

Anglican Spirituality

Monastic Roots



Nicholas Lossky writes that “the ultimate objective of the spiritual life [is] union with God”. One’s *spirituality*, therefore, is the means by which that union is sought and nurtured. The Spiritual life in the Anglican Communion has its roots in the Ancient and Medieval Christian Church in England. Robert Munday has pointed out, “the people of the British Isles were unique among the peoples of western Europe in having an expression of

Christianity not in direct relationship to Rome until the seventh century.” Thus “Celtic” Christianity with its tradition of missionary monk-bishops has had a lasting influence. St. Patrick of Ireland, St. Columba of Iona and St. Aidan of Lindisfarne are some of the great names associated with this ancient expression of the faith. The monastic tradition as a foundation for English Spirituality was reinforced by the increasing Roman influence on the English Church—both Pope Gregory the Great who founded the Roman mission in England and St. Augustine of Canterbury (his missionary - 596 A.D.) were themselves Benedictine Monks.

While monasticism in the rest of Europe was a fringe movement overlaid on a pre-existing church structure, in England it *was* the structure. The Chapter of the Cathedral at Canterbury remained Benedictine for nearly 1,000 years. This has left a distinctive monastic stamp on Anglican Spirituality today. The Benedictine rule called for a balance of work, study and prayer during the waking hours—the focus of which was the Divine Office (a pre-cursor to our Prayer Book).

Via Media

Martin Thornton has pointed out that “Christian spirituality in general is apt to veer towards either a cold and formal intellectualism on the one hand or to an undisciplined emotionalism on the other; toward a theological straitjacket for the spirit or towards sentimentality divorced from doctrine.” In the Anglican Church, spirituality and theology are closely linked. And as with the latter discipline, Anglican spirituality has been characterized by balance and moderation. There has always been an emphasis on scholarly discipline, but not so much as to disregard the affective side of religion. Anglican priest-poets such as John Donne and George Herbert have touched the hearts of many throughout the centuries. John Wesley, the primary figure of the 18th century

Evangelical revival in England spoke about his conversion experience saying: “I felt my heart strangely warmed.”

God in all Creation

Following in their Celtic roots, Anglicans have celebrated God in all his creation. You see this in the Prayer Book Cantic *Benedicite omnia opera Domini* (2019 BCP p. 87) taken from the Apocryphal *Song of the Three Young Men*. It is also apparent in the love Anglicans have for the example and prayers of St. Francis of Assisi as exemplified in the hymn *All creatures of our God and King* (The Book of Common Praise 2017 #372).



God in Literature and the Arts

It is nearly impossible to talk about a distinctly Anglican spirituality without speaking of the language and fine arts. The English language and spirit (in fact all of English-speaking Christendom) is profoundly indebted to the two greatest contributions of the English Church—the *King James Bible* (1611) and the *Book of Common Prayer* (1549). The Bible and Prayer Book are both testimonies to the “close links which have existed between poetry and faith, literature and religion in the last four centuries of the Anglican tradition” (A.M. Allchin). Such poets as Donne, Herbert and T.S. Elliot; writers like C. S. Lewis, Dorothy Sayers, Evelyn Underhill and Charles Williams are an inescapable part of the Anglican spiritual ethos.



An additional hallmark of Anglican spirituality is the great tradition of English Cathedral music. Richard Hooker praised the role of music in worship when he wrote: “More than the other arts, it has the faculty to integrate contemplative reason and sensory perception; it is harmony and proportion, it speaks to the highest part of the soul, evoking the divine perfection; but first of all it speaks to man’s inferior faculties and makes use of their power.”

FOUR STRANDS OF ANGLICAN SPIRITUALITY

Within the agreed-upon standards of the Bible, Prayer Book, 39 Articles and (later) Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral, a variety of spiritual expressions have been practiced in our Communion. People are often only familiar with the practice of their own parish when concluding what is “properly” Anglican; however, it is incorrect to label one over the others as *the* correct form of spirituality for an Anglican (or a Christian). All of the

below can and have been practiced in traditional, orthodox and faithful Anglican congregations throughout the world.

