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How to be Good: Anglican Models of Moral Formation

Andy Griffiths is challenged by reading Nick Hornby's popular novel *How to be Good* into wondering what Anglicanism has to say about being good. He surveys a variety of contemporary views, which suggest that goodness comes from worshipping with other Christians, by thinking, or by reading Scripture. He explores the approach taken to moral formation by the seventeenth century Anglican bishop Jeremy Taylor, to suggest that goodness comes from the dynamic interrelationship between right appetites and formative actions.

Goodness is back in fashion. Nick Hornby's novel *How to be Good*¹, having briefly topped the British bestseller lists in hardback, is now touring Europe in various languages. It asks some searching questions: What is goodness? How can it be acquired? Do we want it badly enough, and if not how can we acquire a desire to be good? Why is 'knowing the right thing to do' not enough to make us good? And it asks them of a number of people, including contemporary Anglicans. Anglicanism comes out positively in some ways (the Vicar rightly points out the dangers of 'artificial goodness', which changes our actions but not our inclinations, and it is at church that Katie, the narrator, rediscovers 1 Cor. 13 which, without spoiling the ending for you, is the nearest thing to an answer the book has to offer). But in other ways the Church of England comes out rather badly. The Vicar is having a crisis of faith (why are Vicars in contemporary novels always having crises of faith?), and her answers sound to Katie too much like the liberalism she's already rejected:

God, why are you people so timid? It's no wonder the churches are empty, when you can't answer the simplest questions. Don't you get it? That's what we want. Answers. If we wanted woolly minded nonsense we'd stay at home. In our own heads.²

Moreover Katie's view of the church community can hardly be called positive. When she discovers that her brother, who is desperate for forgiveness, has started attending church,

1 Nick Hornby, *How to be Good*, Viking, London 2001.

2 Hornby, *How to be Good*, p 204.

my first reaction – and this says something about the state of contemporary Anglicanism, and also why I suspect my new-found enthusiasm for the Church is likely to be short-lived – is to feel terribly sad for him; I really hadn't known things were this desperate...

When we get outside I kiss Mark on the cheek and look at him quizzically.

"It's like bumping into someone at a brothel, isn't it?", he says... "I'm mortified you caught me."³

But the most significant reason why the church is not the answer to 'how can I be Good?' is the most damning – in the novel's view, it is simply not thinking about the question.

So this article, by someone both stung and stimulated by the book, is an attempt to see what Anglicanism really does say about being good. It does so in three sections; first I look at current thought on 'moral formation', both in the context of lay formation and of the training of priests, and then I look at the sources of Anglican theology (Scripture, creeds, and formularies), as well as what is to my knowledge the first systematic 'Anglican' work on the subject, Jeremy Taylor's *Via Intelligentiae*.⁴ In some rather meagre conclusions I reflect on what our tour of formations may have taught us with regard to our own practice of moral education, both in the parish and in the theological college.

How to be good I: a survey of contemporary views

i) We become good by worshipping with or being with other Christians.

One highly influential model of (mainly lay) formation is associated with the name of the American Episcopalian writer John H. Westerhoff III and often called the 'faith community approach'. Westerhoff uses the language of socialisation or (more frequently) enculturation, telling us that the dominant culture which surrounds us is going to socialise us into its consumerist mindset unless we do something about it. Our only hope is in entering an alternative community where the actions, rites and Story of the Christian community can impact us; this will occur mainly through liturgy. Formation will thus occur mainly as the gathered community of the baptised faithfully and attractively celebrates, especially in Eucharist, the Story that forms their identity.⁵

In the UK the most influential educationalist to hold much in common with Westerhoff is Jeff Astley, who describes himself as 'catholic (in that odd, Anglican sense of the term).' Where Westerhoff uses the rhetoric of socialisation, Astley speaks of the psychological effects of worship. These psychological effects may be of two kinds: subjective (which can be explained in sociological terms) and objective (in other words, real experiences of the intervention of the real God in worship). In either case, we are to forget ourselves in worship:

3 Hornby, *How to be Good*, p 190.

4 Jeremy Taylor, 'Via Intelligentiae' in Reginald Heber and Charles Page Eden, eds., *The Whole Works of the Right Rev.*

Jeremy Taylor, D.D., Vol. 8, Longman &c., London: 1861, pp. 359-392, hereafter referred to as *Via*.

5 Westerhoff, John H. III, 'Formation, Education, Instruction', *Religious Education* 82 (1987), pp 578-591.

Worship is arguably the most important medium of implicit Christian education. I would argue that worship should be viewed as an activity that both expresses certain religious attitudes, affections and experiences, and also tends to evoke them.⁶

Another 'collective' approach to formation, which I will call the mutual accountability group, is exemplified in a number of group-based courses such as *Emmaus*. Here, the participant (whether an 'enquirer' not affiliated to the church community or a Christian in the process of growing) is given a supplement to regular Sunday worship services in the form of a weekday group. 'There are things to learn, but nurture is about initiation into a way of life, not about gaining a body of information.' It is envisaged that it is being with and speaking with other group members that this 'initiation' (a religious term being used as an equivalent to Westerhoff's more sociological 'enculturation?') will occur – provided the group is open to be changed by one another.⁷ *Emmaus* is probably as close to a tradition of 'spiritual direction' as contemporary Anglicanism allows itself to get; the difference being that the 'Directors' are the whole group, not one individual.

