

Thinking theologically: Bible, tradition, reason and experience

[Savi Hensman](#) [1]

Abstract

The way Christians dispute and decide among themselves can be confusing for insiders and outsiders alike. The relative value, importance and emphasis on the Bible, tradition, reason and experience is often not perceived with any clarity, and terms like ‘liberal’, ‘literalist’ and ‘traditionalist’ are thrown around in the religious and secular media in a fairly cavalier fashion – often more to win arguments than shed light. In this essay, Savitri Hensman explores, through three straightforward examples, the actual way human beings appeal to text, to history, to rational thought and to their personal apprehensions. She demonstrates that trying to behave as if they were wholly independent is unfeasible as well as undesirable. Hensman also shows that the valid interpretation and application of Scripture in the life and ethics of the Christian community requires a willingness to listen and learn widely, and a shared commitment to a Gospel of loving transformation realised in the flesh, not in texts and arguments alone.

Sometimes Christians get caught up over the relative importance of the Bible, tradition, reason and experience in the way they interpret themselves, the world and their understanding of God. Some define themselves as ‘Bible-believing’ Christians, or use terms like *sola scriptura* (Latin for ‘by Scripture alone’), while others regard themselves as ‘traditionalists’, or ‘liberals’ who put more store by reason and experience, respectively, discarding what seems irrational and outdated.

The media is keen to pigeon-hole with these labels, too, leading to some misleading or caricatured descriptions of what is at stake when Christians disagree – as, like any interpretative community, they frequently do.

However it is questionable whether it is possible, let alone desirable, to separate the effects of the Bible, tradition, reason and experience when grappling with theological questions and ethical issues.

It may be suspected that many who regard themselves as staunch Protestants or evangelicals, for whom Scripture is the sole authority, are more influenced by tradition and reason than they realise, and many who claim that tradition is their main guide – including many who call themselves ‘Catholic’ (whether recognised by the Vatican or not) – are guided largely by the Bible and reason as well as experience.

Meanwhile, those who believe that in their lives the Bible and tradition are far less central than the fruits of reason and experience, may in practice, be more ‘Bible-believing’ and ‘traditionalist’ than they think. But failure to recognise the subtle ways in which these factors overlap makes it harder to find common ground.

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Let us imagine three different scenarios to illustrate how this might work.

1. Acting rationally and heeding experience

Do you see yourself as a modern Christian, not too heavily weighed down by the baggage of the past, making rational and unprejudiced decisions, or as someone for whom experience is central? Then imagine that the vehicle in which you are travelling breaks down, and you are offered a lift by a passing driver in a large, comfortable, 'gas-guzzling' car. It turns out that he is a senior manager in an oil company with a dubious environmental record.

You do not want to be rude, but he himself raises the issue of the environment. He cheerfully tells you that widespread alarm about oil spills and global warming is exaggerated: apparently his firm has commissioned a report by some scientists which shows this. He also explains that there are few experiences he finds as wonderful as driving at high speeds in his car with the window open, the breeze on his face. Noticing that you are looking slightly alarmed, he reassures you that he is a very good driver and has never had a crash.

Life is good and sometimes, he tells you, he thanks God that he has been born into an age of such progress and prosperity, and in which he can enjoy innocent pleasures like driving his fine car.

Now, to someone more objective than he is (whether or not complete objectivity is possible to achieve), it may well be apparent that the warnings from many sources about the impact of pollution and excessive fuel use deserve to be taken seriously. But how likely is he to admit this even to himself, given the twin forces of self-interest and peer reinforcement of questionable beliefs?

Likewise even if the regular practice of walking through an unpolluted countryside, attentive to the singing birds and fluttering butterflies, might turn out to be even more enjoyable than driving fast in an energy-inefficient car, how likely do you think he is to try?

Reason and experience are indeed important. But humans are often less rational than we think, and the ways in which we approach and interpret experience are likewise shaded by a variety of factors of which we may sometimes be barely (if at all) aware.

Even if we are conscious of the influences on us, helpful as this is, it may not be enough for us to be confident that our judgement is right. For instance, if someone you liked very much were to be accused of a serious crime, could you be wholly objective about the evidence?

2. Faithfully obeying Scripture

Do you see yourself as a 'Bible-believing' Christian, mistrustful of any influences other than Scripture? The Bible is indeed hugely important – otherwise how would we even know of Christ, or have language in which to thank the Creator and seek the Holy Spirit's guidance? Yet faithfulness to Scripture is rather more complicated than it might at first seem.

Imagine that you find yourself on a plane and the passenger next to you looks familiar. You realise with a shock that you have seen him on the news, a notorious warlord known for kidnapping children and sending them into battle, and seizing girls to serve as sex-slaves to his troops.

He notices your reactions with some amusement, and starts to talk to you. He explains that he is a devout Christian, and was inspired to recruit child-soldiers after reading the story of David and Goliath (1 Samuel 17.1-54). Similarly, his massacres in the villages he conquered were prompted by the punishment of the Amalekites (1 Samuel 15.1) and the inhabitants of Jericho (Joshua 6.21) in what Christians call the Old Testament.

