Wilkins also takes a polemical stance in excluding from this comprehensive national Church those who wished to establish their opinion on the basis of certainty. In preaching about Paul’s mutual forbearance with respect to meat and idols, Wilkins asks rhetorically how he ought to respond to those who insist that Paul elsewhere wants to “cut off” those who continue to insist on obeying the

⁴⁵⁸ Wilkins, “Sermon 2” in *Sermons preached upon several occasions by the Right Reverend Father in God, John Wilkins*, 63; 77.

⁴⁵⁹ Shapiro, *John Wilkins*, 152-190.

⁴⁶⁰ Wilkins, “Sermon 2,” in *Sermons preached upon several occasions by the Right Reverend Father in God, John Wilkins*, 57-58.

mosaic law. He replies that Paul wanted to cut them off precisely because they insisted that their belief or practice was most certainly “necessary to salvation.” Thus the Jews who insisted on doctrinal certainty were the ones truly cutting themselves off from God!

The Reasonableness of Christianity

Barbara Shapiro argues in her biography of Wilkins that he adopts a “liberalizing” tack in his works in order to establish intellectual space for the reconsideration of the relationship between science, history, and Christian faith. According to Shapiro, this so-called liberalizing approach centered on the notion of moderation in contrast to the zeal associated with disputes over the particularities of Christian doctrines and ensuing practices.⁴⁶¹

Wilkins spent considerable time presenting the reasonableness of the Christian faith through sermons aimed at the average person in the pews of the Established Church. It is unclear whether Wilkins would have taken to the pulpit had he not been deprived in 1660 of his academic appointment to Oxford by Cromwell. Wilkins’s aim, however, seems to have been to continue the legacy set out by Hooker and Chillingworth, to maintain a body of Christians, instructed in the faith and made capable of discernment of the Scriptures, within the limits of a comprehensive Church.

In 1666, Wilkins was made vicar of Polebrook, then prebendary of Exeter in 1667 and St. Paul’s in 1668, and finally bishop of Chester. A supporter of Cromwell during the Interregnum, Wilkins pressed his post-Restoration colleagues for moderation aimed at drawing people willingly into a comprehensive Church: the Church of England. As he was ordained, however, Wilkins made clear his position, speaking out against the use of

⁴⁶¹ Shapiro, *John Wilkins*, see esp. 224-250.

penal laws that he believed would coerce non-conformists to desist from gathering and worshipping or refusing to attend an Anglican Church. Comprehension could not be had through civil, positive laws. These, he argued, would only lead to the sort of civil disruption and divisive formation as had occurred during the wars and Interregnum. To this end, he also sought the support of other moderate bishops to provide concessions to non-conformists.⁴⁶²

In 1668, Wilkins met with non-conformists William Bates, Richard Baxter, and Thomas Manton, hoping that Presbyterians might be brought within the Church of England. This *did not*, however, include Independent separatists.⁴⁶³ For even though he advocated against the use of force with respect to non-conformists, Wilkins, like most moderates and of course conformists, believed non-conformists were asserting an infallible certainty with dangerous zeal, which would threaten comprehension.⁴⁶⁴ Here we see echoes of Erasmus's, Hooker's, and Chillingworth's polemical tactics. Those whose ecclesiastical identity rested on scriptural or doctrinal certainty were excluded from the fold of a comprehensive Church precisely because their assertions continually threatened to fragment the body, taking potential new members with it.⁴⁶⁵ The desire for

⁴⁶² John Marshall, "Locke and Latitudinarianism," in *Philosophy, Science, and Religion in England, 1640–1700*, (eds). Richard W.F. Kroll, Richard Ashcraft, and Perez Zagorin (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, UK, 1992), 257.

⁴⁶³ N.H. Keeble, *The Restoration: England in the 1660s*, (Oxford, UK, Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 123

⁴⁶⁴ N.H. Keeble, *The Restoration: England in the 1660s*, 123.

⁴⁶⁵ Wilkins, "Sermon 2," *Sermons preached upon several occasions by the Right Reverend Father in God, John Wilkins*, 58-59.

comprehension amongst moderates fell through by late summer of 1668, the House of Lords seeing such comprehension as intolerable.⁴⁶⁶

As we shall see, one of the ways Wilkins attempted to press for comprehension (of his own brand) was to ground the notion of and argument for comprehension in epistemically evident principles. If the essentials of religion could be established in these principles most English persons could agree were apparently true, this would enable the national Church, holding these principles as the basis for unity, to serve as an arena into which people could come, on common ground, to weigh evidence about more particular Christian claims, to be formed in the faith by the process of searching, and to sustain in that arena without further threat of division. This proposal would also allow Wilkins to demonstrate the reasonableness of Christianity, a task he takes up in his analysis of Scripture's wisdom literature and, more philosophically, in his final work on natural religion. In both cases he provided an outline of an evidentiary framework. In this, he attempted to demonstrate the evidence for an underlying divine order that could be accessed through discernment when the strictures of zealously asserted and enforced certainty were removed.

Wilkins's writings on Scripture's wisdom literature, and his last major work on natural religion were used to demonstrate how one could reach a reasonable conclusion about whether or not something aligned with God's order, the truth. Wilkins argued that this could occur by examining the universality or "overlap of wisdom" between Scripture and the works of philosophers throughout time. This overlap included the existence and attributes of God, and the ensuing moral lessons or moral life that ought to follow. It was

⁴⁶⁶ William M. Lamont, *Richard Baxter and the Millennium: Protestant Imperialism and the English Revolution*, (London: Croom Helm, 1979), 220.

not that such works verified Scripture. Rather, the parallels between historical and philosophical works from outside the faith provided evidence in support of God's providence over all creation. And these points of universal agreement could serve as a type of cognitively derived common space for more particular scriptural discernment. Learning and teaching these basic principles of logic then could serve to awaken what is innate to "the common man," as God's rational order was innate to all that he created.

Most importantly, this method relied on determining what seemed to be universal: an intrinsic natural ordering of created things. Determining how evidence aligned with these universal principles required patience, mutual restraint, and the mitigation of the human tendency to presume something people did not have because of finitude and sin: epistemic clarity and thus certainty. This method, employed through preaching in the national Churches, would shape how people engaged one another over the ambiguities of scriptural interpretation and moral life. It would also hopefully mitigate the novel zealous claims that had previously contributed to tearing down English society. Wilkins writes:

There are *two* things by which men are usually provoked to heat and eagerness, in their differences of this kind. 1. A false apprehension of the weight and necessity of their opinions, by reason of those consequences which they fasten to them, and will have to stand or fall with them. And 2. An apprehension of their great clearness and perspicuity, upon which account they conceive no man ought to oppose them ... [even where the most probable evidence is on one's side,] ... out of tender respect to those who had contrary prejudices, they [those in Christ who knew eating meat sacrificed to idols was not an offense to God] were not to trouble them [those who did not believe the former] with unnecessary disputes, but to *bear their infirmities, and every one to study how to please his neighbour for his good to edification*, Chap. 15. ver. 1.

At the heart of this effort was Wilkins's argument was the desire to establish common space – within which "edification" could take place. This required a limit: mutual deference on doctrinal or pragmatic points of dispute to enable time and to preserve the

very governing structures necessary for education, learning, and decision-making to take place. And this in turn required common and evident ground to serve as a starting point for corporate discernment: evidence of universal alignment between nature and Scripture. This corporate discernment of the truth, Wilkins believed, was essential to mitigating the effects of finitude and sin so rampant in presumptions of perspicuity and certainty and the resultant divisions and breakdown of civil and ecclesiastical life in England.

Simon Shaffer cites 17th-century thinker Thomas Sprat, whose response becomes prototypical for a stream of English moderates: “for Sprat, [natural knowledge] made experimenters, ‘conquerors over things, in the greatest publick unhappiness’; it ‘never separates us into mortal factions’; finally, ‘it permits us to raise contrary imaginations upon it, without any danger of a civil war.’”⁴⁶⁷ Wilkins, like Chillingworth, frequently expresses a similar sentiment. Shapiro argues that in *Natural Religion* Wilkins “develop[s] ... a moderate, non-dogmatic religion compatible with scientific knowledge, elaborate[ing] an approach to the epistemology and methodology of science compatible with religious belief.” Shapiro is right to assert that Wilkins wanted a comprehensive Church where evaluation of evidence could occur in that (still) limited body. However, drawing on the work of Harrison, it seems more likely that the aims of the empirical sciences were subject to certain theological ends.

The Search for Validation: Universal Evidence

Before turning specifically to Wilkins’s own approach to the relationship between Scripture, certainty and formation, we shall briefly examine the distinctive approaches of

⁴⁶⁷ Simon Shaffer, “Review: Making Certain,” *Social Studies of Science*, 14, no. 1 (February, 1984), 137-152; 138. Shaffer cites Sprat, *History of the Royal Society*, 56.

influential contemporaries. Horton Davies traces a movement away from the figural approach to Scripture (as in John Donne and Lancelot Andrewes) to the “plain sense” approach of Restoration Latitudinarians.⁴⁶⁸ As indicated, Latitudinarians like Wilkins were concerned to establish cognitive common ground as the basis for a comprehensive Church. Edification, they believed, could be the basis of this common ground. It would provide evidence of a universal natural religion consistent with Christian revelation, and a common starting point for further discernment and debate about the many aspects of Scripture and nature that required the use of epistemic probability. Gerard Reedy concurs with Davies’s work and argues that this movement from the metaphysical to literal sense of Scripture followed the Erasmian tradition. Here the literate cleric, without the help of medieval glosses, could “come into contact with the literal and saving truths of Scripture ... [which are few and clear],” which he could then preach to his congregation.⁴⁶⁹ Things *adiaphora* to salvation could be left to discernment without assertions about their certainty, which had in the past torn apart the social and ecclesiastical spheres.

For Latitudinarians advocating the “plain sense” style of preaching and catechizing, the difficulty with the other senses of Scripture – allegorical/typological, tropological, and anagogical – was that any doctrine developed using these senses could so easily become asserted as necessary for salvation without any agreed-upon evidence. A secondary challenge, one exemplified by divergent conclusions about the political events of the Interregnum, was that of the extent to which such methods could lead to

⁴⁶⁸ Horton Davies, *Worship and Theology in England*, Vol. 2, *From Andrewes to Baxter and Fox, 1693-1690*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), chapter 4.

⁴⁶⁹ Gerard Reedy, *The Bible and Reason: Anglicans and Scripture in Late Seventeenth Century England*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 13.

excess and conflict. We see one example of this with Cromwell. According to English Parliamentarian Edmund Ludlow, Cromwell used Psalm 110 to justify himself as a “godly prince” whose work it was to prepare England for Christ’s imminent return by pressing for moral reform and the conversion of atheists and Jews. According to Cromwell, this work had been hampered by the “dry bones” of former English governments.⁴⁷⁰

Cromwell used the psalms to justify his rise to political power. Meanwhile, Edward Hyde, who would become the future earl of Clarendon, turned to the psalms for solace in defeat. He chastised the use of typology, mainly that sort used by Cromwell: “almost every one of the *psalms* [some believe] to contain some prophecy of our Saviour.” Hyde suggests that the psalm, like all of Scripture, ought to be interpreted in the literal and plain sense. Thus the psalms of David must be interpreted in the context of David’s own life, for example.⁴⁷¹

Reedy argues that while typological reading certainly continued post-Restoration with many Royalists, its capacity for creating contentious debate or even supporting a usurper like Cromwell mitigated using it for interpreting political events. Instead, Royalists tended like Hyde to use a more literal approach where psalm 110 might “serve as a reminder to Israel of all that God had done for it, and to remind contemporary readers of the gift of the gospel.”⁴⁷² According to Reedy, many later seventeenth-century

⁴⁷⁰ Colin Davis, “Cromwell’s Religion,” in *Cromwell and The Interregnum: The Essential Readings*, ed., David Lee Smith (London: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 149.

⁴⁷¹ Edward Hyde, “Contemplations and Reflections upon the Psalms of David,” in *A Collection of Several Tracts of the Right Honorable Edward, Earl of Clarendon*, (London: T. Woodward at the Halfmoon and J. Peele at Pater-Noster-Row, 1727), 380.

⁴⁷² Reedy, *The Bible and Reason*, 79.

thinkers believed that salvation could not “depend on such ambiguities.” And therefore with the aim being restoration, order, and reform in the moral, civil, and ecclesiastical spheres, “common sense” or “plain sense” preaching was to become more normatively heard from the pulpit.⁴⁷³ Plain sense preaching focused on first defining the essentials necessary for salvation. Yet the Christian life could not be reduced to these propositional statements, and to do so would potentially and problematically preclude a demand for seeking God more fully in every aspect of one’s social life.

Seeking involved the weighing of evidence, Scriptural and natural, even for those things determined to be *adiaphora* to salvation. As with Erasmus, Hooker and Chillingworth, it was not that things *adiaphora* to salvation were unimportant; they simply did not have the perspicuous Scriptural evidence grounding those things essential to salvation. For Wilkins, as well as other moderates and higher Churchmen of the Restoration period, these inessentials, which helped to order ecclesiastical and civil common life, fell into the category of moral certainty.⁴⁷⁴ They therefore required a common arena for corporate discernment. Because moral certainty could only be derived through using reason and logic to weigh evidence, conclusions were probable and lacked absolute certainty.⁴⁷⁵ Thus Anglicans (whether Latitudinarians, Presbyterian, or higher Church) were reliant upon evidence, particularly testimony, especially in later seventeenth-century treatments of Scripture.

⁴⁷³ Reedy, *The Bible and Reason*, 13.

⁴⁷⁴ Wilkins, *Of the Principles and Duties of Natural Religion*, 408-10.

⁴⁷⁵ Wilkins, *Of the Principles and Duties of Natural Religion*, 408 especially.

For Wilkins and his Royal Society colleagues like Stillingfleet, miracles were assumed demonstrable evidence of God's existence and of his ordering of creation as testified in Scripture. Reedy notes that in terms of evidence, scriptural testimony to miracles specifically, most particularly from Moses, the Pentateuch, the prophets, and Jesus carried the most weight in verifying the authority of Scripture and providing direction for moral life. Reedy argues that for those who deferred to miracles as evidence:

A disruption to the laws of nature, as evident in a true miracle, can occur only through the intervention of the creator of those laws, God himself ... God involves his own authority when he allows the sudden alterations of physical nature, the healings, and the resurrections that punctuate the Old and New Testaments.⁴⁷⁶

Thus miracles were explicit evidence of God's providential ordering, since he not only controlled the general laws of nature, but any supernatural effect superseding those laws.

Wilkins argues that all people have the natural law ordered to God, written on their hearts by God. Whether following this natural law is sufficient for their salvation he declines to answer stating that the Church fathers made arguments for and against the salvation of the 'heathens' who follow only this natural law.⁴⁷⁷ But for those who do have the light of the Gospel revealed to them, following it is essential: "... to *us*, to whom the Christian Doctrine is revealed and proposed, the belief and practice of it is the only way wherein we can hope to be accepted."⁴⁷⁸ What must be observed here is that Wilkins is not proposing that following natural religion is necessarily salvific. More importantly, if one has received the gospel, it is essential that it guide one's life, or at the least, that one

⁴⁷⁶ Reedy, *The Bible and Reason*, 47-8.

⁴⁷⁷ Wilkins, *Of the Principles and Duties of Natural Religion*, 395-6.

⁴⁷⁸ Wilkins, *Of the Principles and Duties of Natural Religion*, 398

not turn away from God's law fulfilled in Christ, if one hopes to be saved. But what evidence do Christians have to establish the warrant for their assent or consent to the Church's teachings? Wilkins writes:

[the] *Evidence* which we have for the Divine authority of this [Christian] Doctrine, above any other [is this:] It seems to be a Principle of Nature, to which all Nations have consented, That God himself should prescribe the way of his own worship. All kind of inventions whatsoever, that have been any way useful to humane life, especially such kind of Laws as concern Civil or Ecclesiastical associations of men, have upon the first discovery of them been still ascribed to the *Deity*. As if the *Authors* of them must needs have been first illuminated with some ray of Divinity."⁴⁷⁹

Wilkins argues that if the governing structures of civil and ecclesiastical societies were not divinely instantiated by laws given and revealed by God to draw persons to him, no one would follow him.⁴⁸⁰ And having received the Christian Scriptures, we can be assured of their authenticity of laying out God's providential ordering first, because the Old Testament has been confirmed by consensus of some of the most learned men through history, "... as the most ancient, so the most exact story of the world"⁴⁸¹ The New Testament's authenticity is confirmed by its correspondence to things of the Old Testament, which in turn demonstrates the authenticity of the Church's teachings that "... there was such a man as Christ, who preached such a doctrine, wrought many miracles, suffered an ignominious death, and was afterwards worshipped as God" And all of these things, Wilkins writes, "we have it by as good certainty as any rational man can wish or hope for, that is, by Universal Testimony, as well of enemies as friends." And finally, argues Wilkins, "the common principles of nature" demonstrate that "'tis not

⁴⁷⁹ Wilkins, *Of the Principles and Duties of Natural Religion*, 398.

⁴⁸⁰ Wilkins, *Of the Principles and Duties of Natural Religion*, 399.

⁴⁸¹ Wilkins, *Of the Principles and Duties of Natural Religion*, 400.

consistent with the nature of the Deity, his Truth, Wisdom or Justice, to work such miracles in the confirmation of a Lye or Imposture.”⁴⁸² Finally, with respect to those miracles that are evidence of God’s providential ordering of created things in accordance with Scriptural revelation, and in accordance with the Church’s reception and ordering its life to receive and discern Scripture, Wilkins argues that it cannot be objected that miracles not occurring in his present are evidence against God’s providential ordering. Rather the miracles recorded in Scripture and their seeming absence now maybe “as much wisdom of Providence in the forbearing of them now as in the working of them then.”⁴⁸³

Wilkins’s argument for belief in a ‘general deity’ begins with observing the natural ordering of the civil and ecclesiastical spheres. This is demonstrated from experience of other societies and one’s own through history. It is a reasonable presumption, Wilkins has argued, that there is a deity who has providentially ordered all things, to which people have responded with obedience. For the Christian, however, more is required: obedience to God’s revelation in Scripture. Again, Wilkins makes his case by establishing evidence: the Old Testament as the most descriptive of the world as it is, the New Testament’s correspondence to the Old, confirming the Son’s coming into the world, his death, resurrection and the proclamation of his followers. Finally, the evidence that this all is true is tied to the testimony God ‘allows’ to continue, of both friends and enemies of Christ. So it is that human beings can therefore have *moral certainty* concerning the Church’s continued proclamation of Christ and of a person’s requirement

⁴⁸² Wilkins, *Of the Principles and Duties of Natural Religion*, 402.