A mutually accountable community 'attractively celebrating its Story' would be exactly what Katie has been fruitlessly looking for. What she finds is

the sparsity of the congregation, and its apparent lack of interest in anything or anyone... C of E heaven is an all probability a quarter-full of unhappy old ladies selling misshapen rock-cakes and scratched Mantovani records.⁸

ii) *We become good by thinking*

David H. Kelsey maintains that the most coherent case for Anglicanism's most pervasive model of formation is made by John Henry Newman in his *The Idea of a University*, first published in 1852. He argues that this is indeed a *paideia*, but it is a *paideia* of a remarkably rational type.⁹ For Newman, the aim of teaching in a university (and we should remember that it is relatively recently that Anglican clergy have been trained anywhere else), 'is simply the cultivation of the intellect, as such, and its object is nothing more or less than intellectual exercise.'¹⁰ '[Learning] is the action of a formative power, reducing to order and meaning all the matter of our

6 Jeff Astley, 'An alternative Christian Response' in John Shortt and Trevor Cooling, eds., *Agenda for Educational Change*, Apollos, Leicester 1997, p 241; —, 'The role of worship in Christian learning' in Jeff Astley, Leslie J. Francis and Colin Crowder, eds., *Theological Perspectives on Christian Education*, Gracewing Fowler Wright, Leominster 1996, pp 244-251.

7 Stephen Cottrell, Steve Croft, John Finney, Felicity Lawson, and Robert Warren, 'Growth: Christian Lifestyle', in *Emmaus: The Way of Faith*, The National Society/ Church House Publishing and The Bible Society, London and Swindon 1996, pp xi, 61.

8 Hornby, *How to be Good*, pp 186f.

9 David H. Kelsey, *Between Athens and Berlin*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans 1993, pp 29-31. See also Mark D. Chapman, 'Scripture, Tradition and Criticism: A Brief Proposal for Theological Education', *Anglican Theological Review* 78, 2 (1996), pp 258-274.

10 John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University*, Longmans, Green and Co., New York 1899, p 121. John Henry Newman would be a strange person indeed to claim as a paradigmatic Anglican; my claim is simply that the sort of thinking this book exemplifies remains extremely influential in Anglican thought.

acquirements.¹¹ As Kelsey rightly points out, intellectual excellence for Newman is analogous to moral excellence in the classical *paideia* model, and this is why education is pursued not for some functional goal, but *for its own sake*.¹² As for 'non-rational' elements in formation, the summit of indifference was to come in the first years of the twentieth century, with thinkers such as D. T. Howard:

I have always been interested in that question, as to the value of emotional states, and the conclusion to which I have come is that they have absolutely no value at all, but represent an insignificant defect in human nature.¹³

If we turn to the work of such writers as Groome, Green and Fraser,¹⁴ we might appear to have a different paradigm entirely. Here there is much appeal to *action*, not to academic research. Though the pioneer of such an approach is Thomas Groome, a Roman Catholic educator of laypeople, it is fair to say that the model, combined perhaps with the academic one detailed above, has become the dominant one in most British Anglican training institutions.

However, a closer look at contemporary exponents of action-reflection will reveal that character formation is not usually expected as a result of action. Our experiences of action take the place of books in giving us the primary material to reflect upon, but the aim is still to reflect on it and change our future actions accordingly; to give us a fairer map, not to top up our battery fluid. What we have here is an attempt to discern new rules and guidelines for ourselves as, out of our own situation and that of the marginalised, we re-examine the tradition to discover how we should act to bring about justice; it is not an attempt to change our attitudes and dispositions. This is certainly one facet of the criticism of Thomas Groome offered by the Roman Catholic religious educator James Michael Lee. Lee tells us that

Groome's instructional method is almost entirely ratiocinative... the almost exclusively cognitive emphasis offered by [Groome and his followers] has blinded [them] to giving due weight to attitude learning.¹⁵

In Hornby's terms this is 'artificial goodness', changing behaviour and communicating information but not changing people on the inside.

A notable exception to this deficiency is in the work of Laurie Green. For Green, now an Anglican bishop, action-reflection as a group is not merely the way we best acquire insight and transform society, but also entails a change in 'disposition':

11 Newman, *The Idea of a University*, p 134. Returning to Newman's own account of formation, we should note that he himself made clear that moral formation does not necessarily follow intellectual *paideia*: Newman, *The Idea of a University*, pp 120-121. His *caveat* has not always been assimilated by those who have followed him.