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According to him, girls are taken from their homes to service his soldiers because, in Deuteronomy 22.28, it states that if a virgin not pledged in marriage is raped, her rapist is required to marry her and never send her back to her family, though of course he can have sex with other women too, in accordance with God's law. Those leading worship in his army, however, must have no more than one wife (1 Timothy 3.2, 12, Titus 1.6).

Though you challenge his interpretation, he is supremely confident that he is doing God's will, in accord with the 'plain meaning' of the Bible, which indeed he frequently quotes. Though some think him harsh, he sees himself as a 'soldier of Christ' (2 Timothy 2.3) in a time of turmoil, sent to rule with a rod of iron, as when earthen pots are broken in pieces (Revelation 2.27). How likely are you to be able to persuade him to rethink his views if this would mean re-examining his life, giving up the power he wields and coming to terms with the harm he has caused?

Such a version of Christianity would of course be strikingly at odds with the Gospel call to love one's neighbour, even one's 'enemy', and be a peacemaker. But, through the centuries, the Bible has often been quoted to justify various kinds of cruelty and violence. For example, a sizeable number of people believed that to oppose apartheid was to rebel against God's will revealed in Scripture. Even today, those claiming to follow Scripture obediently, indeed literally, often disagree with one another, each convinced that their own interpretation is the God-given truth.

This illustrates, incidentally, that interpretation is unavoidable. It is not a 'liberal' invention, just as the text it reflects on is not a 'conservative' one. There is no unmediated way between text and context, and much in the Bible that is plainly not 'literal' (another much-abused term).

Being faithful to Scripture in a meaningful sense is very different to the use of texts for self-justification or offence, and not always straightforward. It is all too easy to read the Bible through the filter of self-interest or one's preconceived ideas, or those of one's community or peer group, misinterpret, or give priority to what is less important.

This is not a new concept: indeed it is found in the Bible. The prophet Isaiah writes of God's frustration with those who obey the detailed instructions of Scripture about religious observance (e.g. Numbers 28-29) yet fail to do justice and show mercy (Isaiah 1.11-17). Satan ('the Deceiver') quotes Scripture at Jesus in an attempt to undermine his mission (e.g. Matthew 4.1-11), and he faces hostility from religious leaders who believe he is undermining scriptural observance (Matthew 12.1-14). Paul's epistles emphasise that Christianity is not a legalistic faith: instead, love is the fulfilment of the law (Romans 13.8-10; Galatians 5.1-14).

Many learned volumes and academic papers have been written about how to approach the Bible in a way that increases the chances of discerning God's will. But there are also works on this subject that are scholarly yet accessible to the general reader.

Examples include *Struggling with Scripture*, a short book by Walter Brueggemann, William C. Placher and Brian K Blount, published by Westminster/John Knox Press in 2002, and an even shorter booklet by Brenda Watson, *Towards Sound Interpretation of Scripture*, published by Aureus in 2003. As Watson puts it, "Can any of us – Catholic, Orthodox or Protestant, traditionalist or radical, liberal or evangelical, or by whatever label we wish to be known – claim to have a God-like understanding which rules out the possibility for further correction or enlightenment?"

3. Following tradition

Tradition is very important: almost every Christian learns about their faith through the witness of others in present and past generations, part of a church in which beliefs and practices are shared. Yet this too is not straightforward.

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Do you see yourself as a ‘traditionalist’? Then imagine you hear that a state governor in another country will be taking part in an online debate about a controversial policy he wants to introduce, with the encouragement of the denomination to which he belongs. This church has held fast to the view that religion should play a prominent role in the civic sphere. He is trying to prohibit those who are not ‘proper’ Christians from being awarded degrees by, or teaching at, any university in his state.

He argues that, since the earliest times, Christians have sought to penalise those they regard as heretics, to protect the faithful from wrong beliefs and encourage those in error to return to the truth. According to him, this is an important part of church tradition and it is only in the modern era, supposedly in response to secularist ideas which play down the importance of religious belief, that many churches have abandoned their heritage.

The penalties he is proposing are quite mild, he points out, considering that numerous people in history were imprisoned or even killed for heresy. As recently as 1871, all academics and students at Oxford and Cambridge universities had to be Anglicans; and even since then, many have held on to the belief that virtue and learning should not be separated.

You are concerned about the effects if this policy is adopted, not only on the students affected but also on Christianity’s image and relationships between Christians and their neighbours. But if you were to email or phone in a comment to the governor will he respond, however persuasive you were, do you think it likely that he would reconsider?

There is much that is precious in church tradition. Indeed the words of a ‘Church father’ or mediaeval nun may cast more light on some of today’s headlines than the spin-doctoring surrounding many politicians and corporations. But there are other aspects which are less admirable. Mistreatment of non-Christians and fellow-Christians with the ‘wrong’ beliefs has indeed been all too common in church history. Treatment of women as inferior, or even dangerous, is another example.