⁴⁸³ Wilkins, *Of the Principles and Duties of Natural Religion*, 402.

to consent to the Church's testimony. Yet perhaps it was because they saw the circularity of their own arguments, or the incapacity to convince those outside the faith, that several later seventeenth-century thinkers moved to establish evidence of Scripture's divine authority from outside Scripture. Reedy writes, "one of the great conundrums of Anglican scriptural interpretation in this period concerns the proof at issue ... the goal of the proof was to affirm the truth of at least the central books of Scripture. Yet the entire burden of the proof – the character of an author, his reputation, and his miracles – can be found only in the apposite book, whose very truthfulness cannot be assumed."⁴⁸⁴

Any apologetic intended to "lead one" to affirm Scripture as the divine law, which contained moral laws for ordering society, seemed to require an infinite regress of evidence, were one *only* to look within the Scripture for proofs. Stillingfleet makes an argument concerning testimony from external evidence – namely the consent of Jews and Gentiles concerning biblical authorship. He acknowledges that this universal testimonial evidence could only inspire moral certainty, yet he writes, "[it is still] a sufficient foundation for a firm assent to be built upon."⁴⁸⁵

The Cognitive Basis for Common Space within the Church of England

⁴⁸⁴ Reedy, *The Bible and Reason*, 53.

⁴⁸⁵ Edward Stillingfleet, *Origines sacræ, or, A rational account of the grounds of Christian faith, as to the truth and divine authority of the Scriptures and the matters therein contained*, (London: R.W. for Henry Mortlock, 1662), 300-301.

With Stillingfleet, Wilkins argues that the principles of religion do not need to be “established by such cogent evidence [physical or mathematical] as to necessitate assent,”⁴⁸⁶ because these principles are innate to human beings, “written on the heart of man,”⁴⁸⁷ as indicated in the last section. What is it that God has written on the heart of

⁴⁸⁶ There are two kinds of assent proceeding from evidence: 1) there is knowledge or certainty. This type of assent can be further distinguished into three kinds: a) physical, which consists of sense knowledge and provides the highest kind of evidence and thus certainty; b) mathematical, which relies upon objects themselves having natures that are so obvious to a reasonable individual so as to provide complete certainty (for example, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts); c) moral, which is less simple than the first two, and is dependent on mixed circumstances (apart from the mere apprehension of its own nature), and is thus not capable of providing the same kinds of evidences of the first two (Wilkins, *Of the Principles and Duties of Natural Religion*, 5-6; Wilkins argues that physical and mathematical certainty are characterized not by an “absolute infallibility” (an attribute which is not communicable to human beings), “[b]ut [by] ... a *Conditional infallibility*, that which supposes our faculties to be true, and that we do not neglect the exerting of them. And upon such a supposition there is a necessity that some things must be so as we apprehend them, and that they cannot possibly be otherwise” (Wilkins, *Of the Principles and Duties of Natural Religion*, 9). Moral certainty on the other hand, provides what Wilkins terms: “*indubitable Certainty*,” by which he means, “that which doth not admit of any reasonable cause of doubting, which is the only certainty of which most things are capable; and this may properly be ascribed both to that kind of evidence arising from the *Nature of things*, and likewise to that which doth arise from *Testimony*, or from *Experience*. I am from the nature of the things themselves *Morally* certain, and cannot make any doubt of it, but that a *mind free from passion and prejudice is more situated to pass a true judgment, than such a one as is byassed by affections and interests*” (Wilkins, *Of the Principles and Duties of Natural Religion*, 9-10). Basic principles of social order (as in the last section), witness or testimony (for example, to miracles), and experience (the seasons of winter and fall), would be examples which would provide morally certain evidence to which a reasonable person ought to assent. Knowledge for human beings is dependent upon a first cause, which of course cannot be proved *a priori*, whose laws can be known only by their effects. That is, writes Wilkins, we can “only receive illustration by instances and circumstances and by universal effects as do proceed from them and from monstrous absurdities that happen in their absence” (Wilkins, *Of the Principles and Duties of Natural Religion*, 8). 2) the second kind of assent Wilkins identifies is that of probability or opinion. This takes place when the evidence in support of something might be greater than the evidence against it, yet the supporting evidence is “not so weighty and perspicuous as to exclude all reasonable doubt and fear of the contrary.”⁴⁸⁶ This occurs when there is a “more imperfect and obscure representation and conception of things, either by our Senses or Understandings, by Testimony or by Experience.” Often when the evidence in support or against something is of equal weight, one cannot assent, and the result is a “hesitation” or “suspension of assent” (Wilkins, *Of the Principles and Duties of Natural Religion*, 11, 38).

⁴⁸⁷ Wilkins, *Of the Principles and Duties of Natural Religion*, 31-33, 92. See arguments on 156 and 229, in particular. Wilkins asserts that some of God’s goodness, wisdom, and power were communicable to human beings. Barbara Shapiro suggests that this assertion put him “in opposition to the traditional Calvinist view” of human beings, in that “God can indeed provide a measure for man.” She argues that in concert with his understanding of man’s innate capacity, Wilkins’s method of mitigating prejudice (which would otherwise obscure morally certain knowledge) through proper education allows for human beings to “choose” good from evil (also communicable attributes). And in this way, Shapiro contends, Wilkins has put “salvation into his own hands” (Shapiro, *John Wilkins 1614-1672*, 240). I disagree with her conclusion. I instead contend that for Wilkins, probabilistic reasoning and moral certainty do not have to do with acquiring or implying agency in one’s salvation. Using probabilistic reasoning to come to moral certainty about matters is the most faithful response to God possible for finite, sinful human beings.

man? Wilkins argues that through nature, God has made it universally obvious that all living things want to preserve their own lives: “From that Prime and Fundamental Law of Nature ... Nothing is more essential, not only to *rational*, but even to *sensitive* Nature, than that it should principally seek its own continuance and well-being, and all other things only in order to this.”⁴⁸⁸ He concludes that God implanted this natural inclination and “stamped [it] upon the very nature of things, whereby they are fitted for those services to which they are designed in their creation.” Furthermore, God “Governs all things by such Laws, as are suited to those several natures, which he had at first implanted in them.”⁴⁸⁹

While technically the human response to what God has naturally implanted in people is a “moral duty,” in reality one cannot choose otherwise than to pursue one’s own survival. So while individuals have a choice in how they respond to God, a human being is naturally inclined to choose what is in his or her own best interest: “I mean, [by moral duty] such Habits or Actions as are the most proper means for the attaining of this end. About these we have a liberty of Acting; to which we are to be induced in a moral way, by such kind of Arguments and Motives, as are in themselves sufficient to convince the Reason.” Habits or actions are not conditioned or taken on the basis of direct knowledge; they are the result of a person being presented evidence through arguments and motives

⁴⁸⁸ Wilkins, Sermons preached upon several occasions by the Right Reverend Father in God, John Wilkins, 11.

⁴⁸⁹ Wilkins, Sermons preached upon several occasions by the Right Reverend Father in God, John Wilkins, 12-13.

that will enable her to determine how consistent something is with the pursuit of the good and truth at which she aims in making her choice.⁴⁹⁰

Wilkins presupposes that “a Deity” has created human beings and that as a human being’s creator, this Deity is the ultimate end or *telos* of a person’s life. As such, when a person looks to what is good for himself, he must look foremost to his creator. This “looking,” Wilkins argues, consists of acts of faith and love (obedience). And yet this love is not directed outward in the first place, and even if it could be, a person could not grasp and love the fullness of who this Deity is. Therefore, faith and love are not absolute responses to God but are contingent on God’s value to a person’s survival: “[the divine] attributes of such a superlative goodness, that of themselves they do deserve infinitely more than the best of our affections; but yet they prove effectual to the winning over of our love and desires so far only, as they are apprehended to be convenient for us.”⁴⁹¹ One’s mere personal survival cannot be obtained because it is a part of a larger “system,” a community of people each ordered in particular ways to God without the capacity for humans to know this. Therefore, a person cannot properly love God, because of her own limited capacity to know both the divine and the good of her neighbor (i.e., the fullness of the two commandments).⁴⁹² Human beings are then incapable – on the basis of this natural, innate law – of achieving their proper end in God. Wilkins confirms that this is

⁴⁹⁰ Wilkins, *Sermons preached upon several occasions by the Right Reverend Father in God, John Wilkins*, 14-15. On page 14, Wilkins makes the argument from nature and then seeks to demonstrate the same argument through scriptural evidence on page 15.

⁴⁹¹ Wilkins, *Sermons preached upon several occasions by the Right Reverend Father in God, John Wilkins*, 15.

⁴⁹² Wilkins, *Sermons preached upon several occasions by the Right Reverend Father in God, John Wilkins*, 12; cf. the whole of Sermon 2.

why it was necessary that to truly love God, to direct our acts to him, “he must first love us.”⁴⁹³

Wilkins addresses both finitude and sin more fully when he argues that prior to Adam’s fall from grace, when he “could not have any such reluctancy or weakness in his nature, which might make a good duty seem difficult ... God [still] saw it necessary for him, that his obedience should be fenced about with promises and threatnings. *Do this and live, The day thou eatest thereof thou shalt dye the death.*” Finitude alone required laws, regulations, and consequences to help direct a person in acting toward the truth.

Adam and Eve’s fall from grace left human beings without the possibility of responding to God without natural and Scriptural laws to direct and limit actions: “And therefore certainly it is not possible for us, who have corrupted natures to attain unto any perfection above this.”⁴⁹⁴ Wilkins argues that even Christ had to endure the Cross and, following Hebrews 5, this was the climax of a life of suffering through which he learned obedience:

Now you know that our Saviour was perfect Man: perfect in regard of all those things which are essentially and necessarily annexed to our natures, and perfect too in respect of that utmost holiness of which in this life we are capable; and therefore if he according to his humanity were thus quickened in his obedience, by hopes of reward and fears of suffering, certainly *then ’tis impossible for us whilst we are in this World to be ever above such helps.*⁴⁹⁵

⁴⁹³ Wilkins, *Sermons preached upon several occasions by the Right Reverend Father in God, John Wilkins*, 18 (quoting 1 John 4:19).

⁴⁹⁴ Wilkins, *Sermons preached upon several occasions by the Right Reverend Father in God, John Wilkins*, 20.

⁴⁹⁵ Wilkins, *Sermons preached upon several occasions by the Right Reverend Father in God, John Wilkins*, 20 (italics mine).

In other words, for people to survive, it was essential for them to seek their creator and preserver. Yet the frailty of human finitude and sin eliminated this possibility. God alone could overcome this gap between human and divine natures, which prevented human seeking in response to God's act. Thus, in his love for us sent his Son into the world, Wilkins confirms. By obedience to his Father and to his neighbors and enemies even to his death on the Cross, the Son learned and fulfilled the summarized Commandments to love God and neighbor. Christ's death and resurrection permitted human response, enabling people to seek their ultimate good, God, through him. The inclination and capacity to seek, Wilkins argued, was contingent upon God's loving human beings first. In light of finitude and sin, human beings required grace, which Wilkins termed, "helps." Helps according to Wilkins, could be summarized and civilly or ecclesiastically implemented in the form of laws given for the purpose of ordering people to God. The basis for these laws, however, was drawn for Wilkins from Christ's own life of obedience to God. As Christ had to live a life of obedience in the midst of the temptations of the world, society and culture, of friendships, danger, betrayals, doubt and questioning of his followers, and his enemies, all the while fulfilling the law and the prophet's testimony, so his life could provide the template for seeking God in the midst of the trials experienced in one's own civil and ecclesiastical life.⁴⁹⁶ However, unlike Christ, human beings in their finitude and sin do not have direct access to the perfect knowledge of God, or even of their own personal circumstances (understandings, beliefs, effects on others, place and purpose in history) before God. These limits therefore required some form of discernment of Christian truth, where the effects of sin that affect the pursuit of God in individual and

⁴⁹⁶ Wilkins, "Sermon 2," Wilkins, *Sermons preached upon several occasions by the Right Reverend Father in God, John Wilkins.*

civil and ecclesiastical life, might be identified and addressed. Moreover, discernment of how the life of Christ might be lived out, or the sin of a Scriptural figure like Adam might be avoided, required weighing sometimes incomplete, sometimes ambiguous and sometimes even contradictory evidence from Scripture, from history and from the natural world. Fractious Independent Churches, with their zealous presumption and articulation of Scriptural certainty, would increase the chance of incubating sin, distorting or depriving members in their pursuit of truth. Corporate discernment in the form of a comprehensive Church, not founded on divisive doctrine but on the widest possible principles of common agreement, could, Wilkins proposed, become an arena for discerning together the Scriptures and their history of interpretation. What would form the basis for this comprehensive Church?

Wilkins begins by presenting the problem he's responding to when he comes to argue for a comprehensive Church: many Church party leaders of different positions ground their distinctions in religion itself. They thus inspire their followers to zealously uphold those distinctions from other Church parties in England with such certainty that no common space can be found for discernment:

Now tho it should be granted that some of the *Leaders* amongst all Parties, are chiefly swayed by their particular interests and desires of dominion, yet because they have done and will always, pretend at least, to found their differences upon grounds of Religion, whereby those that are *Followers* amongst them are heated to a zeal and eagerness in opposition of one another: Therefore it is of very great consequence that men should be rightly informed, what Religion is? Wherein it chiefly consists? What are the main things to be contended for about it? How men should demean themselves in matters of lesser moment? In what method the obligation of things is to be stated? And in brief, how they should so order their conversations as to be both *accepted of God, and approved of men?* Than which

nothing can more effectually conduce to that general peace and settlement which these Nations are not in expectation of.⁴⁹⁷

From Chillingworth's own time, through the Interregnum period and therefore always on the horizon for Restoration thinkers, trying to discern a common definition for 'what religion was', let alone how one might faithfully live that religion, had served as a basis for division, violence and social upheaval. If corporate worship and interpretation of Scripture continued to cause division over the core of the Christian faith – the gospel, issues of salvation and justification – the arena for discernment required widening in order to comprehend those who could not agree on the particulars of Christian revelation.

For Wilkins, this 'arena' for discernment is best founded on the basis of natural religion whose principles can be easily established and taught with clear supporting evidence from logic and history. In his sermon on Romans 14:17-18, "the Kingdom of God is not meat and drink," Wilkins argues that the effects of sin on corporate discernment can only be mitigated through edification. "There is nothing of greater importance towards the healing of the minds of men, than to have a right understanding of those Principles, by which they profess to be guided in their differences [from one another]."⁴⁹⁸ Wilkins goes on to demonstrate how addressing the questions above beginning from a common basis in natural law and leading then to core principles of the

⁴⁹⁷ Wilkins, "Sermon 2," Wilkins, Sermons preached upon several occasions by the Right Reverend Father in God, John Wilkins, 41-42.

⁴⁹⁸ Wilkins, "Sermon 2," Wilkins, Sermons preached upon several occasions by the Right Reverend Father in God, John Wilkins, 41.

Christian faith, can help create shared intellectual space to bring distinct parties together in discernment.⁴⁹⁹

The passage he draws on from Romans above has to do with the difficulties between Jewish and Gentile converts to Christianity – difficulties that prevented them from coming together in worship and mission. Wilkins indicates that there are two ways to address this fundamental split between the two groups of converts. Either the Apostles could assert their infallible authority “by some *Canon* or decree, since they were the ‘chief Preachers of the Gospel, and confirmed it by many signs and miracles . . . ,’” or they could “find out some expedient for this difference, to accommodate matters unto the present state of things, and to moderate the rigor on either hand.”⁵⁰⁰ The leaders chose the second of these two routes: a limited toleration of distinctions on account of the finitude or weakness of human understanding and inclination. This limitation was shaped by a set of rules:

1. To forbear offensive disputes about these things[;] To avoid despising and condemning one another upon this account. He that hath a clearer light concerning his own just liberty, must not despise another who comes short in this persuasion; and the other must not judge him, as being loose and irreligious in doing more than he ought, v. 3. This he confirms by these Reasons. 1. You have no commission and authority to *judge another mans servant* [;] 2. Tho you both differ about these controverted Points, yet you both agree in these other Rules, that no Man ought to *put a stumbling block, or occasion to fall, in his brothers way*. And that every one ought to *walk charitably*. And to take care *that their good be not evil*

⁴⁹⁹ Wilkins, “Sermon 2,” Wilkins, *Sermons preached upon several occasions by the Right Reverend Father in God, John Wilkins*, 42-3.

⁵⁰⁰ Wilkins, “Sermon 2,” Wilkins, *Sermons preached upon several occasions by the Right Reverend Father in God, John Wilkins*, 44-5.

spoken of. And the Rules in which both sides do agree, ought not to be violated in the prosecution of those things about which they differ⁵⁰¹

Wilkins's argument begins with the presumption that something external to the scriptural text or to the particularity of Christian religion itself must provide the common space to engage in corporate discernment of religious truth. This is the case precisely because claims to certainty about scriptural interpretation and ensuing "right practices" are the reason for division and the breakdown in society, which in turn inhibits formation in the particularity of the Christian faith. Wilkins argues that the common space must first be created by broad toleration of differences. Then secondarily, that common ground is given shape by particular principles of natural religion, general enough not to inspire division. And finally, certain rules are put into practice for maintaining that common space in order to engage in the discernment of the particulars of the Christian faith.

In one of his last works, *Natural Religion*, Wilkins provides his most substantive argument for using natural religion as a common starting point – giving a broad enough basis – from which to establish rules for engaging in corporate discernment when there is inevitable dispute. This is predicated on Wilkins's presumption that God is providential over all things and that coming to know this is critical for the survival and flourishing of societies made up of individuals of reasoning capacity: "it is not imaginable that God would have left himself without a witness unto all the nations of the world; but that *all men* should be endowed with such natural capacities and notions as being improved by consideration will afford sufficient evidence for the belief of this great and fundamental

⁵⁰¹ Wilkins, "Sermon 2," Wilkins, *Sermons preached upon several occasions by the Right Reverend Father in God, John Wilkins*, 45-6 [verse references have been removed from the original text because they do not correspond to present verses. The removal of verse references does not change the text or its interpretation].

principle.”⁵⁰² Natural religion reveals that all things are endowed with the capacity to move toward the perfection of their respective natures in response to God’s natural order. Since human beings are of the highest rational order, “whatever most wise and considerate part of men agree in it, it must follow that we are framed with such kind of faculties that permit us to know good and evil, through such things as natural fears and expectations.”⁵⁰³

Human beings can use probable discernment to determine which acts accord with good (truth) or evil. What is essential to enabling the truth written on the mind to become “available” for corporate discernment is the “eradication” of “prejudice” and ignorance in individuals. This requires a physical arena and a common starting point (natural religion) within which edification can take place. Wilkins hoped this would eradicate the insistence on doctrinal or practical certainties. Wilkins argues that as long as “a man keeps his mind free from prejudice,” the principles will “appear unquestionable and the deductions from them demonstrable.”⁵⁰⁴ And this is Wilkins’s main argument: to those who maintain moderate characters – something that requires a moderate society⁵⁰⁵ – the religious principles necessary for discerning “reasonable” assurance of one’s salvation, and of proper moral conduct, will be made evident. Once secured in these basic tenets of natural religion those things pertaining to the particularities of Christian moral life can be properly pursued through reasoned and free choices. Moral moderation and qualitative

⁵⁰² Wilkins, *Of the Principles and Duties of Natural Religion*, 153-155.