Prayer Book

The 17th century has been described as the “golden age” of Anglicanism. The leading churchmen of the period, collectively known as the “Caroline Divines” aimed for a balanced devotion of “true piety with sound learning.” The place of the Prayer Book in their spiritual life is emphasized by Martin Thornton:

‘Bible and Prayer Book’ were the twin pillars of Caroline spirituality, with the latter given almost equal status, and subjected to the same kind of systematic study as the former.... The Prayer Book is not a list of church services but a foundation for Christian living in all of its minutiae. To the seventeenth-century layman the Prayer Book was not a shiny volume to be borrowed from a shelf on entering the church and carefully replaced on leaving. It was a beloved and battered personal possession, a lifelong companion and guide, to be carried from church to kitchen, to living room to bedside table.

Evangelical

Bible reading and prayer were the hallmarks of the 18th century Evangelical revival in England and America. The Rev. Henry Venn advised his daughter: “Rise always by seven. Be sure that you do not omit prayer; and strive to pray in earnest, that you may be of a meek and humble spirit.” Charles Simeon reportedly rose at *four* a.m. each day in order to devote *four* hours to prayer. One scholar noted that “if [Simeon] overslept he fined himself a guinea which he threw in the Cam; this he had to do only once.” John Newton, author of *Amazing Grace* wrote “Secret prayer, and the good word, are the chief wells from whence we draw the water of salvation.”

The emphasis on the Bible and prayer (personal, family and corporate) was not to the exclusion of the Prayer Book for Anglican Evangelicals. In fact, a group of enthusiasts were so methodical in their use of the Prayer Book services and devotion to good works that they came to be called Methodists.

Anglo-Catholic

Whenever the Church neglects one aspect of Christian truth, the Holy Spirit raises up leaders to restore the balance. The 19th century brought a movement led by men raised on the Prayer Book and taught by leading Evangelicals who, in their study of the ancient

Christian Fathers, felt the full depth of the Christian spiritual tradition had been lacking in contemporary Anglican practice—thus the advent of the Oxford or Anglo-Catholic movement in the Church of England and America.

Their spiritual emphasis included the return of the Holy Communion service as the central act of worship in the Christian Church, a devotion to Christ in the sacraments, and worship which utilized all five of the human senses (e.g. color in vestments, incense, etc...). The services we're accustomed to during Holy Week are part of the lasting influence of this tradition on our forms of worship as well as the fact that we offer Holy Communion each Sunday. A fair amount of our beloved musical tradition can be traced to the Anglo-Catholic movement as well, such as the 25 hymns authored or translated by John Mason Neale in our 2017 Hymnal (e.g. *All glory, laud, and honor*).

Charismatic

The 20th century brought the return of a Biblical form of spirituality long lost to the Church. In a broad sense, to be *Charismatic* is simply to be touched by God's grace (Greek: *charis* = grace). More commonly, the term refers to one for whom the *charismata* or "gifts of the Spirit" enumerated by St. Paul in I Corinthians 12 and Romans 12 are part of their spirituality. While misunderstood and actively opposed in some Christian circles today, this was the *expected* practice of new believers in Biblical times. A pioneering leader re-introducing this form of spirituality in the mainline denominations in the 1960's-80's was the Episcopal priest Fr. Dennis Bennett. A foundational belief of this form of spirituality is that God's power is as available to believers today as in New Testament times.

An Anglican Synthesis

Most Anglicans, whether consciously or not, owe a debt to some combination of the above spiritualities. Some would say "I'm a Prayer Book Anglican"; others "a Prayer Book Catholic" or "Evangelical Catholic"; perhaps an "Evangelical Anglican" or "Charismatic Evangelical". It's even possible to be a "Prayer Book Evangelical Anglo-Catholic Charismatic." Any parish that does not include in its life the full diversity of spiritual expressions in our heritage is handicapping itself spiritually and cutting itself off from the fullness of what God has available for them—traditional church order and doctrine; love for the Bible and a zeal for the salvation of all; respect for the fullness of the historical tradition and the sacraments; and a belief in the present and available power of God for our lives today. Sadly, due to pride, fear and naiveté, it is only the rarest and most special of congregations that are blessed with the ability to balance these well.