Thankfully, however, tradition continues to develop: the relationship between the church and God is living, and openness to change as well as appreciation of the past plays a part. Practices such as religious tolerance and carol concerts, which at one time might have seemed like extraordinary innovations, can become common. Likewise churches sometimes modify, or even abandon, doctrines on which they formerly insisted, or adopt beliefs which later become ‘traditional’.

What is more, tradition is often diverse, though official church histories do not always recognise this. For instance in Britain and beyond in pre-modern times, many Christians may have married by having their hands tied together or jumping over a broom with no clergy present; but this is probably rather different from most people’s notion of a ‘traditional Christian wedding’!

Hence ‘tradition’, by itself, cannot be a completely reliable guide to what is right. Nor is it the sole basis for doctrine (the codification of core Christian beliefs), which as Cardinal Newman set out, requires development and reception.

4. The interplay of Scripture, tradition, reason and experience

In reality, people do not rely entirely on Scripture, tradition, reason or experience alone to form their picture of God, the world, the church and themselves.

Even the most ardent ‘Bible-believing’ Christian is generally guided not only by the words on the page but also the powers of reason required to understand these and the tradition which helps to shape his or her assumptions. For instance, it is rare, perhaps unknown, for modern Christian men to seek to become, literally, eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 19.12). Instead, this is usually interpreted as a figure of speech, even by biblical literalists, though modern medicine would make such a procedure less risky than in ancient times!

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Certainly, many who condemn others for not being faithful enough to Scripture bypass Jesus' memorable saying that "it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God" (Matthew 19.24, Mark 10.25, Luke 18.25). It is far easier to condemn groups with lower social status or which are unlikely to make things uncomfortable for the church if they feel hurt or angry. Ironically, if more 'Bible-believers' were aware of the degree to which they (like others) interpreted the words they read, they might be more aware of the risk of failing to engage with challenging biblical truths.

Likewise, someone who puts more emphasis on 'tradition' or 'reason', while being a frequent churchgoer, may end up absorbing numerous biblical stories and other passages, which then enter their imagination and influence their reasoning, sometimes subconsciously. As well as Bible readings and psalms, some of the hymns they sing, the images on stained-glass windows, murals and altar-cloths and so forth may evoke biblical events or images. Indeed someone who goes to morning prayer or Mass practically every day on her way to work, as well as worshipping on Sundays, may end up familiar with more of the 'good book' than those unfortunate enough to go to churches where the preachers constantly refer to the Bible but almost always quote the same handful of texts!

In any case, tradition is often based heavily on the Bible, filtered through the lens of reason. And what seems reasonable may be affected by the experience of Christians past and present, whether written in the pages of the Bible, passed on in other ways or encountered in the attempt to be open to Christ in prayer, worship and everyday life.

Wider recognition of the diverse ways in which divine grace and wisdom may be nurtured would support faith and fellowship, helping to break down some of the barriers in the church. A biblical passage which jolts a reader into looking at an issue in a new way, an encounter which brings fresh insights, unexpected findings by scientists, an old hymn or prayer in a new context – in these and other ways, deeper understanding and spiritual growth can occur.

In this, Christians have much to learn from one another and indeed from other people of goodwill, and sometimes even from our fellow-creatures. A child's sometimes surprising way of looking at the world, an elderly person's rich store of memories, the fruits of a scholar's patient work, thoughts which occur in the midst of everyday routines, insights from different settings and reflecting different backgrounds and gifts – sharing such things can offer wonderful opportunities, and a chance to adjust what is unbalanced and correct what is wrong.

Scripture, tradition, reason and experience cannot always be separated, and none in itself is a failsafe guide to the truth regarding controversial matters. This may be worrying to those who like certainty or fear getting things wrong. Yet if more people who might classify themselves in different ways – 'evangelical' or 'liberal', 'Catholic', 'Orthodox', 'Anabaptist' or 'Protestant' – could share with and learn from one another, there would be a greater chance of discovering what God has done and is doing, and how we can better respond.

God is not, as some have believed, a kind of celestial sadistic schoolteacher, giving snippets of sometimes ambiguous information and then punishing pupils if they fail to give perfect answers. Far from it: God is wonderfully loving and patient, though also awe-inspiring and challenging, and the universe is full of pointers to the divine, which can appeal to and be grasped by people of every background and educational preference. We inevitably make mistakes, but with God's help and hopefully the support of other Christians and people of goodwill, we can fix these and move forward.

For Christians, in particular, 'the Word' that we seek in challenging times is not fixed in texts and thought alone, but shown to us in the flesh, in the incarnation of divine love and freedom in the life, person, work, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

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THE AUTHOR

© **Savitri Hensman** was born in Sri Lanka. She works in voluntary sector in health and social care and equalities in the UK, and is also a respected writer on Christianity, social justice and theological perspectives on religion and society. Savi is an Ekklesia associate.

Additional research on this paper by Simon Barrow.

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