⁵⁰³ Wilkins, *Of the Principles and Duties of Natural Religion*, 156.

⁵⁰⁴ Wilkins, *Of the Principles and Duties of Natural Religion*, 31.

⁵⁰⁵ Wilkins, *Of the Principles and Duties of Natural Religion*, 58-9.

probabilistic reasoning are essential to ascertaining the wisdom of God entwined with and made visible through the laws of religious societies. Wilkins writes:

I am from the nature of the things themselves Morally certain, and cannot make any doubt of it, but that a mind free from passion and prejudice is more fit to pass a true judgement, than such a one as is byassed by affections and interests. That there are such things as virtue and vice. That Mankind is naturally designed for a sociable life. That it is most agreeable to reason and the common interests of those in society, that they should be true to their compacts, *that they should not hurt an innocent person &c.*⁵⁰⁶

Central to Wilkins's argument is that mitigating the "passions" (those that cause the zeal of many members of sectarian groups) will prevent "prejudice" from distorting both a "true apprehension of the Divine Nature and Excellences; his infinite power and wisdom and goodness."⁵⁰⁷ The "divine nature" and his "excellences" are properly apprehended by learning to seek God free from peculiar zeal, obedience, or duty. Wilkins writes that "[a] mind modeled and prepared with these virtues [love, joy, peace, long suffering, faith, meekness, temperance] will thereby be rendered generous and courageous, fit for any trouble or suffering which the providence of God shall think fit to call a man unto."⁵⁰⁸ Therefore even if human beings suffer as a result of their sins, they can come to see their sufferings as a gift and so ought to be patient and submissive to God in suffering them.

As indicated above, Wilkins presupposes sinfulness in his methodological approach. With the tradition, he maintains human beings have no warrant for complaint against God for sin's effects in human experiences. But he then asserts that "laboring for

⁵⁰⁶ Wilkins, *Of the Principles and Duties of Natural Religion*, 9-10; for a discussion of Wilkins on certainty, see Barbara Shapiro, *John Wilkins 1614-1672* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969), 229-233.

⁵⁰⁷ Wilkins, *Of the Principles and Duties of Natural Religion*, 275.

⁵⁰⁸ Wilkins, *Of the Principles and Duties of Natural Religion*, 283.

true apprehensions of the Divine Nature and Excellences” can at least mitigate the effects of sin by moderating human responses when this “labor” takes place within the comprehensive national Church. And this is so for three reasons: first, God’s “incommunicable excellences should dispose our minds to adoration and worship”; second, his “communicable attributes” of “understanding” ought to work in us “faith, affiance, hope and confidence”; and third, he moves the will, which should “execute in us love desire and zeal.” In these three ways, human beings were made to ascertain the truth. Wilkins’s qualifier here is that human minds, understandings, and wills can attain to knowledge of God only when people are properly disposed to common philosophical principles that “eradicate” ignorance, thereby mitigating (although not eliminating) the effects of sin.⁵⁰⁹

For Wilkins, this “eradication of ignorance” necessitates *social education*. A social education will lead to *common social discourse*. And in this shared framework of discourse, persons will be exposed to “common experiences.” Finally, common experience will make those things universal to human experience evident for consideration and choice, by “natural light.”⁵¹⁰ When joined with his commentary on the “barbarous” nations of America and Africa – whose societies are not religious and who therefore have no moderation – we can see Wilkins’s implicit drive to provide an intellectual foundation for the sort of homogenous society out of which Hooker had

⁵⁰⁹ Wilkins, *Of the Principles and Duties of Natural Religion*, 177-78; 58-59.

⁵¹⁰ Wilkins, *Of the Principles and Duties of Natural Religion*, 58-60.

derived his *Lawes*.⁵¹¹ For Wilkins, the physical arena within which all of this was to take place in England was the national Church.

The post-Restoration national Church once again had the power of laws established by the monarch to exercise discipline within England, and to press for external compliance in attendance and in worship services. However, as Jeremy Gregory notes, there was a lack of consistency in enforcing these laws accompanied by or perhaps partially motivated by the fear of another ‘Interregnum type’ uprising, but also inhibited by ministers and laypersons who worked around the laws in various ways.⁵¹² As a moderate Churchman who lived and worked through the Interregnum period Wilkins had seen firsthand how Laud’s attempt at enforcing compliance to civil and ecclesiastical laws concerning worship had rent asunder both Church and civil spheres.

⁵¹¹ Wilkins, *An Essay Towards A Real Character and A Philosophical Language*, (London: Sa. Gellibrand, and for John Martyn, 1668), 250-51. <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A66045.0001.001?view=toc>, (Accessed February 8, 2017).

⁵¹² Between 1661 and 1665, four laws were passed as part of The Clarendon Code. These included the Corporation Act (1661), which required municipal officials to attend and take communion in Church of England parish, thus excluding any non-conformists from political office; the Act of Uniformity (1662), whose second statute required the use of the Book of Common Prayer in services. Those who refused to comply (approximately 2000), were forced to resign their livings; the Conventicle Act (1664) which forbade meetings for unauthorized worship of more than five people; and finally, the Five-Mile Act (1665) which prevented non-conformist ministers from coming within five miles of incorporated towns and from teaching in schools. All of these laws were aimed at re-establishing the supremacy of the Church of England, while attempting to mitigate or eliminate the continuance of Independent or non-conformist parishes or ‘conventicles.’ The Code was named after the Earl of Clarendon, Edward Hyde, King Charles II Lord Chancellor. While Clarendon attempted to enforce the codes, according to Jeremy Gregory there was actually “inconsistency” in royal policy in “vacillating between indulgence and repression.” The result was that some Presbyterian ministers (and lay people) would minister at or attend both an Anglican service and a non-conformist service. See: Jeremy Gregory, *Restoration, Reformation and Reform 1660-1828: Archbishops of Canterbury and their Diocese*, especially pages 188-200.

Herein lies a key distinction between Hooker's and Wilkins's respective justifications for consent or deference to the national Church: Hooker presumed God to lead English people, through the national Church, with England's monarch as head, toward the truth through their deference to positive and thus divine and eternal laws. The actual practice of having done this was, at the least, a contributing factor to the moral chaos of the civil wars and Interregnum period. Wilkins needed, therefore, to establish a basis for deference to the National Church not on the grounds of mere submission to positive laws of Church or state. But to do this, argued Wilkins, the Church's foundations could not be built on doctrinally contentious issues or practices that were manifestations of those beliefs. Wilkins therefore argued that the Church was an arena for discernment of Scripture whose truths – which defined God's providential ordering of the world – could be established by their consistency with the principles of natural religion. To establish the validity of Scripture as the locus of truth required a twofold proof: first, since God had ordered all of history, and God's will was written on the hearts of men, there ought to be markers – a 'universal testimony' – to these laws. Second, Scripture, along with Christians of the first centuries, performed the role of direct testimony to God's will, which in turn, "anchored it in probable reality." If anchored in probable reality, it could be reasonably assumed to have "relevance to universal issues of morality."⁵¹³ Together, the testimony of Scripture as read alongside the testimony of natural religion (found throughout the world), ought to provide sufficient evidence and thereby a basis for willing consent of the 'rational man,' to the Church of England. Here

⁵¹³ Champion, *The Pillars of Priestcraft Shaken*, 43.

the discernment of Scripture – preached in plain sense form consistent with the principles God made known through natural religion – could occur.⁵¹⁴

Hooker had grappled with the relationship between human freedom and divine freedom and whether there was an intersection between nature and grace. Hooker argued that one ought to obey the Church of England and her monarch, since God ordered the nation through these bodies. To consent to these bodies was simultaneously to act toward society's and one's own good. Chillingworth maintained Hooker's argument for deference to the Church of England, but he did so on the basis that while one's external acts ought to conform to those of the Church, one could not be compelled in any way (on the basis or threat of damnation) to internally assent to something one did not believe. If it wanted to form people in the truth, a Church needed to allow people who held diverse positions on most matters of Scriptural interpretation to search and seek for truth unfettered by the fear or threat of damnation. So also did he question whether such consent could in fact lead one to immoral acts masquerading as faith. More than anything else, Chillingworth's arguments provided a theoretical case against the assertion to epistemic certainty, and an intellectual claim that a comprehensive Church necessarily had minimal means of coercing belief, which would in turn allow for freedom in determining how to act for the moral good of one's neighbor.

In Tillotson (who wrote the introduction to Wilkins's *Of the Principles and Duties of Natural Religion*), and so too with Wilkins, we see Chillingworth's argument offered again: "moral arguments" with moral certainty or even mere probability cannot be "of

⁵¹⁴ On this point of using universal philosophical principles as the basis to demonstrate the reasonableness of Christianity, especially for the purposes of conversion (of native persons, atheists, and Jews), see William Bulman, *Anglican Enlightenment*, 67.

necessary and infallible efficacy, because they are always propounded to a free Agent who may choose whether he will yield to them or not.”⁵¹⁵ Stillingfleet and Wilkins adopt Chillingworth’s approach to things *adiaphora* to salvation. This time, however, the impetus has to do with a much more collective desire for a comprehensive Church to help restore order, morality, and discipline for the sake of Christian education after years of war and political upheaval. Chillingworth’s focus on willing assent to a broader framework of evidence, rather than Hooker’s assent to ecclesiastically defined doctrines and practices, held considerable sway for many post-Restoration thinkers, such as those of moderate leanings.⁵¹⁶

This approach of broadening the Church’s approach to teaching and preaching the faith was not met with unmitigated praise, and in fact it faced critique from Anglicans like Herbert Thorndike and Puritan John Owen. In *Of the Divine Originall, Authority Self-Evidencing Light and Power of the Scriptures*, Owen rejected miracles as confirmatory evidence for scriptural authority. He argued that Scripture, as light and power, eventually validates itself.⁵¹⁷ Thorndike offered a similar conclusion, following Hooker, offering that Scripture will validate itself when heard over time in ordered common worship according to the Prayer Book of the Church of England, with exclusive

⁵¹⁵ John Tillotson, *The rule of faith, or, An answer to the treatises of Mr. I.S. entitled Sure-footing*, (London: Printed by H.C. for O. Gellibrand, 1676).

⁵¹⁶ On this see Champion, *The Priestcraft Shaken*; Larsen, *Contested Christianity, Gregory, Restoration, Reformation and Reform*; Green, *The Christian’s ABC*.

⁵¹⁷ John Owen, *Of the Divine Originall, Authority Self-Evidencing Light and Power of the Scriptures*, (Oxford: Henry Hall, 1659), 103, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A90280.0001.001?view=toc> (Accessed February 8, 2017).

deference to the Church of England's scriptural witness.⁵¹⁸ Yet the idea that Scripture was self-validating seemed to pick up little traction amongst moderates and other conformist Anglicans, as both Reedy and Thorndike's biographer Charles Miller, point out. This had to do with the perceived need to establish a wider basis of common life than Owen's or Thorndike's ideal Churches would allow.

John Wilkins and Alexander Ross on Scripture

What ought to be clear by this point is that Wilkins, unlike Chillingworth (and Erasmus and Hooker before him), does not presume Scripture can be a common starting point for discernment. He does, however, return to Erasmus's, Hooker's, and even Chillingworth's assertion that one Church – in this case the Church of England – ought to serve as the “physical arena” within which discernment ought to occur. For Wilkins, that physical arena had to be broad or tolerant enough to incorporate parties with beliefs and practices distinct from one another. He was not ready to admit extreme Independents because he believed their zealotry would blind them to reasonable and rational assessment of evidence. Those of moderate persuasion, however, he hoped might be persuaded to conform to the practices of the English Church. His argument to convince them consisted of presenting the Church as a body that could conform around broad religious principles of natural religion. This would mitigate religious dispute to enable Christians of different persuasions to come together in discernment of the particularities of the Christian faith. The process of engagement would have a set of rules that would maintain sufficient

⁵¹⁸ See in particular Herbert Thorndike, “Of the Government of Churches,” “Of Religious Assemblies and the Publick Service of God,” and “The True Principle of Comprehension,” in *The Theological Works of Herbert Thorndike: Library of Anglo-Catholic Theology*, 6 vols. (Oxford: J.H. Parker, 1844–56). See also E. Charles Miller, “The Doctrine of the Church in the Thought of Herbert Thorndike (1598-1672),” (PhD diss., Oxford: University of Oxford, 1990).

moral limits or boundaries for Christians to engage in discernment of the particularities of the Christian Scriptures over time and without division. It is to Wilkins's approach in establishing this wider basis of common discernment that we now turn.

In a rather famous engagement in the 1640s, John Wilkins and Alexander Ross displayed the central topic of future debates about scriptural interpretation for several centuries to come: the relationship between nature and Scripture.⁵¹⁹ Ross argued that accepting Copernican assertions that the Earth revolves around the sun, contra Scripture, is to charge the Holy Spirit and thus God with speaking falsely. As we saw already with Chillingworth and others above, one method to account for discrepancies between the discovery of natural phenomena and seeming contradictions of the scriptural text was to propose that God accommodated the text to human understanding to move hearts rather than to provide logical coherence to the mind. This was an unacceptable approach to Ross, as it would "charge the Holy Spirit with falsehood."⁵²⁰ Ross supported his case by citing several passages of the Scriptures and several of the Church Fathers, all claiming that the Earth does not in fact move.

It was the literal statements of Scripture, upon which Ross relied, that Wilkins attacked. He began with a tactic of dividing the truth into two classes: the theological and the physical:

In the search of Theologicall Truths, it is the safest method, first of all to looke unto Divine Authority; because that carries with it as cleer an evidence to our Faith, as any thing else can be to our reason. But on the contrary, in the examination of Philosophicall points, it were a preposterous course to begin at the

⁵¹⁹ John Milton's dialogue on astronomy that opens Book VIII of *Paradise Lost* is essentially a summary of the Ross-Wilkins controversy (Grant McColley, "Milton's Dialogue on Astronomy: The Principal Immediate Sources," *Publications of the Modern Language Association*, 52, no. 3 (September 1937): 728-62.

⁵²⁰ On this argument see: John Wilkins, *New Essays (1614-1672)*, ed., William Poole, (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 21.

testimony and opinion of others, and then afterwards to descend unto the reasons that may bee drawne from the Nature and Essence of the things themselves; because these inartificiall Arguments (as the Logicians cal them) doe not carry with them any cleere and convincing evidence; and therefore should come after those that are of more necessary dependance, as serving rather to confirme, than resolve the Iudgement.⁵²¹

Thus the theological truths that are “clearly evident” to our faith are revealed in Scripture by “Divine Authority.” These are the truths necessary for salvation. But then he considers those things that fall into his second category: things requiring philosophical reflection, given the need to examine and weigh the evidence for the claims made. He begins by laying out what he perceives as the argument of scriptural literalists like Ross (who presume a one-to-one correlation between Scripture and nature):

What (say they) shall an upstart Noveltie [the Copernican revolution] thrust out such a Truth as hath passed by successive tradition through all Ages of the World? and hath bin generally entertained, not onely in the opinion of the vulgar, but also of the greatest Philosophers and most learned men? Shall wee thinke that amongst the multitude of those who in severall times have been eminent for new inventions and strange discoveries, there was none able to finde out such a Secret as this, besides some fabulous Pithagorians, and of late *Copernicus*? Is it possible that the World should last for above five thousand yeares together, and yet the Inhabitants of it be so dull and stupid, as to be unacquainted with it's motion? Nay, shall wee thinke that those excellent men, whom the Holy Ghost made use of in the penning of Scripture, who were extraordinarily inspired with supernaturall Truths, should notwithstanding be so grossely ignorant of so common a matter as this? Can wee beleeeve, if there were any such thing, that *Iosuah*, and *Iob*, and *David*, and *Solomon*, &c. should know nothing of it? Certainly it must needs argue a strong affectation of Singularitie, for a man to take up any groundlesse fancy against such antient and generall Authority.⁵²²

⁵²¹ John Wilkins, *A Discourse Concerning a New World & Another Planet in 2 Bookes*, Proposition 1, 1-2 (London: John Norton and R. Hearne, 1640).
<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A15364.0001.001/1:11.1?rgn=div2;view=fulltext>. (Accessed February 8, 2017).

⁵²² Wilkins, *A Discourse Concerning a New World & Another Planet in 2 Bookes* Proposition 1, 3-4.

Challenging the deference Ross wishes to make to literalism, where Scripture must describe what is true of the natural world, Wilkins determines that this is impossible. The writers of Scripture could not have known many recent discoveries about nature:

I answer: As wee should not bee so fondly conceited of our selves, and the extraordinary Abilities of these present ages, as to thinke every thing that is antient to be absolute: Or, as if it must needs bee with opinions, as it is with cloths, where the newest is for the most part best. So neither should we be so superstitiously devoted to Antiquitie, as to take up every thing for Canonically, which drops from the pen of a Father, or was approved by the consent of the Antients. 'Tis an excellent saying, It behoves every one in the search of Truth, alwaies to preserve a Philosophicall liberty: not to be so inslaved to the opinion of any man, as to thinke what ever he sayes to be infallible. We must labour to find out what things are in themselves by our owne experience, and a through examination of their natures, not what another sayes of them. And if in such an impartiall enquiry, we chance to light upon a new way, and that which is besides the common rode, this is neither our fault, nor our unhappinesse.⁵²³

Here we see a connection to Chillingworth's work (not unusual, since *Discourse* was written a few years after Chillingworth's *The Religion of Protestants*).

Wilkins presses for those things that are *adiaphora* to salvation remaining open to new inquiry and not being confined by a demand for a literal correlation between Scripture and nature. The evidence offered by scriptural writers for discernment of natural phenomena must be weighed in accordance with standards of evidence for any "philosopher" at any point in time.

