
Letters to a Young Episcopalian: Authority

This letter is part of a series of fictional letters by Canon George Maxwell intended for Episcopalians young and old who wonder what it means to be faithful in the world today.

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Dear Anna,

Yes, you're right, I have talked a lot about experience. And, it is often difficult to determine whether we have interpreted our experiences of God accurately. In the church we rely on the authority of what we call the "three legged stool" of scripture, tradition, and reason.

We believe that the Scriptures – the Hebrew Scriptures, the New Testament, and the Apocrypha – reveal the nature of God by telling the story of the relationship between God and those people who have chosen God. If it's essential, then it's there – in those books.

Of course, every reading of scripture is an interpretation – whether we admit it or not. The original stories were first told in a time and place much different from our own, by people who engaged the world in a much different way than we do today. That's why Robin Williams includes "No snake handling" and "You can believe in dinosaurs" in his ten reasons to be an Episcopalian!

One thing remains the same, though. They struggled with the same tension between the God that they experienced and the condition of the world in which they lived that we do. We can learn a lot about how they believed, even if we can't always accept what they believed.

We have a particular way of going about trying to make sense of it all, which we call the Anglican tradition. It's more about being in relationship than getting things right. And, we think that it is more important to pray together than to all believe exactly the same things. That's why Robin Williams' list takes comfort in the observation, "No matter what you believe, there's bound to be at least one other Episcopalian who agrees with you."

We also value reason. Quoting Robin Williams again, "You don't have to check your brains at the door" to be an Episcopalian. But, you do have to use your whole brain. The logic of the left side of the brain isn't always enough. It's often the creativity of the right side of the brain that comes closest to conceiving the nature of God. That's why we pay so much attention to poetry, art, and music. And, that's why the shared experience of the liturgy is so important to us.

It's funny, really. Some people think that it's what they don't know that draws them into faith. My experience is that it's faith that draws me into what I don't know.

And, well ... I sure do miss Robin Williams.

Your affectionate uncle,
Ames

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