Wilkins will go on to deny that Scripture aligns in a literal way with all the things that will occur. He argues that trying to approach Scripture as a literal descriptor of the natural world leads "divers learned men [to] fall into great absurdities, whilst they have looked for the grounds of Philosophy from the

⁵²³ Wilkins, *A Discourse Concerning a New World & Another Planet* in 2 Bookes Proposition 1, 4-5.

words of Scripture.”⁵²⁴ For example, in the literalist interpretation, “there are waters properly so called above the starry Firmament, because of those vulgar expressions in Scripture, which in their literall sence doe mention them.” But the notion that these waters had the two functions of cooling the revolving orbs and of weighing down the heavens, “together with both it's reasons [the functions], are now accounted absurd and ridiculous.”⁵²⁵ What Wilkins was driving at here was a common struggle in the seventeenth century: to determine the relationship between nature and Scripture, in light of the effects of sin on human nature, or at least, cognitive capacities..

It was not that Scripture was not authoritative for ordering the life of Christians. But that the words of Scripture were to have a literal correlation to the findings of science was necessary for neither salvation nor the moral life of Christians. The *Discourse* was an early work of Wilkins’s and was intended to enable people to obtain a better understanding of God and his ordering of creation. In it he writes, “Astronomy proves a God and a Providence,” and “a more accurate and diligent enquiry into their Natures, will raise our Understandings unto a neerer Knowledge, and greater Admiration of the Deific ... Likewise may it serve to confirme unto us the Truth of the Holy Scriptures.”⁵²⁶

Wilkins’s purpose was to demonstrate that the study of nature could provide confirmation of general philosophical principles about a creator ontologically

⁵²⁴ Wilkins, *A Discourse Concerning a New World & Another Planet in 2 Bookes*, 76-77.

⁵²⁵ Wilkins, *A Discourse Concerning a New World & Another Planet in 2 Bookes*, 80-81.

⁵²⁶ Wilkins, *A Discourse Concerning a New World & Another Planet in 2 Bookes*, 216.

distinct from his creation and provide insight into how the creator had ordered his creation. This did not imply, however, that Scripture could be read as a catalogue of natural things, for this would imply that Scripture was written in deference to nature.

Ross replied with what would become part of a debate between the role in faith played by experience and revelation for centuries to come: “The Scripture never patronizeth a lye or an error, nor doth it apply it self to our capacity in naturall things, though it doth in supernaturell mysteries Wee must stick to the literall sense, when the Scripture speaks of naturall things.”⁵²⁷ Ross’s concern of course is that Wilkins would appear to posit that nature confirms the truths of Scripture:

Whereas you say, That Astronomy serves to confirme the truth of the holy Scripture: you are very preposterous, for you will have the truth of Scripture confirmed by Astronomic, but you will not have the truth of Astronomic confirmed by Scripture: sure one would thinke that Astronomicall truths had more need of the Scripture confirmation, then the Scripture of them.⁵²⁸

Ross challenges that one will not find God by basing one’s faith on uncertainties derived from the evidences of nature and presuming they can correct the Scriptures:

You conclude your Booke with a large digression upon the commendations of Astronomy, which hath for its object the whole world you say, And therefore farre exceeds the barren speculation of *universale*, and *materia prima* ... *That it depends upon conjectures and uncertainty*; is most true of your Astronomicall Booke, wherein I have found nothing but suppositions, may-bee’s, conjectures,

⁵²⁷ Alexander Ross, *The New Planet No Planet* (London: J. Young, 1646), chapter II, p. 13. <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A57666.0001.001/1:6.3?rgn=div2;view=fulltext>, (Accessed February 8, 2017).

⁵²⁸ Ross, *The New Planet No Planet*, chapter X, p. 117.

and uncertainties. 5. Whereas you say, That man had *os sublimum*, a face to looke upward, that he might be an Astronomer: You are deceived, it was that hee might be a Divine; for the starres were made, not that he should doate upon them in idle speculations and niceties full of uncertainty, but that by their light and motion he might be brought to the knowledge of Divinity, which your self in your subsequent discourse is forced to acknowledge. But take heed you play not the Anatomist upon these celestiall bodies, (whose inward parts are hid from you) in the curious and needlesse search of them; you may well lose your selfe, but this way you shall never finde God.⁵²⁹

Whether or not Wilkins took heed of Ross's warning here, it would not seem to have affected his course of work. We will see Wilkins develop the argument he makes early on against Ross throughout his career. This culminates in his posthumously published and probably best-known work, *Of the Principles and Duties of Natural Religion*, and even in his treatment of wisdom literature, to which we will now turn.

A Case Study: Wilkins on Wisdom Literature

In the sections above, we briefly touched on Wilkins's emphasis on using a plain sense approach to Scripture that would provide correlatives to naturally and empirically known phenomena. This was in contrast to Royalist thinkers such as Alexander Ross and (later) Herbert Thorndike, both of whom argued (albeit in different ways) that Scripture ought to authenticate itself. So too did Puritan Congregationalist John Owen believe this to be the case, although in contrast to Thorndike's and Ross's suggestions that the Church had a vital role in Scripture's self-authentication, Owen believed in *sola scriptura*. The rationalist approach, at least for moderates like many members of the Royal Society and Cambridge Platonists, was directed toward the end of providing morally (not 'mathematical/absolute') certain evidence establishing Scripture as the valid source of

⁵²⁹ Ross, *The New Planet No Planet*, chapter X, pp. 116-117.

truth about God and the world in its moral shape and order, and of attempting to demonstrate the claims of the Christian faith as true. This, Wilkins endeavored to show, could take place by showing coherence between Scripture and evidence external to Scripture. Scripture could then provide the moral tenets for interpreting present events and discerning the will of God.⁵³⁰ Wilkins took this approach of identifying ‘universal testimony’ to God’s providential ordering of history because it would provide embattled Christian groups fighting over doctrinal matters with non-divisive facts that could be shown to be probabilistically true. This could then form the basis of unity (in beliefs) for a comprehensive Church. In a sense, natural religion could provide a comprehensive Church with the broadest base of agreed to convictions for sustaining unity over time. While Wilkins did not believe natural religion to be sufficient for salvation *generally*, he did believe that God could *possibly* save people through their adherence to it. As such, although not *generally* sufficient and certainly not capable of revealing the triune God, or other matters of Scriptural revelation, natural religion could serve as a stepping stone into the Christian faith for non-Christians. For Christians, it could create a sort of intellectually founded comprehensive national Church, which itself could provide common space for corporate discernment of the truth, mitigating the impasse of division over the particulars of the Christian faith. In this section, we shall explore Wilkins’s attempts to develop an evidentiary framework wherein one could be convinced of the world as divinely ordered, specifically as laid out in Scripture; and validated as probabilistically true because consistent with the ‘universal testimony’ of moral principles drawn from outside the Christian faith.

⁵³⁰ Champion, *The Pillars of Priestcraft Shaken*, 41-43.

In *The Bible and Reason*, Gerard Reedy writes that for “Latitudinarians” [moderates]:

The plain style takes precedence: God inspired an author to use this style especially on occasions when some law was to be changed [the Decalogue or Sermon on the Mount for example, because] so great is the weight of such passages for the welfare of mankind that God would not allow the eccentricities of personal style to make their meaning ambiguous.⁵³¹

Wilkins considered passages like those found in the Sermon on the Mount as providing clarity as to those things necessary for salvation and central to ordering moral life. A second category found in the canon was that of the prophetic books. Reedy cites Gilbert Burnet as providing a characteristic perspective of Latitudinarian thought: these books are given by God to “excite readers or hearers to an observance of the law.”⁵³² The third category of wisdom books provides a “clearer idea of God,” and to these Wilkins turns to satisfy the desire to probabilistically affirm that one does in fact know God.⁵³³

For Wilkins, the concluding passage of the Book of Ecclesiastes is the orienting lens through which other Scripture is interpreted. His approach enables him to argue for congruence between natural religion, evident to the “common man” even without revealed religion, and God’s law as conveyed through both nature and the Scriptures. In his book *The Spirit of Anglicanism*, Henry McAdoo agrees with Barbara Shapiro in writing that part of Wilkins’s approach is a:

[G]eneral reaction in the direction of a theological method which sets a premium on reason and practicality. In [Wilkins’s] view, it was the only positive and constructive line to take because the prevalent indifference [to Christian religion]

⁵³¹ Reedy, *The Bible and Reason*, 98.

⁵³² Reedy, *The Bible and Reason*, 98; cf. Burnet, *Exposition of the Thirty-Nine Articles*, 85.

⁵³³ Reedy, *The Bible and Reason*, 98-99.

was in large part due to “that heat and zeal of men in those various contrary opinions, which have of late abounded.”⁵³⁴

The quotation from Wilkins is referring here to the claims to have dogmatic certainty, and thus the “true faith,” made by the Independents or independent Christian sects in England. Implicit in Wilkins’s comment is the post-Restoration concern with claims to certainty and their leading to further violence, as well as the breakdown of the civil and ecclesiastical forms undergirding moral life in England.

As we have seen, in *Natural Religion* Wilkins sets out to demonstrate the truth of the claim that because God orders all of nature, natural religion can provide the basis for grasping Christian revelation. The pursuit of knowledge that accords with the tenets of natural religion can serve to prime a person’s mind to be open to the more particular tenets of Christian revelation.⁵³⁵ How does this priming take place? This Wilkins draws from the concluding passage of Ecclesiastes. “The main argument of Solomon’s book is to enquire wherein the chief happiness of man doth consist. In the former part, Solomon shows the insufficiency of all things pretended to it, at the conclusion he fixes upon its true basis, asserting every man’s greatest interest and Happiness, to consist in ... [f]earing God and keeping his Commandments; for this is the whole duty of man.”⁵³⁶

As we saw in both Hooker and in Chillingworth, obedience is the underlying core by which the rational (because) providentially ordered world could be apprehended through reason. Reason itself was a part of that providential order. This is not reason free

⁵³⁴ McAdoo, *The Spirit of Anglicanism*, 221. Here McAdoo cites Wilkins as referring to the contestation between religious sects in England.

⁵³⁵ Wilkins, *Of the Principles and Duties of Natural Religion*, 340.

⁵³⁶ Wilkins, *Of the Principles and Duties of Natural Religion*, 286.

of limit, but bounded by divine order. It is also concretely bounded, in Hooker and Chillingworth, by the Church and civil government working together, and finally, in Wilkins, by a comprehensive national Church focused on common education, exclusive of separatists. However, as we have seen beginning with Chillingworth and burgeoning in the works of moderate thinkers, ultimately the comprehensive Church could not be the reason for consent. This consent had to come, if it were not to be coercive and thereby divisive, from what was evidently reasonable to “the common man”: what I have referred to above as an intellectually developed common space within which edification could take place. With these things in mind we can turn to Wilkins’s use of Scripture’s wisdom literature to better understand how he transitions between natural religion and the particularity of Christian revelation.

Wilkins’s first step is to demonstrate a common linguistic meaning amongst all translations – Hebrew, Arabic, Syriac, Greek, and Latin – of Solomon’s conclusion, “[f]earing God and keeping his Commandments; for this is the whole of man.” Wilkins argues that from these translations one can conclude a threefold subject matter: Ecclesiastes is concerned with the “essence, happiness, and business of man.” The sum of these is that the “fearing of God and keeping his commandments is of so great consequence to human nature that 1) the essence of man may consist in it; 2) the great business or duty of man is to be conversant about it and to labour after it; 3) the happiness or well-being of man doth depend on it.” In his approach here, Wilkins seeks to justify the interpretation he provides by drawing together diverse linguistic (and so temporally and culturally specific) interpretations, out of which he proposes that a consensus can be formed regarding the meaning of the text. The pieces of knowledge embedded in things

like shared languages and experiences – when observed, measured, compared, and whittled to a point of universal agreement – can provide greater understanding of God’s commandments or laws. Understanding obtained through this reasoning process, so Wilkins states, leads to obedience to God’s laws and thus willing conformity to him.

This approach of aggregating knowledge and evaluating it in order to reach a consensus is and has been shared by Christian writers across history. What distinguishes Wilkins, and many who followed in his footsteps, is the source that orients and drives his method for measuring and evaluating the aggregated data of knowledge. Wilkins’s source for establishing the validity of his claims is not the authority of Scripture as self-authenticating, nor the verification of its contents using a rule of faith or Creed, nor any notion of an apostolic tradition, nor the Church’s authority in verifying claims, as we saw above in his debate with Ross. His point is to demonstrate the invitation to Scripture that God has implicitly and explicitly woven into his creation through the testimony of persons across time.

Wilkins proceeds to show how this is the case. He argues that it is perfectly evident to “heathen writers” that the salvation, happiness, and contentment of individuals is “the fearing of God and keeping of his commandments.” This is known, he says, through the “clear principles of reason” which, when we examine history, show that fear of God constitutes the very being of rational creatures both as individuals and as members of a society. Such a fear, Wilkins claims, is inherent to rational individuals and causes them to “apprehend a deity” and to “expect a future state after this life.”⁵³⁷ It follows that natural religion is the “surest bond to tie men up to those respective duties

⁵³⁷ Wilkins, *Of the Principles and Duties of Natural Religion*, 293.

towards one another, without which government and society could not subsist.”⁵³⁸ “Fear of deity,” he maintains, “is the only way to restrain men within the bounds of duty.”⁵³⁹

Wilkins then demonstrates the congruence between these things God has woven into testimony even outside the Church, and the testimony of God’s own people. Here he first draws on Proverbs to make his claim: “No punishment can stand [thus no proper societal order can be maintained] if the punisher is guilty of the same thing he’s punishing, ‘those that sit on the throne of judgment should be able to scatter away evil with their eyes (Prov. 20:8).’”⁵⁴⁰ He then demonstrates this congruence using arguments from the Roman Stoic philosopher Seneca and from Aristotle, who contend that the power to rule comes only with fear of God.⁵⁴¹ And finally Wilkins ties up the argument drawing together natural law, Scripture, and experience by pointing out that – as philosophers and the “common man” alike realize – when Rome was filled with proper Christian rule and order, the claim in Proverbs 14:34 that, “righteousness doth exalt a nation,” is proved true. But with its downfall, which he plainly associates with a loss of proper fear of God, “sin doth prove a reproach to it.” Such is an expected and evident fate of a nation with the loss of true and saving faith.⁵⁴²

⁵³⁸ Wilkins, *Of the Principles and Duties of Natural Religion*, 293.

⁵³⁹ Wilkins, *Of the Principles and Duties of Natural Religion*, 294.

⁵⁴⁰ Wilkins, *Of the Principles and Duties of Natural Religion*, 295.

⁵⁴¹ Wilkins, *Of the Principles and Duties of Natural Religion*, 296.

⁵⁴² This drives at Wilkins’s presupposition that it is prejudices of minds without the knowledge of philosophy that are susceptible to “superstition and profaneness.” These prejudices lead to the inability to know God in a way sufficient to one’s assurance of salvation (*not* to justification itself). Thus, those places where people are “most devout in their worship have been the most civilized and philosophical.” “Africa and America” in particular are the “most destitute of religion,” and so also the “most brute and barbarous as to other arts and knowledge” (Wilkins, *Of the Principles and Duties of Natural Religion*, 237).

As indicated in the chapter on Chillingworth, with Wilkins also we see a shift to experience as the realm in which evidence is to be found concerning conformance to God's will. Here Wilkins argues for the coherence between Scripture and observable acts and experiences:

[O]ur acts, in conformance to our proper end, are the means by which [God] doth communicate to us such divine qualities as will exalt our faculties beyond their natural state and bring them into an assimilation and conformity to the most perfect idea of goodness *together with an inward sensation of the effects* of this in ourselves.⁵⁴³

He then enumerates a list of ways in which we can see the congruence or incongruence of our acts with God's commandments. We can then judge with a probable degree of certainty whether we have a proper fear of God that leads to salvation. He lists physical health, liberty, safety, possessions, the delight we receive in these enjoyments, and the esteem in which we are held by others as external marks. The ability to regulate and exalt our faculties to their proper function, and the attainment of peace, joy, and contentment that comes from this, are internal (and sometimes external) markers of evaluation.

Wilkins, in one of his examples, turns to Proverbs to make his point concerning health: "The fear of the Lord and the departing from evil, shall be health to thy navel and marrow to thy bones. As righteousness tendeth to life, so he that pursueth evil pursueth it to his own death" (Prov 3:7-8; 11:19). He goes on to argue that fear of God and the acts that properly follow remove the things that cause or exacerbate disease. What arises out of a proper fear of God? The development of things like temperance, sobriety,

⁵⁴³ Wilkins, *Of the Principles and Duties of Natural Religion*, 296. Italics mine.

moderation: all things that help to eliminate or at least moderate the effect of diseases.⁵⁴⁴

Those who get sick, in contrast, are those who are without virtue, wicked and evil. He substantiates this historically by describing particular events known to his audience through news sources, and then by scripturally using particular verses from Leviticus, Proverbs, and the Psalms, to argue, “those who seek after God shall be quiet from the fear of evil ... [since] the Lord delivers the righteous out of all their troubles.”⁵⁴⁵

In contrast to Shapiro’s judgment, but rather in light of Peter Harrison’s work in this period and Wilkins’s own statements concerning sin, Wilkins’s goal is to provide an evidence-based framework undergirding the unity of the national Church, for guiding people in mitigating the effects of sin in their discernment. The context is the wake of a breakdown and a desire to restore civil and ecclesiastical order. Wilkins has attempted to demonstrate that all things – even those that are not evidently Christian – are under the providential, rational order of God. A moral framework, universal to various cultures at various periods of time, can be derived from the pragmatic tenets of common life found in the wisdom literature, but so too could these pragmatic tenets be derived through other moral or religious frameworks.

It is therefore plausible, from Wilkins’s perspective, to assume that all people have an innate knowledge – both an internal inclination and a rational design written into the essence of all created things including their various social arrangements – that inclines them to the Christian faith. The problem with accessing this innate knowledge is that sin and finitude, coupled with a divided Church, have obscured Christian witness.

⁵⁴⁴ Wilkins, *Of the Principles and Duties of Natural Religion*, 318.

⁵⁴⁵ Wilkins, *Of the Principles and Duties of Natural Religion*, 325.

One of Wilkins's goals is to prove that the very pursuit of knowledge, prepares us to receive God's grace; 'to fear God' (to seek his will with humility); and to persist in sustaining common space for corporate discernment of truth. By acknowledging its probabilistic nature and therefore its limits, this form of discernment mitigates the sort of presumption one has epistemic certainty in one's beliefs, the latter of which can thwart the reception of grace. There is evidence for these things, yet the evidence must be weighed and evaluated and 'checked' with what is universally testified to determine the action most likely to be in accordance with God's will. Fortunately, this evidence of God's providential ordering of history, Wilkins sought to demonstrate, is encoded in natural law and even in positive law across history. Like Hooker, Wilkins concludes, "everyone who does not wish to do violence to his own faculties, must believe and assent to these principles."⁵⁴⁶

As with Hooker, and implicitly assumed by Chillingworth, natural law is presumed to incline a person to that which he or she already knows. It has been given by God to help create civil conditions where the distorting effects of sin are mitigated, in order to pursue one's natural inclination. Wilkins's hope was that, with the reasonableness of Christianity demonstrated through natural law, moral reform and obedience might resume after twenty years of war and religious disorder predicated on sectarian assertions. At the beginning of his *Natural Religion*, John Tillotson writes that Wilkins's purpose is:

1) to establish the great principles of religion ... by showing how firm and solid a foundation they have in the nature and reason of mankind; a work never more necessary in this degenerate age which has been so miserably overrun with skepticism and infidelity ... [and] 2) to convince men of the natural and

⁵⁴⁶ Wilkins, *Of the Principles and Duties of Natural Religion*, 392.

indispensable obligation of moral duties ... those comprehended by our saviour under the two general heads of the love of God and neighbor – all these duties are written on our hearts and every man feels a secret obligation to them in his own conscience, which checks and restrains him doing the contrary to them and gives peace and satisfaction in the discharge of his duty or if he offends against it, fills him with guilt and terror ... it is plain that mankind was always under a law, even before God had made any external and extraordinary revelation, else how shall God judge the world.⁵⁴⁷

This natural law, and reason that operates in accordance with it – though flawed through sin and human finitude – is not separate from divine order, but a part of it. It is a means of being opened to grace, to hearing the gospel, and thus to the freedom to live in accordance with one's own nature: willing obedience conformed to Christ's free response to the Father even in the midst of a fallen world. While natural law is sufficient to incline one to God – to serve as a stepping stone to Scriptural revelation – those to whom Christian doctrine is revealed and proposed (Hooker's divine law) are expected to respond with faith and obedience. These two responses are “the only way wherein we can hope to be accepted.”⁵⁴⁸

For Wilkins, Ecclesiastes becomes one of the key texts of natural religion and its truth. But what of the particularity of the Christian faith? Wilkins does indeed argue that is not enough to do moral duties, which are of natural obligation; “we must also do them in obedience to Christ as our Lord and lawgiver and by him alone [can we] expect to find acceptance with God.”⁵⁴⁹ While religion is firmly based in the nature and reason of all human beings, this does not take away from the “necessity and usefulness” of revelation.

⁵⁴⁷ Tillotson, “Preface,” *Of the Principles and Duties of Natural Religion*, no page number.

⁵⁴⁸ Wilkins, *Of the Principles and Duties of Natural Religion*, 398.

⁵⁴⁹ Wilkins, *Of the Principles and Duties of Natural Religion*, 343.

Instead, it “prepare[s] and make[s] way for the entertainment of that doctrine which is so agreeable to the clearest dictates of natural light.” Reason is incomplete without revelation and revelation is agreeable to reason.

In other words, while Wilkins has sought to develop visible benchmarks that could serve as a universal framework for assessing one’s own (and other’s) response(s) to God in accordance with the faith – guide posts for those involved in corporate discernment of religious truth – Wilkins also acknowledges that “revelation provides a clearer light” with respect to the truth. We see him argue in the final chapter of *Of the Principles and Duties of Natural Religion* that revelation (Scripture) is a superior authority. The evidence for this is found first in the Old Testament, by reason of its being the most ancient record of the beginnings of things. Secondly we see evidence in the New Testament, corresponding as it does to the “chief things of the Old Testament,” because of the certainty of its truth, which is confirmed by miracles.⁵⁵⁰ Although he acknowledged revelation as the superior authority, that authority could not, as it had been preached and heard in the first half of the seventeenth century, prevent the divisions and violence that had so recently thrown England into political and social chaos. While on the one hand, Wilkins sought to address those without knowledge of revelation (Indigenous people in the Americas), his primary task was to find a basis for unity in one ecclesiastical body, the national Church. In short, he sought a foundation of common space to which those with a breadth of understandings of core doctrines (justification for example), could come together to engage in corporate discernment of the truth.

⁵⁵⁰ Wilkins, *Of the Principles and Duties of Natural Religion*, 401-2.

John Tillotson commends Wilkins's work writing that, "nothing is more likely to carry weight with thoughtful people than to be convinced that 'religion and happiness, our duty and our interest, are really but one and the same under several notions.'"⁵⁵¹ Tillotson intimates that to preserve ecclesiastical and civil order for probabilistic discernment, post-Restoration Englishmen needed to search for common ground, common articulation of instances of God's order, and a common arena within which to learn and debate these things. This should not be understood for Hooker, Chillingworth, or Wilkins as an intentional effort (as it will become in the eighteenth century) to separate nature and grace. For Wilkins, all that is, *is* solely by a rational and divine order of grace, including human beings' inclinations and capacities to pursue those inclinations to their proper ends in God.

In *Of the Principles and Duties of Natural Religion* Wilkins contends that the collective human experience of suffering, death, happiness, prosperity, and good reputation provides for people signs of God's providence in all things. More importantly, "the happiness of our condition [as we experience or endure or obtain them], in all these respects, doth depend on religion."⁵⁵² In other words, neither human happiness nor our salvation can be had or determined in having any of these things. What is to be discovered in these universal experiences is that enduring them from within the Church, with faith and hope, enables sanctification or transformation toward one's proper end of participating in God's divine order. It is the property of religion, then, to bring about contentment, moderation, charity, and forbearance, for these are the marks that allow for

⁵⁵¹ As he makes explicit in the previous paragraphs, the "several notions" Tillotson has in mind here are those that are both "natural" and "revealed."

⁵⁵² Wilkins, *Of the Principles and Duties of Natural Religion*, 313.

the reception of grace. Wilkins writes that “[religion] changes the natures of men,” so that their lives become a willing assent to “a participation of the Divine nature.”

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have explored how Wilkins and some of his contemporaries responded to the breakdown of ecclesiastical and civil order most particularly in the events of the decade-long civil wars and then the Interregnum period. With the exception of the non-conformists or Independents, most English Christians expressed the desire for an integrated society wherein Christian formation would take place. Chillingworth’s work provided a basis for a non-coercive national Church, wherein those holding a diversity of interpretations of Scripture and of doctrine could come together and seek the will of God. Chillingworth contended that while one could not assent to a belief that one did not actually hold, even on pain of damnation, the Church ought to have the power to require conformance of external acts. This was for the sake of sustaining a corporate body of discernment and for preventing interpretations of Scripture or doctrine as essential for salvation based on presumed *apriori* certainty. The vision Hooker articulated – where integrated ecclesiastical and civil governance could work within their own spheres to form people in the faith – proved unobtainable. Laud and Charles attempted to use Hooker’s argument to justify their demand for consent. However, in the context of further social and political upheaval and shifts in power during the 1620s and 30s, Laud’s and Charles I’s realizations of Hooker’s argument seemed to compel them to use “strong-arm” tactics to rein in non-conformists.

Moderates and those of the Royal Society in particular, sought to reconstitute the integrated society presumed by or hoped for by Hooker without the tactics employed by Laud and Charles I. Chillingworth's presumption that the 'common man' ought to know what was essential to salvation, and that he could therefore let things *adiaphora* go rather than making them a basis for division, was idealistic. Wilkins's approach was to demonstrate common ground from outside the tautological arguments of doctrinal and scriptural disputes. This should not be mistaken for an atheistic or Deistic "turn to nature" to attempt to find there "sufficient faith." Rather, for Wilkins at least, nature served as a starting point for establishing a probability that one could not prove false with absolute certainty: 1) that there is a God; 2) that this God has particular attributes; and 3) that through education provided by plain and simple exposure to Scripture in a comprehensive national Church, the effects of sin might be mitigated to enable a person to grasp Christian particulars written already on their hearts or minds. The whole of Wilkins's argument is predicated on stepping away from the claim to have absolute certainty – a claim which had served to tear apart both the government and the Church in England.

The fragmented ecclesiastical sphere could not but communicate Scripture and doctrine with incoherence to those hearing the Word. God is not divided. But then, to which "agent of God" ought one to defer or consent, to put it in Hooker's terms? Wilkins's approach began with the broadest of moral certainties and probabilities about God's existence and attributes, things concretely evident in historical events. These served as evidence of God's providential ordering of creation. They provided moral certainty and therefore the intellectual common space where those with contested claims about the faith could still inhabit a common arena of Christian formation: the

comprehensive Church. Assent to these principles of natural religion would lead to openness to the particulars of the Christian Scriptures – a space for corporate edification and common discernment – containing many things that could only be affirmed with moral certainty, as argued by Chillingworth.

Wilkins serves as a purveyor of the civil Christian culture that stands behind many later modern Protestant and Catholic notions of a revived “Christian society.” Hooker had relied on the Church and Monarch working together, but in distinctive spheres, to form people in the Christian faith. Chillingworth had relied on a comprehensive national Church with unarticulated essentials, and the belief that those things not essential to salvation ought not prove to be fodder for division. In line with his work on a universal language and reaching those skeptical of or in fact utterly ignorant of Christian claims, Wilkins sought to articulate a vision of common formation much in keeping with Hooker’s own vision. And it is this very vision of common formation we see develop prolifically in the eighteenth century with schools, hospitals, institutions for the poor, and even missionary societies, all run along Christian principles. They were all means by which to educate large populations – of varying classes or ethnic origins, etc. – into a “moderated” Christianly-perceptive society.⁵⁵³

Yet as with Chillingworth, so too did Wilkins’s vision for a comprehensive Church widen the boundaries or limits defining the Church and, in many respects, its vocation and thus witness. Wilkins intended his argument concerning natural religion to

⁵⁵³ On these claims, see foremost Jeremy Gregory, *Restoration, Reformation and Reform 1660-1828: Archbishops of Canterbury and their Diocese*. Secondly see Green, *The Christian’s ABC*. Also instructive are the following two chapters: D.W. Bebbington, “Evangelicalism and British Culture,” and Peter Borsay, “The Topography of Power,” both in *Religion, Identity and Conflict in Britain: From the Restoration to the Twentieth Century*, ed. Stewart J. Brown, Frances Knight, and John Morgan-Guy (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013).

be a stepping stone for drawing Christians together and providing common space for engaging Scriptural revelation again more deeply after so much division over its particulars. The difficulties with such broadening of the definition of that common space (the national Church), were threefold: first, avoiding the ambiguities of Scripture by allowing for diverse beliefs on all but the essentials hardly presses people to work through those ambiguities, be challenged by them, or transformed (conformed more to Christ) through engaging with them; second, if the basis for unity is grounded in universal principles, with the particulars of Scripture and doctrine reduced to a few core beliefs essential to one's salvation and the contentious things *adiaphora* to salvation avoided in debate with respect to forming common life, then common Christian life in a body may well become more about common moral principles than about common life before God revealed in Scripture; third, if natural religion is evident to all people everywhere, the Church cannot be absolutely, or even morally certain that the 'first principle' creator it calls the triune God is not in fact, another religion's god and that one's salvation is dependent upon that god's revelations. These and related problems end up besetting the Church of England's self-understanding as the decades progress.

Chapter 5: A Conclusion – Isaac Watts

The Concept of Comprehension in the Church of England

Throughout this dissertation I have traced the continual struggle to define the proper relationship between civil and ecclesiastical authority in order to create common space for the corporate discernment of truth. In *Ecclesiastical Authority and Spiritual Power in the Church of the First Three Centuries*, Hans von Campenhausen demonstrated how contestation over aspects of scriptural exegesis itself gave shape to early Church arguments over the role of authority and its exercise in Christian formation.⁵⁵⁴ He showed that an early charismatic leadership eventually gave way to a more hierarchical body of governance as issues of interpretation in a geographically expanding Church demanded structural mechanisms of accountability for teaching the faith. This demand for mechanisms of accountability continued to drive the development of church law, as demonstrated in the work of the Decretists and Decretalists of the medieval period, which was defined in part by efforts to develop a method to grapple with contradictory statements concerning the faith.⁵⁵⁵

One method proposed by the English thinkers examined in this work was that of what I have termed “comprehension.”⁵⁵⁶ “Comprehension,” as defined in this

⁵⁵⁴ von Campenhausen, *Ecclesiastical Authority and Spiritual Power in the Church of the First Three Centuries*.

⁵⁵⁵ See Brian Tierney, *The Crisis of Church and State 1050-1300* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988); Brian Tierney, *Foundations of the Conciliar Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955).

⁵⁵⁶ As briefly noted in the introduction, comprehension in English theology must be distinguished from toleration primarily because these two related concepts were in fact separated by English politicians and Churchmen just after the Revolution of 1688 (see John Spurr, “The Church of England, Comprehension and the Toleration Act of 1689,” in *English Historical Review*, 104, 413, (May 1989), 927-946).

dissertation, is a descriptive term used thus far, to delineate four types of pragmatic approaches to collect and evaluate contested doctrinal, moral, and liturgical claims about the faith, while maintaining a common body or arena within which that discernment could take place. Maintaining that common space for corporate discernment required both agreement on some essentials that provided definition to the body of which they were a part, and it required limit on practices (and in some cases verbal debate) that were inconsistent with what was agreed to by, in the case of each of our thinkers, the national English Church. That limit was understood by each of our theologians to press one toward active discernment, which was in turn considered an essential part of being formed in the faith in accordance with the truth.

Additionally, the two terms were understood both in their relationship to one another, and in their respective uses, to change meaning from the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries. Gary Remer distinguishes between sixteenth and seventeenth century concepts of toleration and comprehension. Unlike the distinction made in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the two terms were sometimes used interchangeably in the sixteenth and early seventeenth century to refer to those who would not profess faith in or, in some cases, engage in the practices of the Roman Catholic (or English) Churches. The goal of toleration was in fact to comprehend these persons not with the intention of widening the acceptable ecclesiastical articulation of the faith, or practices, but rather by either preaching or conversing with them with the intention of logically persuading them to defer to the Church, rather by using coercive means (see Remer, *Humanism and the Rhetoric of Toleration*, 7-8). Comprehension took on distinctive meaning in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, particularly as the Church of England expanded into new geographic territories, moving from a national Church, to a Communion of Provincial Churches. Jeremy Morris traces debate about the notion of comprehension amongst several 'Broad Church' English thinkers including F.D. Maurice and Thomas Arnold. He argues that most thinkers, "emphasized the national mission of the church, assuming establishment and a distinct concept of national identity." In addition, most thinkers believed that the goal of establishment was to be, "inclusive," so that the "external boundaries of the Church" were shaped to that of the community to which a mission went. However, "there was no common agreement between [these thinkers] as to how this [comprehensive Church] could best be secured." Morris concludes that, "Comprehensiveness [was] a word promoted by all of the broad church, [yet it] was in fact an umbrella term for radically contrasting ecclesiologies. (Morris, "The Spirit of Comprehension: Examining the Broad Church Synthesis in England," 439-441). As argued throughout this dissertation, these contrasting ecclesiologies ought not to be interpreted as ecclesiastical incoherence. As the English Church expanded, its thinkers were pressed to reconceptualize how to create common space, while also providing definitive limit to the Church's articulations of the faith, and its capacity to form people from cultures very different from England in language, custom, governance, and resource bases, in that faith. Finally, Morris comments on the notion of comprehension as communicated in the twentieth century at the 1948 Lambeth Conference wherein it is suggested that Anglican polity is itself comprehensive. His essay is an attempt to show how the move was made from conceiving comprehension within a National Church, to one that would be capable of encompassing multiple national Churches. (Morris, "The Spirit of Comprehension," 425).

One of the critical issues identified by tracing the works of our theologians was that comprehension eventually seemed to imply a broadening of the boundaries or limits of the Church's articulation of the truth, eroding any notion of Christian particularity. Furthermore, Chillingworth's, and more particularly, Wilkins's arguments for a cognitive foundation for the unity of the Church potentially removed a central tenet of Erasmus's and Hooker's own understanding of what was necessary to comprehending people within the Church: a visible body whose function and aim had the particular *telos* of the triune God. The particulars of the Christian faith mattered for Erasmus and Hooker; comprehension and toleration were employed for the sake of being able to engage those particulars even when they were not essential to salvation. It was not that those particulars were matters indifferent to the life of Christians; rather those particulars were indifferent to one's salvation. And freed from the concern that they were essential to salvation, these matters were *not* to be ignored; quite the opposite. These matters were to be engaged by preachers and by teachers for the sake of discerning the most likely way to act consistently with God's will where certainty was simply unavailable due to finitude and sin. For our first four thinkers, Erasmus through to Wilkins, comprehension had to do with taking those matters capable only of providing moral certainty and engaging them through probabilistic reasoning in a limited arena of other non-like minded persons, where the effects of individual and sectarian finitude and sin could be mitigated. And yet by the time Wilkins had written about natural religion toward the end of the seventeenth century, English thinkers were teetering on a type of comprehension that would be so broad as to eliminate any engagement about Christian particulars.

After the Revolution of 1688 in which William III invaded England to reclaim the crown for Protestants from England's Roman Catholic King, James II, controversy arose concerning the shape of a possible settlement.⁵⁵⁷ Two Acts were proposed: one for Toleration, and a second for Comprehension. The Toleration Act officially permitted non-conformist congregations (such as Baptists), to legally assemble in worship and to appoint teachers for their own schools.⁵⁵⁸ The Toleration Act received royal assent on May 24, 1689. However, from the outset, Brent Sirota argues that non-jurors (those who refused to align themselves with the leadership of William and Mary after James II was forced from England), found comprehension far more problematic than toleration.⁵⁵⁹ Comprehension, Sirota notes, meant the visibility of the church would be harmed, since comprehending Christians who held so little in common in terms of the structures of ministry and of decision-making, and of sacramental and liturgical practices,⁵⁶⁰ could only end up living in an invisible communion of Protestants where people were free from

⁵⁵⁷ See: Sirota, "The Occasional Conformity Controversy, Moderation, and the Anglican Critique of Modernity," 81-105; Spurr, "The Church of England, Comprehension and the Toleration Act of 1689," 927-946.

⁵⁵⁸ Sirota, "The Occasional Conformity Controversy, Moderation, and the Anglican Critique of Modernity," in *The Historical Journal*, 57,1, (March, 2014), 81-105; Spurr, "The Church of England, Comprehension and the Toleration Act of 1689," in *English Historical Review*, 104,413, (May 1989), 927-946, in particular see, 927-929; Two separate Acts, one for Comprehension and one for Toleration had been proposed as part of the religious settlement after the Revolution of 1688. The Toleration Act of 1689 allowed freedom of worship to non-conformists – also called "dissenters" at this time – who had pledged to oaths of allegiance and supremacy and who rejected Catholic doctrines (these included Baptists, Congregationalists, and English Presbyterians, but not Roman Catholics or atheists). Non-conformists were allowed their own physical buildings in which to worship, and to hold classes in accordance with their Church's teaching.

⁵⁵⁹ Parliament's consideration of and eventual

⁵⁶⁰ Sirota, "The Occasional Conformity Controversy, Moderation, and the Anglican Critique of Modernity," 100, 103-5. Sirota writes, "[t]he nonjurors conceived of the church as a corporate and visible society, an order constituted by the lasting adherence of spiritual subjects to their spiritual governors, the clergy, and bishops. Occasional communion was thus, strictly speaking, an impossibility."

the binding, limiting, and thereby transformative structures of a visible Church.⁵⁶¹

Toleration, on the other hand, meant that the Church of England retained its visible status as ‘the’ Church in England. Those non-conformists (those worshipping outside the Church of England) existed and functioned solely because of and at the discretion of the visible English Church.⁵⁶²

As this brief examination of the concept of comprehension shows, what began as a mechanism for non-coercive transformation in the truth articulated by the Church, eventually broadened in definitive limits with the entrenched assertions of epistemic certainty. In the mid-seventeenth-century (and, to a much lesser extent, at the time of the so-called Glorious Revolution) this dynamic of change would end by erupting in violence and political and ecclesiastical chaos. By the end of the seventeenth century, comprehension was understood by some factions of the Church (many non-jurors and high Churchmen), to threaten the Church’s visible (legal and teaching) capacities to transform people in the truth of the Christian faith.

⁵⁶¹ Sirota, “The Occasional Conformity Controversy, Moderation, and the Anglican Critique of Modernity,” 84-86. Sirota writes, “... with a handful of notable exceptions, critics of occasional conformity [many non-jurors and later many high Churchmen] consistently disavowed any interest in rolling back the indulgence [the privileges provided by the passing of the Toleration Act]. Their quarrel, they claimed, was with moderation, an altogether different social and political malady. Sirota’s assessment here is consistent with the concerns expressed by Erasmus, Hooker, and Chillingworth in particular, and even Wilkins: the limits of one national Church were understood to contribute to mitigating the sin of individuals and of small factions of Christians unaccountable to others who could thereby tautologically justify any interpretation and action they desired.

⁵⁶² “Toleration” permitted non-conforming worship; but it excluded non-conformists from membership in the Church of England, and, as a result, from holding public office. Terms are further confused by the additional early eighteenth-century category of “occasional conformity”, a pejorative term aimed at unmasking the purported hypocrisy of the practice by dissenters of publicly showing up at Church of England worship services in order to obtain the right to hold civil office, as defined the Toleration Act. A 1711 bill aimed at forbidding such circumventions of the hard lines of “toleration” remained in effect only briefly.

A Summary of how Erasmus, Hooker, Chillingworth and Wilkins conceived of Comprehension

In chapter one, I examined the work of Erasmus. He is a foundational figure for examining “types” of comprehension largely because of the influence he had on subsequent generations of English thinkers concerning questions of truth, polity, and things necessary and unnecessary for salvation. For Erasmus, comprehension ultimately required deference to the one holy, catholic, and apostolic Church. His argument aimed at maintaining the unity of the Church against those proposing necessary assent to *adiaphora* doctrines. And in this sense, his argument was not conciliatory or a matter of toleration, as in the late seventeenth century, but polemical.

Erasmus understood the Christian life to involve a gradual formation both through individual and corporate participation in Christ through his Church. God slowly revealed himself over time to an individual, in order to accommodate the capacities of his diverse hearers and enable their response to his revelation. Erasmus understood the capacity to make a choice, as one learned, to be an essential element in pursuing the truth of the faith.⁵⁶³ Commenting on the Gospel of John, Erasmus writes,

But Jesus, gentlest of teachers, who does not crush the broken reed or snuff out the smoking wick, did not reject his frightened and untimely visitor. He welcomed him kindly, a weak man to be sure, but innocent of evil intent and therefore worthy to be gradually drawn on to higher things.⁵⁶⁴

The Church then, was essential to formation because it set limits both to human articulations of the faith and to human practices. Those essential limits were to be

⁵⁶³ See James Tracy, “Erasmus among the Postmodernists: Dissimulatio, Bonae Literae, and Docta Pietas Revisited,” in *Erasmus’s Vision of the Church*, ed. Hilmar M. Pabel (Kirksville, MO: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1995).

⁵⁶⁴ Erasmus, Paraphrase on John, CWE, 46, 45.

consented to, while those inessentials – which also had a role in ordering practices, teachings, and beliefs – provided a common basis from which to learn, challenge, and grow in the truth of God’s revelation. Thus the Church for Erasmus served as a sort of arena within which Christians could learn and grow in faith. This is also why disruptions to the unity of the Church by assertions to doctrinal certainty on matters that were not scripturally perspicuous and essential to salvation were unacceptable to him.⁵⁶⁵

For Erasmus, even God’s revelation in the life of Jesus Christ did not make the texts conveying his life to readers clear but instead demanded patience, restraint, and persistence in discernment over time: “Jesus doeth so entermendle and temper his talke, that me semeth his will and pleasure was, to be darke and not understood, not onely to the Aposteles, but also unto all of us. There be also certayne places (as I thinke) almost impossible to be expounded.”⁵⁶⁶ Erasmus argued that it was God’s intention to make Scripture unclear to humble persons, an apparently necessary characteristic for being brought from sinful presumptions of certain knowledge to formation and thus transformation in the true faith.⁵⁶⁷

The type of comprehension evident in Erasmus’s work enabled discernment and formation in the truth but was not an explicit “theology of Church” or ecclesiology. Comprehension was simply a pragmatic response to several presuppositions. First was the presupposition that God made Scripture intentionally obscure in order to draw people out of a presumption of certainty and into a humble posture of reception for grace

⁵⁶⁵ Marjorie O’Rourke Boyle, *Rhetoric and Reform* (Hartford, CT: Harvard University Press, 1983), 134, 158.

⁵⁶⁶ Erasmus, *Paraphrases I*, sig. [par.] 3V. Preface to Matthew, cited in Dodds, *Exploiting Erasmus*, note 23, 281

⁵⁶⁷ Erasmus, *A Discussion of Free Will*, *CWE*, 76, 8-9.

sufficient to their capacities.⁵⁶⁸ Second, the unity and peace of the Church should not be disturbed by doctrinal assertions to certainty by dissenting individuals (or any actions that follow from those assertions that would divide the Church) about things indifferent to salvation and, most particularly, unclear in Scripture. The ensuing battles and possible violence would undermine the capacity of individuals in the Church and of the Church itself to be formed and form people in the truth.⁵⁶⁹ Finally, the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church was to provide a limit by articulating those doctrines *necessary for salvation*, to which the faithful were called to consent.⁵⁷⁰

Yet by the time Richard Hooker published his *Lawes* (1594 [I-IV], 1597 [V]), the Church in England had not been bound to and by the authority of the pope for sixty years,

⁵⁶⁸ Erasmus, *Paraphrases I*, sig. [par.] 3V. Preface to Matthew, cited in Dodds, *Exploiting Erasmus*, note 23, 281.

⁵⁶⁹ Erasmus writes, “I specifically exempt from uncertainty... what has been revealed [clearly/perspicuously] in sacred scripture and has been handed down by the authority of the church” (Erasmus, *Hyperaspites*, cited in Erika Rummel, “The Theology of Erasmus,” *The Cambridge Companion to Reformation Theology*, ed. David Bagchi, David Steinmetz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 32. Erasmus’s argument here is not that the Church has infallible or absolute certainty. Rather, if there is a consensus of the Church through time, that consensus provides a moral certainty (a discerned certainty), that ought to be assented to for the preservation and unity of the Church. It is not, as we saw above, that theologians cannot engage in ‘conversation’ or debate with one another, or that a priest cannot tolerate someone they believe in error in the hope of reforming them in accordance with the Church’s teaching. Instead, Erasmus is providing a basis of moral certainty – the Church’s received tradition – to which one ought to consent because it is the most likely rendering of truth of which human beings are capable at any given point in history. Lack of deference to tradition, Erasmus held, could lead not only to social and moral chaos, but also to the replacement of those in power with potentially worse leadership.

⁵⁷⁰ See in particular Rummel, “The Theology of Erasmus,” 32. In the quote from Erasmus cited above, Rummel argues that Erasmus “converts probability into certainty by using church authority as a criterion.” Rummel, distinguishing Erasmus from the Reformers, writes, “consensus and tradition emerge as essential decision-making tools for Erasmus the Christian sceptic, and came to shape his attitude toward the Reformers... for the Christian sceptic, consensus was not only a sociopolitical desideratum; it was an essential criterion and the touchstone of true religion” (Rummel, “The Theology of Erasmus,” 32). It should be remembered, as argued by Dodds, that Erasmus’s assertion about tradition being certain is specifically about moral and not absolute certainty. More than that, however, Erasmus is situating the received tradition of the Church as the best available discernment of Scripture, polemically against those who wish to establish with absolute certainty, something they alone have developed or asserted. It would seem then, that for Erasmus, part of establishing sufficient certainty to legitimate a ‘call to consent,’ had to do with the sufficiency and universality of evidence.

with the exception of a brief restoration of papal authority under Mary in the 1550s. During that sixty-year period, debate along with political and ecclesiastical struggles carried on about the extent to which the Church should pursue greater reform in its doctrinal and liturgical practices. In writing the *Lawes*, Hooker drew on Erasmus and developed the first type of English comprehension we examined. He suggested that obedience to God, and in turn to one's own created purpose, was met through consent to the Church and civil governments, both governing the common life of English people in distinctive ways, but with the one aim of faithful response to God. As with Erasmus, Hooker saw the danger in attempts to dictate or change doctrines and practices assuming certainty in things *adiaphora*. He challenged both Puritans and Roman Catholics who wished to command consent where he believed it could not be or ought not to be sought with certainty. However, it would be false to hold that Hooker's motives were the same as those behind the main ideas of toleration that developed in the later seventeenth century.

Hooker, like Erasmus, believed that each national Church – in this case England's – should be the sole ecclesiastical body, bound to the monarch. The civil and ecclesiastical spheres were developed to govern a body of individuals toward the pursuit of the truth: God in Christ. Underpinning this governance, Hooker drew upon and developed a medieval theory of law by which all of creation was ordered. As Hooker demonstrated in Books I, IV, and VIII, submission to these authorities – embedded as they were in a system of law – proved to be a submission to God, and ultimately to one's own particular created good within a commonweal.

Thus the Hookerian type of comprehension offered a limited body of discernment – the nation of England governed by Church and civil authorities working in their own realm of jurisdiction – fitted within a framework of natural and supernatural laws ordering all things to God as their *telos*. It was by discernment within this body that the truth was to be found. Hooker maintained that a limited body or arena provided room to grapple with doctrinal and liturgical matters that required using probability to determine how to faithfully proceed. This required a qualified toleration with the intent of persuading a person to consent to the Church’s teaching. As with Erasmus, the proposal for limited toleration was actually a polemical argument intended to expose the danger proposed by those who would demand consent to things *adiaphora* to salvation. And yet at the same time, Hooker sought to show that refusal to defer to the Church of England and its monarch would only tear apart common civil and ecclesiastical space for discernment of the truth. Ultimately for Hooker, unity was a prerequisite for seeking the truth.

The third type of comprehension we examined was that articulated by William Chillingworth. Chillingworth argued that Scripture alone could provide the common basis from which Christians must derive arguments concerning the truth. Here we begin to see some divergence from the notions of comprehension in the works of Erasmus and Hooker. Erasmus and Hooker clearly indicated deference to the Church’s consensus, what had been handed on. For Hooker of course, this deference was shorn of obedience to the pope and replaced with obedience to the English monarch. In his Works, particularly *Religion of the Protestants*, Chillingworth engaged a Roman Catholic interlocutor, Edward Knott, on the questions of certainty in truth and authority.

Chillingworth used historical evidence, often of disputed or changed doctrines and practices, along with scriptural passages capable of multiple interpretations, in an attempt to undermine Knott's claims that the Roman Catholic Church had justification for its infallibility as an authority, and thereby, its requirement to consent to its doctrines.

Despite this, Chillingworth still held that the national Church ought to serve as the body limiting external actions where someone's belief was not consistent with the beliefs of other parts of the comprehensive national Church. Yet the comprehensive Church of England Chillingworth proposed was to establish limits broader than what Hooker had proposed precisely because unlike Hooker, Chillingworth had raised a serious concern about the reliability and therefore legitimacy of any reliance on any received custom or tradition of the Church and thereby deference to it.

Writing in 1638, nearly a century after the English Church's departure from papal governance, Chillingworth, as Hooker before him, used aspects of Erasmus's argument. Specifically, he argued for a limited body of essentials to which one must assent, with the remainder of doctrines and practices being *adiaphora* to salvation and thereby not necessary to being a member of the Church. Like Erasmus he maintained that Scripture was unclear in many matters, although he did not mention God's intentionality in this. However, he insisted that the "common man" would reasonably assent to essential doctrines since God had made them obvious in the Scriptures. God in fact accommodated those essential aspects of Scripture to the capacities of its hearers or readers, thereby ensuring their capacity to pursue him. For Chillingworth, it was the very *act* of discernment – not sufficient for salvation – that opened an individual to God, who in turn could transform a person's life in accordance with that person's capacities.

Chillingworth's greatest concern, then, was any Church – Roman Catholic, Presbyterian, sectarian or Church of England – that would inhibit one's capacity to engage in discernment.

Due to finitude and sin, many aspects of the faith, including scriptural passages and their application to daily life, necessitated weighing sometimes contradictory or unclear evidence; these aspects of the faith were thus capable of being known only probabilistically. To presume certainty in inessentials that would require necessary consent was, for Chillingworth, to demand an act perhaps even adverse to the pursuit of truth. Furthermore, such demands in competition with one another would serve to tear apart the peace and unity not simply of the Church, but of the nation; and in so doing, they would inhibit a common forum within which to pursue the truth. Thus, if the Church was going to be comprehensive, the essentials required for belief had to be consistent only with what could be proved morally certain, with little disagreement or dispute. All other things concerning the faith, liturgy, and the moral life of Christians ought not to be infallibly instituted or required as part of one's belief.

Our fourth type of comprehension is found in the work of John Wilkins. Wilkins began writing just prior to the civil wars in the early 1640s. Yet his most substantial or important theological works were written after the Restoration of 1660. Wilkins, along with most Restoration thinkers (with the exception of some extreme Independents), sought a restoration of civil and ecclesiastical comprehension. For even moderate Englishmen like Wilkins, this included a return to one national Church. They faced a challenge in proposing their concept of comprehension, however, as the worries about further violence and civil and political unrest were still fresh concerns for them. The

drive for positive law proposed by Laud and Charles, which had contributed to the civil wars, was not particularly desirable. And yet the notion that Scripture could serve as one common foundation of perspicuous interpretation for common life had already proved false.

Seeking to provide some common space without directly appealing to deference to the positive laws of a now divided civil and ecclesiastical sphere, Wilkins turned to a type of cognitive framework for comprehension. The national Church of England should use as its basis for comprehension a referent of first principles derived from history and philosophy. He argued that God's providence was evident where everyone everywhere had held to a given proposition about religion: for example, the existence of a first principle, and the attributes of that first principle in ordering societies. This would be evident to the "common man through common sense." As a Christian thinker, Wilkins did not believe that natural religion was sufficient for salvation. Instead, he believed that it served as a common intellectual space and so a common social space for discernment in a nation divided in its political and ecclesiastical affairs.

This common space, an intellectual framework drawn from natural religion, he argued, would allow people to see the truth and wisdom of the Scriptures, even if those gathering together differed on inessentials of the faith where certainty could not be derived anyway. Wilkins shifts away from Erasmus, Hooker, and Chillingworth in relying on a physical, structural body for corporate discernment, and instead he makes cognitive discernment the framework itself. The duty of the national Church was shifted for him to providing teaching through plain-sense preaching anchored by its evident concordance with God's providential ordering revealed throughout history. These things

took on great importance for him, as they would enable common discernment to take place once again in a divided realm.

By the end of the seventeenth century, any argument for “comprehension” as we have defined it in this dissertation – the search for common space for corporate religious discernment with structural or intellectual limits – lost traction. Remer argues that by the late seventeenth century, comprehension came to apply to putative dissenters who were willing, in some way, to live inside the Established Church, while the state came to legally protect or “tolerate” dissenting non-conformists outside. The key difference here was that now, in the form of “toleration” of dissenting non-conformity outside the Church of England, there would be an official acknowledgement of and permission for persons being formed in the faith without submission to a unified commonwealth of civil and ecclesiastical authority.⁵⁷¹ This was not, Remer argues, a shift to acceptance of religious liberty: “under a regime of toleration dissenters depend on the approval of, or at least the voluntary inaction of, superior authority. By contrast, liberty is not granted but *held* independently of any granting agency.”⁵⁷²

Indeed, examining English Christianity in the post-revolutionary period of the eighteenth century, Brent Sirota argues that the religious impetus was not really directed toward liberty any longer – “liberty” being a watchword of seventeenth-century social ferment -- but toward religious revival, manifest in pastoral acts directed to the improvement of the whole civil society.⁵⁷³ He maintains that the revolutionary program

⁵⁷¹ Remer, *Humanism and the Rhetoric of Toleration*, 7.

⁵⁷² Remer, *Humanism and the Rhetoric of Toleration*, 7.

⁵⁷³ Brent Sirota, *The Christian Monitors: The Church of England and the Age of Benevolence, 1680-1730*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014).

of 1688-89 consisted of two distinctive types of witness. The first, pursued by the Established Church, attempted to retain a sense of the need for common formation in the faith – what Sirota terms “constitutional inertia.” The second type was characterized by an explosion of voluntary societies: “experiments” in education, care for the poor and sick, prayer and missionary societies committed to charity and benevolence.⁵⁷⁴

Englishmen (and Irishmen) representing various institutional and voluntary groups, such as William Wake, White Kennett, Jonathan Swift, and James Welton, understood these two types of witness to be part of the religious and thus moral renewal of England.⁵⁷⁵ In one sense, then, what we today might consider “civil religion,” oriented to an organized pursuit of the common good, was in fact the result of two different visions of how truth pursued ought to be manifest: a stable institutional body where the good, not immanently recognizable, was ordered by God to himself; or the empirically testable good pressed by entrepreneurial and experimental groups whose aim was to put faith into action for an immanent realization of the good of all.⁵⁷⁶

This was not an integrative or synchronistic effort on behalf of those in the Established Church and those of these voluntary societies. Voluntary societies often arose out of a narrative assuming the death and decay of Christianity in the late seventeenth century, the decline of the Church and therefore of civil society and its divinely given

⁵⁷⁴ Sirota, *The Christian Monitors: The Church of England and the Age of Benevolence, 1680-1730*, 5-6.

⁵⁷⁵ William Wake, *The Excellency and Benefits of a Religious Education, A Sermon Preach'd in the Parish-Church of St. Sepulchre, June the IXth, 1715* (London: J. Downing, 1715), 27-33; see also White Kennett, *The Charity of schools for poor children recommended in a sermon preach'd in the Parish-church of St. Sepulchre, May 16, 1706* (London: J. Downing, 1706), 38-9; Jonathan Swift, *A Serious and Useful Scheme, To make an Hospital for Uncurables* (London: J. Roberts, 1733); James Welton, *A sermon preached at the cathedral church at Norwich, on Thursday, Nov 29, 1759* (Norwich: William Chase, 1759).

⁵⁷⁶ Paul Slack, *From Reformation to Improvement: Public Welfare in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1999), 148-9.

order. The pressure of those in the Established Church continued to maintain traditional forms of common life against Catholicism, dissent, atheism, and enlightenment.

Sometimes voluntary societies were understood as a way to mitigate these forces, to press for moral and religious renewal wherein one could see empirical evidence of ‘service to one’s neighbor’ that was to spring from knowledge of one’s justification; and at other times these voluntary groups were seen as disruptive and even antithetical to a society ordered to salvation.⁵⁷⁷

It is this conflict itself which produced not comprehension as we have defined it – the space for discernment or even contestation ordered to God – but life ordered to a presumed program of benevolence, stripped of Christian particularity. Yet contestation has always been a part of Christian discernment of the truth. More deeply, then, the division of Christians into (now “tolerated”) denominations meant that even appeals to the Christian Scriptures, or to natural religion, could not produce a consensus about the relationship between salvation and its effects in ordering society. The result – given the history of violence and condemnation, of absolutism and coercion from Church parties ascending to power – was an eventual shedding of the sacramental and confessional “skin” of public Christianity. While certainly not realized until the late nineteenth or even twentieth century, the result, as Sirota characterizes it, was “the making of modern civil society in Britain, a split religion: moral rather than confessional, associational rather than parochial, benevolent rather than sacramental – a space perhaps where individuals may be improved, but not saved.”⁵⁷⁸

⁵⁷⁷ Sirota, *The Christian Monitors: The Church of England and the Age of Benevolence, 1680-1730*, 8-9.

⁵⁷⁸ Sirota, *The Christian Monitors: The Church of England and the Age of Benevolence, 1680-1730*, 260.

Watts on Comprehension

Sirota's observation is confirmed by observing how even most ardent and particularist Christians ended by positively embracing a non-particularist religious establishment, thereby ceding the Christian ground of the common society to a generalized moralism. We can see this in the peculiar case of Isaac Watts. Known best for his hymn writing,⁵⁷⁹ Watts in fact proposed a last type of comprehension, with some continuity to the overall hope for the transformation of England, as outlined in this concluding chapter thus far, but now distinct enough so as to fall outside the broad notion of comprehension that I have been examining.⁵⁸⁰ J.F. Maclear argues that Watts's response to the events of the eighteenth century was "prompted not by any devitalization of traditional Christianity but

⁵⁷⁹ A relatively recent biography by Graham Beynon, *Isaac Watts, Reason, Passion and the Revival of Religion* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), helpfully outlines essential reading on Watts's life and his theological, philosophical and liturgical works which I follow here. For an intellectual biography that lays out his contributions as a theologian, philosopher, and hymn writer, see Arthur Paul Davis, *Isaac Watts: His Life and Works* (London: Independent Press, 1948), chapter 19. Davis, like many of the following scholars, argues that Watts is an inconsistent thinker. While Watts applies reason to his non-religious works, he does not use it in his religious ones; furthermore, while in some places, notably his hymns and poems, he seeks to evoke passion or zeal, in other places he utterly discounts it. See for example John Hoyles, *The Waning of the Renaissance 1640-1740: Studies in the Thought and Poetry of Henry More, John Norris and Isaac Watts* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1971); Jonathan Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, ed., Paul Ramsey, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957); Isabel Rivers, *Reason, Grace, and Sentiment: A Study of the Language of Religion and Ethics in England 1660-1780. Volume 1: Whichcote to Wesley* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Roy Porter, *Enlightenment: Britain and the Making of the Modern World* (London: Allen Lane, 2000); Joseph Figures, "Isaac Watts and His Position in the Eighteenth Century" *Congregational Quarterly* 35 (1957); Reginald Ward, *Christianity under the Ancien Regime, 1648-1789* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Scott A. Gunn, "'We Have Sat Out Ye Hearing of a Sermon': Manuscript Sermons in the James M. and Marie-Louise Osborn Collection," in *Yale University Library Gazette*, 71,3/4, (1997), 140-154, 149.

⁵⁸⁰ Beynon argues throughout his book that Watts retains the belief that true faith requires active reason. However, because reason is still subject to sin, ultimately a person relies on the knowledge of God in the heart and the testimony of the Spirit. Such reliance results in the regeneration of moral life, realized in experience as assurance of God's presence. In short, reason must necessarily be exercised to pursue understanding of God, but recognition of God's presence and transformation don't come through one's emotional response or through one's intellectual effort, but through one's experienced transformation. Beynon's assessment of Watts's more philosophical thought fits the framework of civil and ecclesiastical governance for which J.F. Maclear argues in "Isaac Watts and the Idea of Public Religion" in *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 53, 1 (Jan. - Mar., 1992), 25-45.

by tensions between the confessional Anglican state and the unprecedented religious pluralism which agitated post-Restoration England.”⁵⁸¹

Watts suggested that the evangelical impetus of many of the voluntary societies in operation alongside the Established Church needed space to operate independently from the latter’s strictures. This was so because to impose an “established religion” – a gathering of all persons of a nation in common worship,⁵⁸² at least for certain seasons or celebration – would be to “intrench upon the Liberty of Mankind, and impose upon the Consciences of some of the Inhabitants of the Land...”⁵⁸³ Watts’s concern, however, was *not* to establish an unlimited range of worship. Rather, his concern was to create public space within which differing religious and in particular Christian groups, could worship not merely according to a diffuse “Light of Nature,” but in accordance with the “true God in the Name and by the Mediation of Jesus Christ, according as the Lord has taught them.” Ironically, this meant “establishing” just the “religion of Nature” that could not save. Watts goes on to say:

[n]ow a Christian may think it unlawful to come and worship even the One true God together with the Deists, and to join with them in those Prayers and Praises which are not offer’d in the Name of Christ or by his Mediation, and therefore he should never be constrain’d to attend this Natural Worship by any Penalty.”⁵⁸⁴

⁵⁸¹ Maclear, “Isaac Watts and the Idea of Public Religion,” 27.

⁵⁸² Isaac Watts, *A New Essay on Civil Power in Things Sacred: Or an Enquiry After an Establish’d Religion Consistent with the Just Liberties of Mankind* (London: Printed for M. Steen, in the Inner-Temple Lane, unknown year); I use the phrase “common worship” to refer to Watts’s gathering of all people of a nation. Watts specifies that this gathering of all people could only refer to the worship of things in accordance with “natural religion” (p. 42); Brad Gregory argues that this religious and secular pluralism in beliefs, and the absence of the capacity to even conceptualize a ‘common good,’ along with the triumph of an economic capitalist market as replacing religion as the center of common life, were the results of the Reformation and its ecclesiastical division. See Brad Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2012).

⁵⁸³ Watts, *A New Essay on Civil Power*, 42.

⁵⁸⁴ Watts, *A New Essay on Civil Power*, 48.

Watts here is grappling with a familiar tension: how to sustain civil peace, and even more importantly common order necessary for grappling with probabilities and uncertainties, while at the same time allowing for discernment, worship, and teaching in accordance with particular claims to religious truth. What is new, however, is that his grappling takes place after an official act of toleration permitting the simultaneous gathering and worship of different Christian groups within England. This opens up new questions: given that it is now a legalized choice, to whom does one give one's allegiance in the matters of belief, worship, and practices, and how does this allegiance contribute to shaping a common moral life (or in pulling it apart)?

Ultimately, Watts sought to construct a type of comprehension based in first principles, that is, the religion of "Nature." Since Christians (and non-Christians) could not agree on God's nature, Watts began, as did Wilkins, with an uncreated deity who created and ordered all things and provided mechanisms of governance to maintain and protect the peace and order of individuals within their respective societies. His type of comprehension was largely utilitarian, even if given by God. Unlike his contemporary, Warburton, and distinct from Erasmus and Hooker, yet arguably more consistent with the proposals of Chillingworth and Wilkins, Watts rejected state-Church collusion in enforcing consent. His form of comprehension instead prioritized the capacity for multiple groups of Christians to seek the truth in accordance with particular convictions about how that should take place. The state's public religion was a general law embedded in a presumption that the cornerstone of first principles was the civil protection of peace necessary to enable individuals or small groups to discern the truth in accordance with their own convictions. The limiting factor here, for the 'civil religion,' were the moral

virtues civil religion taught, that would ensure an individual's commitment to the oaths and promises made. These oath commitments in turn would preserve the peace of a society within which individuals were free to make choices.

At first glance, Watts's type of comprehension might seem merely a scheme of toleration, which would eventually lead to pluralism or to a purely political unity without truth. Such an impression could certainly be supported by what he writes in his conclusion:

... I cannot see it lawful for any Civil Power in Christendom to suppress the Publication of any new, strange, or foreign Sects or Parties in Religion, where they promise and pay due Allegiance to the Rulers, support the Government, maintain the Publick Peace, and molest not the State: nor do I see good reason to make any such Laws or execute any such Punishments against the peaceable Preachers of any Sect or Party, which we Christians should have thought unreasonable or unlawful for the Civil Powers of Athens to have made and executed against St. Paul... ⁵⁸⁵

But it should be remembered that Watts, in ways similar to Erasmus, Hooker, Chillingworth, and Wilkins, sought to find a means to protect space for the seeking and practice of the Christian faith in particular. Watts was a dissenting minister and theologian who believed that public or civil religion was not saving even while it was necessary for moral order, i.e. for enabling a protected space for discernment.⁵⁸⁶ Watts writes:

And every Man, both Governor and Governed, ought to have full Liberty to worship his God in that Special way and manner which his own Conscience believes to be of Divine Appointment, or which he thinks to be most necessary in order to secure the special Favor of his God and his own future Happiness [salvation]. This is a *personal* Obligation which natural Conscience, or the Light of Reason, which is the *Candle of the Lord within us*, lays on every individual Person among Mankind; supposing always that this particular Religion does not

⁵⁸⁵ Watts, *A New Essay on Civil Power*, 92-3.

⁵⁸⁶ Watts, *A New Essay on Civil Power*, 93.

break in upon the just Rights or the Peace of our Neighbors. And indeed if it does unjustly invade their Peace or their Natural or Civil Rights, this seems to be sufficient Evidence that it does not come from God, who is the original Author and Supreme Guardian of the natural Rights of his Creatures....⁵⁸⁷

In keeping with John Locke's own argument, he maintains that because the civil government was designed only for temporal benefits, in most things it ought not to interfere with the Church, whose purpose was to order persons to God, the spiritual kingdom. He writes:

The only Maxim by which I have conducted my Sentiments thro' all this Scheme is this, that the Power of Civil Government reaches no further than the Preservation of the Natural and Civil Welfare, Rights and Properties of Mankind with regard to this world, and has nothing to do with Religion further than this requires: but the Special Rights of Conscience and the things of Religion, as they relate to another World, belong to God only.⁵⁸⁸

In one sense, then, his argument closely follows that of Chillingworth, who claims that for one to seek the particularity of Christian truth, one must be freed from the interference of the Church and of the State. However, Watts's argument is distinct, in that the state, through its positive laws, can no longer serve the Church in limiting discernment of Christian truth. This is the case because the state itself is not bound to or even capable of upholding Christian truth. The searching and formation of persons in the truth came exclusively through formation in Churches not bound to or by state dictated religion. The role of the state was merely to provide a protected space where truth could be pursued variously and in often siloed distinct communities. In Watts's case, the truth was to be pursued through the faith of dissenters, including the evangelical efforts of their members engaged in works of charity and benevolence.

⁵⁸⁷ Watts, *A New Essay on Civil Power*, 47-8.

⁵⁸⁸ Watts, *A New Essay on Civil Power*, 89.

Watts's argument for comprehension provides a lens for evaluating the legacy of our types of comprehension developed in Erasmus, Hooker, Chillingworth and Wilkins.⁵⁸⁹ Erasmus, as we have examined, offered his argument for the purpose of maintaining the unity of the Church, even to the extent of polemically chastising those who attempted to impose dogmatic interpretations and/or practices of those things that were *adiaphora* to salvation. By the eighteenth century in England, Watts lived in a period which had seen two centuries of post-Reformation Christian practices. This included multiple changes in the form of civil and ecclesiastical governments, accompanied by violence, war, coercion, sectarian fragmentation, and constant efforts at moral renewal and formation in the faith.

Sirota, "against the prevailing historiography," contends that by the end of the seventeenth century, it was the failures and limitations of the court of William and Mary to enable moral and religious reform that "drove initiative away from the court toward a new culture of projecting and association."⁵⁹⁰ The groups that populated this 'new culture,' included members of conformist and non-conformist Churches. At the same time, as with Warburton, groups of conformists advocated a unified Church-state sort of comprehension where the state relied on the Church to impose religious sanctions on the state's inhabitants. Non-jurors, Sirota notes, influenced the social thought of post-1688

⁵⁸⁹ Watts's scheme also stood in contrast to contemporaries like Benjamin Hoadley and William Warburton, both of whom saw the necessity of a public Church for the purpose of providing religious sanctions enabling the State to control society. Warburton's type of comprehension was however, developed more as a mechanism for mitigating disorder brought about by dissent than for enabling truth-seeking and discernment over time. It was, therefore, a sort of unity without truth (William Warburton, *Alliance between Church and State; or, The Necessity and Equity of an Established Religion and a Test-law Demonstrated, from the Essence and End of Civil Society, upon the Fundamental Principles of the Law of Nature and Nations* (London: Printed for Fletcher Gyles, over against Grays-Inn in Holborn, 1736)).

⁵⁹⁰ Sirota, *The Christian Monitors*, 14.

Revolution high Churchmen, most centrally in how the former saw the Church of England as a “‘distinct society’ irreducible to either state or voluntary association.” Following the ecclesiological principles of non-jurists, Anglican high Churchmen sought “to restore the convocation and enact a comprehensive program of ecclesiastical reform as an alternative to Anglican voluntarism.”⁵⁹¹

Watts, then, was responding to a historical reality in which the Church’s divisions had fundamentally changed the arena within which discernment of the truth could take place and thereby the sort of limitation on teaching and practices that ensued. What we see in Watts’s argument are aspects of each type of comprehension in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, combined and transposed into a necessarily new social and ecclesiastical context.

Watts holds that it is by worship and formation in particular Churches (as opposed to an established state Church) that one finds the particularity of truth adequate to one’s belief and therefore conscience. But whereas Hooker anchors this formation by the Church in a framework of supernatural and natural law that includes adherence to a monarch as head of the Church, Watts would find this scandalous. He writes:

Never did the alwise God mingle Sacred and Civil Power throughout any national Government but that of the Jews, where he himself was both the Political and the Ecclesiastical Head, the God of the Church and the King of the State. Scarce are these Mixtures safe in any other Hand but his. When in later Ages some of their High Priests grew up to be Kings, and God their supreme King withdrew from them his divine Influences, what terrible Confusion, Barbarity, and Madness were sometimes found among them. And I might add, that such dangerous Mixtures as these in every Popish State or Government, where there is no Toleration nor Liberty allow’d to other Christians who would maintain the Purity of their Religion; these, I say, are the very Composition of the Feet and Toes of Nebuchadnezzar’s great Image in Dan ii which were made part of Potter’s Clay and part of Iron: And if the Dream of the Assyrian King be divine, or the

⁵⁹¹ Sirota, *The Christian Monitors*, 14.

Interpretation of the Jewish Prophet be true, these Toes and these Feet, wherein the Iron is mixed with miry Clay, wait only for the Stone cut out of the Mountain without hands to smite the huge Image upon its Feet and to break it to pieces....⁵⁹²

Watts seeks to show there is great folly in conflating Church and state in such a way that a nation might be considered a “Christian state,” where persons would be considered as “Members of the Civil State and of the Christian Church,” being governed by “Christian rulers, and by their Laws and Sanctions of Rewards and Penalties both in Things Sacred and Civil.”⁵⁹³ He indicates that where this has taken place in England and Europe under the headship of the pope, “what [is] derived from it [is the] frequent Usurpation of Civil Power in things Sacred, or of Ecclesiastical Power in Things Civil.” And what such usurpations lead to is “keep[ing] the Persons and Consciences of People in deep Bondage,” which “has produc’d infinite Confusion and Mischief both in Church and state, Inquisitions and bloody Persecutions, Blindness, Hypocrisy, and Superstition, Slavery of Souls and Bodies, and Fraud and Violence without end.”⁵⁹⁴

Watts’s type of comprehension does follow Chillingworth’s own on one point, as we saw just above: protecting the capacity of an individual, guided (not coerced) by the teaching of a Church, to seek God as per his capabilities. Chillingworth does not develop what he means by, or how to implement and balance the freedom of Scriptural interpretation, with establishing and adhering to the Church’s common life. Presumably, and even too with Wilkins’s own presumptions, the Church would still have had to rely

⁵⁹² Watts, *A New Essay on Civil Power*, 109.

⁵⁹³ Watts, *A New Essay on Civil Power*, 107.

⁵⁹⁴ Watts, *A New Essay on Civil Power*, 108; He did, however, see Britain as a “Christian nation”, analogous to Israel in the OT. His translations of the Psalms bear this out very clearly. So the issue is not whether Britain should be considered a generally Christian (and elect), nation, but how laws function and are enforced within it.

upon the state to implement and enforce conformance of outward acts to those things that preserved common life. Watts departs from Chillingworth and Wilkins here, however, when he writes, "... for since the Authority of the Civil Power reaches only to the common Welfare and Safety of the State and People, the sworn Obedience of Subjects can be requir'd only in things that relate to the welfare of the People and the State." He goes on to argue that "in the original Compact between government and the Governed, the Governed do not consent to part with any Liberties of Human Nature," but again, only for the purpose of securing the peace of the state. Therefore the state is not to intrude into the affairs of "Labor or Study, in Trade or Recreations," or even in the private affairs of families.⁵⁹⁵ So if people did not give up their rights in these affairs to their rulers, so, "[a person] knows not what divine or human Reason they can have to claim this Right in religious Societies or in Churches."⁵⁹⁶

Watts departs from all four arguments for comprehension provided by Erasmus, Hooker, Chillingworth, and Wilkins. Seventeenth-century thinkers certainly appropriated aspects of Hooker's intricate and systematic framework of law. Yet even by the time of Chillingworth's 1638 publication of *The Religion of Protestants*, the relationship between Church parties and the "state" of England had shifted, so that attempts to enforce conformance to a monarch as head of the Church of England would soon after his writing, bring not peace and order, but war. Thus for Watts, even if undergirded by natural and positive laws, the practical outcome of an interwoven relationship between

⁵⁹⁵ Watts, *A New Essay on Civil Power*, 101.

⁵⁹⁶ Watts, *A New Essay on Civil Power*, 102.

Church and state never manifested itself in a way that preserved persons not simply in conscience, but from coercion, violence, and blindness to the truth.

Watts's concern with an unimpeded civil space for diverse religious practice was, however, informed by an epistemic sensibility quite at odds with that lying behind even the broadened parameters of Chillingworth and Wilkins. Indeed, it was Watts's trust in and reliance upon epistemic *certainty*, particularly that given in Scripture, that founded his arguments for a de-Christianized civil space permitting religious diversity.

Natural religion or civil religion, Watts argued, would enable a social environment where persons could be opened – since their basic needs of protection, safety, and security were met – to God's revelatory grace received in one of two ways. Here I follow the recent and comprehensive work on Watts by Graham Beynon in *Isaac Watts: Reason, Passion and the Revival of Religion*. The first opening to grace Watts's argues occurred through the testimony or reasoning of other human beings. This could provide a person with moral certainty. Here one might encounter the need to discern customs or practices pertaining to the social life of Christians (narratives, relations, reports, historical observations)⁵⁹⁷ that aren't spoken of explicitly in Scripture. Watts writes: "what man only acquaints us with, produces a human faith in us ... [and] being built upon the word of man, [it] arises but to moral certainty."⁵⁹⁸ The second involved God's revelation to people, which provided the evidence of divine faith. Because it is "founded on the word of God, [it] arises to an absolute and infallible assurance, so far as

⁵⁹⁷ Watts, *Logic or the Right Use of Reason in the Inquiry After Truth*, (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2007), 146

⁵⁹⁸ Watts, *Logic or the Right Use of Reason in the Inquiry After Truth*, 145

we understand the meaning of this word. This is called supernatural certainty.”⁵⁹⁹ It is just this achievement of such certainty that Watts wanted the state to make possible through its umbrella protection of Christian denominations.

Watts’s maintained with Chillingworth and Wilkins (the latter especially) that because nature is God’s, reason can and in fact must lead one to discover revelation.⁶⁰⁰ Watts, however, believed that the New Testament Scriptures provided revelation that rose above human capacity to reason. Examples of this include the incarnation and the Trinity.⁶⁰¹ Revelation is the sole location wherein the incarnate Son is revealed as God and savior. For Watts then, the capacity to interpret the particularities of Scripture was necessary to ensure access to direction not just on matters necessary for salvation, but also for moral response to God and neighbor. And although active response is not itself salvific, it is unthinkable that one would not respond to the clarity of revelation: “the revelation of God in an illustrious manner supplies the deficiencies of our reason, and enlightens our natural darkness in the knowledge of divine things.”⁶⁰²

Put another way, one’s direct encounter with God revealed in Christ in Scripture was superior in discerning the truth than any external evidence requiring reason: “Reason

⁵⁹⁹ Watts, *Logic or the Right Use of Reason in the Inquiry After Truth*, 145-6.

⁶⁰⁰ Watts, *The improvement of the mind: or A supplement to The art of logic. In two parts*,” (Exeter, NH: J. Lamson, and T. Odiorne, for David West, 1793), 15; Watts also notes that for the testimony of someone to be convincing, it must have some “antecedent or consequent” evidence – i.e., prophecies or miracles (Watts, “Evangelical Discourses,” *Works*, 2, 69, cited in Beynon, *Isaac Watts: Reason, Passion and the Revival of Religion*, 39). In one sense then, Watts presses the notion that the most assurance one can have is derived from one’s own subjective interpretation of Scripture, which he refers to as “direct inspiration” (see Beynon, *Isaac Watts: Reason, Passion and the Revival of Religion*, 39).

⁶⁰¹ See Watts, “Useful and Important Questions” in *Works*, Vol 6, 709, cited in Beynon, *Isaac Watts: Reason, Passion and the Revival of Religion*, 44).

⁶⁰² Watts, “Ruin and Recovery,” *Works*, 6, 180, cited in Beynon, *Isaac Watts: Reason, Passion and the Revival of Religion*, 46.

could scarce sustain to see 'Th' almighty One, the eternal Three, Or bear the infant deity; Scarce could her pride descend to own, Her maker stooping from his throne, And drest in glories so unknown, A ransom'd world, a bleeding God, And heav'n appears'd with flowing blood, Were themes too painful to be understood."⁶⁰³ With disordered passions mitigated by the laws developed through a civil religion, individuals in particular Churches would be able to teach the particularity of the Scriptures in accordance with their particular interpretations and doctrines, without threat or interference from other Churches, other Church parties, or from the state.⁶⁰⁴

The seventeenth-century types of comprehension we examined were pragmatic responses to the breakdown in social and ecclesiastical unity in providing common space for corporate religious discernment. As society fragmented over religious dispute grounded in claims to certainty, the capacity for Christians to come together for discernment was increasingly shifted from physical structures girded by positive laws to a cognitive referential framework. Finally, with Watts we see civil religion become the opposite of what Chillingworth had envisioned: now it appears as a common space ordered for the protection not of comprehension, but of fragmented groups all asserting their own particular notions of certainty (only one or a few of which will in fact be correct). Indeed, Watts's type of comprehension was constructed to protect the space for an assortment of societies and Churches, to learn and teach very particular truths about their respective understandings of truth. Watts still recognized the need for using

⁶⁰³ Watts, *Horae Luricae: Poems Chiefly of the Lyric Kind in Three Books*, (Haverhill: Printed by Galen H. Fay, for Angier March, Bookseller, Newburyport, 1902), 185.

⁶⁰⁴ Of course, nothing guarantees that individual churches will do this. Some will be wrong; others right and divinely guided. But Watts does not try to describe criteria by which one could distinguish the true churches from the false ones. That is God's business. In this, Watts is not entirely different in his proposals from Hooker, Chillingworth and Wilkins.

epistemic probability of a kind similar to Locke's in moral matters, particularly in evaluating the credibility of witnesses.⁶⁰⁵ His operative premise, however, was distinct from all four of the theologians we have examined.

His belief that revelation was clear and convicting even for determining how to act toward God and neighbor sets him apart from our first four thinkers. Watts's double conviction that Scripture was perspicuous, and that God acted directly in people's lives pressed him to argue for unfettered access to scriptural particulars through concrete Church teaching and practice. This was a type of comprehension distinct from ones that "widened" the arena within which discernment took place. It was based on a return to the presumption that Scripture alone ought to be the sole origin of and test of evidence for Christian truth. This testing required that scriptural interpretation not be "watered down" by conformance to a unified state and Church (as Erasmus and Hooker argued), nor to a comprehensive but theologically watered-down Church (as Chillingworth and Wilkins sought), or to nature, or broad philosophical maxims, or even to experience. Truth came from God's revelation in Scripture, particularly the New Testament. All of our thinkers would likely affirm this. However, for Watts, pursuit of the truth was hampered by interference by other Churches or by the state and so individual, non-conformist Churches needed the freedom and protection to teach their understanding of scriptural particulars. It was not the case, for Watts, that diverse groups needed to be brought together in a common arena of discernment; rather, they needed to be protected from one another.

⁶⁰⁵ See Locke, *Essay*, IX.xvi, cited in Beynon, *Reason, Passion and the Revival of Religion*, 39.

Maclear argues that Watts's type of comprehension served as a model for both English and American religion in the eighteenth century. Benjamin Franklin took up Watts's conviction that "the services of religion considered indispensable for a wholesome society" could be secured, "while at the same time vindicating the 'gathered Church' as a dedicated community of saints."⁶⁰⁶ Watts attempted to maintain traditional aspects of Christianity – the primacy of scriptural revelation, reason informed by grace sustaining perseverance in the faith, the distorting effects of sin, the role of the Church as the body within which Christian truth is discerned – while also accounting for the reality of division manifest in Christian persons not governed together or meeting together in communion. The solution Watts offered was not prompted, Maclear argues, "by any devitalization of traditional Christianity but by tensions between the confessional Anglican state and the unprecedented religious pluralism which agitated post-Restoration England."⁶⁰⁷ Instead, Watts argued for a way to use the tensions created by the proliferation of religious societies not to tear down but to renew and revitalize the faith of individuals and of the nation. Maclear writes, "Accordingly, 'public religion,' at least in Anglo-American culture, may owe its inception in part to the progress of thought in Congregational Dissent."

Unfortunately, Watts's argument for protecting common space for religious groups has contributed socially to a Western society where crude polarizations in politics, religion, social, and moral practices have become the normative way of engaging one

⁶⁰⁶ Maclear, "Isaac Watts and the Idea of Public Religion," 26

⁶⁰⁷ Maclear, "Isaac Watts and the Idea of Public Religion," 26.

another.⁶⁰⁸ Watts's vision at least indirectly seems to serve as a precursor framework for the development of contemporary liberal (and now not just Anglo-American liberal) religious society: *no one knows how to or wants to know how to discern the truth of God together*. Instead, each religious group pursues its own quite 'certain' convictions in isolation.

In a sense, civil society is now invested solely in preserving a space for various claims/attempts by individual Churches to get back to "absolute scriptural certainty." Neither the civil nor the ecclesial spheres are any longer spaces for specifically *religious* discernment. Religiously denuded public space links up with multiple nodes of absolute truth. Watts's form of comprehension – which is mostly that of the liberal state – actually *banishes* the practice and the virtues of common religious discernment of the truth. His legacy is that of modern American individualism:⁶⁰⁹ each person, freely choosing to

⁶⁰⁸ For a general religious-sociological perspective, see Wade Clark Roof and William McKinney, *American Mainline Religion: Its Changing Shape and Future* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1987). Roof and McKinney examine shifts in voluntarist religious commitments in America and how these have shaped the political, economic, legal, and social factors that gird American life. It is the issue of voluntarism that is most interesting here. Voluntarism, in theological terms, contends that faith or belief in God is foremost in the agency of a person's will. This is opposed to pre-early modern understandings of the faith as an *a priori* gift from God bestowed upon a person. Since voluntarism involves specific empirically based assertions and commitments to a given set of doctrines, pursued by will rather than received as gift, the result has tended to an evolution of competing religious groups whose members, as part of American society, give shape to the economic and therefore moral, legal and social life of the country. Roof and McKinney trace the evolution of, tearing down, redefining of, and shifts in moral and social culture tied to competing religious and Christian groups. For a theological framework for my conclusion, see Ephraim Radner, *A Brutal Unity: The Spiritual Politics of the Christian Church* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012). Radner examines how Christian divisions, particularly between Roman Catholics and Protestants, have exacerbated political, social, and ethnic tensions, and contributed to moral atrocities.

⁶⁰⁹ American individualism was *not* the immediate outcome of Watts's arguments. It is not until the late twentieth century that we begin to see this sort of individualism arise. See Barry Alan Shain, *The Myth of American Individualism: The Protestant Origins of American Political Thought* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994). Shain is right to insist that individualism in its modern, secular form does not arise until the twentieth century in America, and he is right that Americans were largely communitarian within local pockets. This is a helpful corrective to historians who presume the Enlightenment immediately brought with it individualism. However, the form of civil protection for individual nodes of claimants to individual truth could not but eventually collapse any common space for corporate religious discernment. It

which Church they might belong, can define the limits of truth, the limits of the authority she will obey, and the framework of evaluating evidence – whether scriptural or natural – one will use for determining the truth. This in turn provides each person with self-derived “assurance,” so long as, in keeping with Watts’s argument, they do not impinge upon anyone else’s capacity to do the same. We are left at present with radical choice insistent on self-derived assertions of certainty shorn of common discernment, to such an extent that we can no longer find common ground to discern what might inhibit or harm one another in the pursuit of truth. These kinds of observations are now themselves established as central topics of theological debate.⁶¹⁰

The types of comprehension in the work of Erasmus, Hooker, Chillingworth, and Wilkins had this in common: they all sought common ground for corporate discernment of religious truth. For each of them, in different ways, sustaining the structural and/or relational mechanisms that undergird that common space required limitation on the practices or articulations of the faith. On the one hand, this meant that while there was more freedom in holding different beliefs, one’s practices or attendance had to conform to a given common body: the Church and its explicitly defined common life often embedded in some framework of laws. This premise of consent to the common body proved difficult to sustain where divided Churches clashed with one another over the

is this initial movement, combined with pluralism and eventually globalism, which helped move us to the current state of individualism prevalent in the United States.

⁶¹⁰ For philosophical reflections on this, see Alisdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, (Notre Dame, IN, University of Notre Dame Press, 3rd Edition, 2007); *Whose Justice? Which Rationality* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988); *Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry* (Notre Dame, IN: The Gifford Lectures, University of Notre Dame Press, 1990). For theological reflections on this, see Ephraim Radner, *End of the Church: A Pneumatology of Christian Division in the West*; Stanley Hauerwas, *Naming the Silence: God, Medicine and the Problem of Suffering* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990); *After Christendom: How the Church Is to Behave If Freedom, Justice, and a Christian Nation Are Bad Ideas* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1991); *Theology Without Foundations: Religious Practice and the Future of Theological Truth*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994).

certainty of different beliefs and practices and therefore the legitimate authority any body had to compel or receive consent from believers. We saw this drive for epistemic certainty as a continuous thread in the debates between Luther and Erasmus, all the way through to Watts's assertion that Scripture provides this epistemic certainty in scriptural interpretation. Watts's formulation of local nodes of truth – all protected by a civic commitment to preserving the peace and order of the land – provided a basis for the late twentieth-century individualism prevalent in the United States today. The difficulty with this mode of religious life is blindness to one's own propensity to sin. Further, one is shaped by that sin without the challenge or opportunity for correction that is implicit in having to live with and discern the faith together with other people.

By and large, the work of Erasmus, Hooker, Chillingworth, and Wilkins, represents general outlooks that have characterized Anglicanism's modes of truth-discernment more broadly through to the present. Watts's proposal, arising out of a similar context as his seventeenth-century Church of England forebears studied here, nonetheless stands in sharp contrast to their hopes. And it was Watts's vision that ultimately prevailed in the liberal states which evolved in Britain and North America. Nonetheless, that vision has now itself reached an impasse of political stalemate and emerging new conflict. Perhaps, then, it is time to reconsider the concerns and responses of these earlier Anglican thinkers.

Present Day Anglican Alternatives

Anglicanism itself offers some alternatives to this difficult impasse, although they are ones yet to be concretized. For example, as briefly examined in the Introduction, the

last decade has been one of intensive debate over matters of sexual ethics within the Anglican Communion. Most recently, the Anglican Covenant Agreement, now half a decade old, brought to the fore some of the following conflicting understandings of decision-making:⁶¹¹ the degree of autonomy each member Province (typically a country), had to revise and define its worship, ministry and moral practices (particularly in rites of same sex blessing and marriage); the theological justification for, and origin of authority in, limiting the exercise of Provincial autonomy; and finally, the consequences for violating common agreements. While several Provinces have signed the Covenant Agreement, those in the midst of contentious dispute – many Churches in the Global South and the Episcopal Church in the United States, the Church of England itself – did not. The central proposal of the Covenant itself, however, seemed to offer a genuine effort at moving forward. It sought to once again make explicit the theological and concrete relational basis for the common space for corporate discernment. Like our sixteenth and seventeenth century Anglican thinkers, the Covenant Agreement makes explicit what has traditionally been agreed to in ordering the Common life of the Communion's Churches. However, its authority is not defined by nor does it rest on positive, enforceable laws, since these simply have no force in the twenty-first century. Rather the Covenant's authority is dependent upon willing mutual deference to acting in a way that is consistent with the decisions made by the gathered Anglican Churches on matters of the faith affecting all, that is to say, consistent with life in an ordered arena of common discernment.

⁶¹¹ Anglican Covenant Agreement (Ridley Draft [final], 2009).
http://www.anglicancommunion.org/media/100850/ridley_cambridge_covenant_english.pdf. (Accessed October 17, 2018)

The theological arguments contained within the Covenant Agreement text recognize the Scripturally and pragmatically problematic figure of ecclesiastical division where “everyone does what is right in their own eyes.”⁶¹² Some Anglican thinkers have provided theological arguments for this figural relationship between Israel and the Church at present, and have also proposed solutions that press to restore some form of corporate religious discernment of the truth.⁶¹³ Other theologians have pursued parallel arguments, e.g. that like Israel, the Church is now in a type of exile, turned over to the nations in each of the countries it exists in the West (and in general a modern Western secular moralism). Analyzing this kind of ecclesiastical situation in the wider providential terms offered in these proposals presses ecclesiological practice beyond the now exhausted forms of the Wattsonian liberal paradigm.⁶¹⁴ Whatever their ultimate usefulness, these proposals intriguingly seek to get beyond the dead end of discernment depicted in this thesis’ broad conclusions. They deserve careful scrutiny and active engagement, for what is clear is that a dead end it has proven to be.

⁶¹² Judges 21:25, NRSV

⁶¹³ See in particular Ephraim Radner, *End of the Church: A Pneumatology of Christian Division in the West*; cf. Ephraim Radner, “Conclusion: The World is Waiting for Holiness,” in *The Fate of the Communion: The Agony of Anglicanism and the Future of a Global Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006).

⁶¹⁴ Luke Bretherton, *Christianity and Contemporary Politics: The Conditions and Possibilities of Faithful Witness* (New Jersey: Wiley-Blackwell Publishers, 2009); Rod Dreher, *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation* (New York, NY: Penguin Random House, 2017).

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