12 Kelsey, *Between Athens and Berlin*, pp 33f.

13 Quoted by Morton Kelsey, *Can Christians be Educated?*, IND: Religious Education Press, Mishiwaka 1977, p 176.

14 See Thomas H. Groome, *Christian Religious Education*, Harper & Row, San Francisco 1980, Laurie Green, *Let's do Theology*, Mowbray, London 1990.

15 James Michael Lee, *The Content of Religious Instruction*, Religious Education Press, Birmingham, Alabama 1985, pp 187, 274.

The group may experience both a longing for the freedom for captives, with all the struggle and repentance that that involves, and at the same time the group may wish to celebrate the promise of that freedom... Laughter and joy... will turn obedience into a free and happy disposition.¹⁶

Such claims that self-forgetfulness, and absorption in the struggle which is the action-theological task, will change our dispositions is remarkably close to Astley's view of what happens in worship. This is not surprising if doing theology, for Green, is worship, and if it is true that we are changed primarily through worship's psychological effects.

iii) *An alternative voice*

Before moving on to look at an older source, I would mention two recent and influential works: David Ford's *The Shape of Living* and ACCM 22. I call them influential because they have been much discussed, but I have not included them as contemporary paradigms because they seem to have had very little impact on actual practice.¹⁷ Ford's book renames what I have been calling 'moral formation' as 'shaping', and suggests that we are shaped by what overwhelms us: our closest relationships, our deepest desires, the catastrophes and 'vertigos of gladness' that have marked our lives. But if that is so, how can we ever hope to shape ourselves? Only by 'an indirect, even foolish way to solve the problem of sin and get on with being good', says Ford, by the everyday disciplines which change our desires little by little.¹⁸ But what are these disciplines? Ford's list sounds very like an updating of the work of the Caroline divines. There is being in a good community; praying as long as it takes; intensive time away; giving generously and secretly; submerging oneself in music; using the Jesus prayer. There is Bible study; silence; an 'ordinary life' of 'little sacrifices'; the Sabbath; 'baptised work in a global market.' Not that Ford is telling us that holiness consists in doing such things. Far from it: holiness consists in desiring God and desiring what God desires. As David puts it in *How to be Good*, the contemporary problem is to have the right desires when you have no desires at all, but are soul-dead, like a car with a perfectly good map but a flat battery.¹⁹ But the disciplines, together and over time, are small 'multiple overwhelmings', 'practices of excess' that will have an indirect impact on our desires. The key question is not 'what should I do?' but 'how can I be transformatively overwhelmed?' Also noteworthy for our purposes is Ford's last chapter, in which he deals with the possibility that we might be overwhelmed by 'gladness'; and, like Astley and Green, he speaks of a self-forgetfulness which, following Bonhoeffer, he names *hilaritas*. But Ford's example of experiencing *hilaritas* is taken not from worship or the liberation struggle, but from study; in the excitement of a new discovery we may find a joy which takes us out of ourselves and so changes our being.²⁰

16 Laurie Green, *Let's do Theology*, pp 130, 133.

17 For a lament that theological education remains highly academic fourteen years after ACCM 22, see David Heywood, 'A New Paradigm for Theological Education', *ANVIL* 17 (2000), pp 19-27.

18 David F. Ford, *The Shape of Living*, HarperCollins, London 1997, pp 64-65.

19 Hornby, *How to be Good*, p 225.

20 Ford, *The Shape of Living*, pp 69-96, 64-65, 172.

By contrast, ACCM 22 had a more limited scope: to question and modify the 'academic paradigm' in theological education. It found a 'preoccupation with the academic' in Church of England Theological Colleges, 'to the exclusion of other central concerns, e.g. prayerfulness and leadership.' What was needed was 'a godly pattern of life', which an emphasis on 'the assimilation of information by lectures' does not promote; the root-problem being that the university model was adopted largely because 'the rationale of theological education in the Church of England has never been made fully explicit.'²¹ Perhaps a return to classic Anglican sources would help?

How to be good II: authoritative Anglican sources

An Anglican theology of 'becoming good' would have to start with Scripture. It would speak about sanctification as becoming holy; being set apart for God through the sacrifice of Christ. It might look in this regard particularly at Hebrews 9-10. It would also speak of moral striving and putting to death the old self (Galatians 5, Ephesians 4, Colossians 3), and give attention to the balance to be seen in Philippians 2 ('continue to work out your salvation... for it is God who works in you to will and to act'). It would want to stress the role of the Holy Spirit in changing the character of the believer. I move on, not because Scripture is unimportant, but because it is so important that it demands far more time than I can give it and far more skill than I can claim.

The creeds might feature less strongly in such a theology, though some will want to follow Thomas Traherne in meditating on the Trinity, which overflows in joy to create worlds. For us, his image, likewise 'to be good, to be holy, to be righteous, is freely to delight in excellent actions', and we will acquire this delight through 'the love of God in the eye of the understanding, which is the influence of the Holy Ghost proceeding from the Father by the Son into the soul of the spectator.'²² It is contemplation of and delight in the being of God and the future blessing we will find in him which brings about true goodness now – and 'there is more goodness in them to ravish our desire.'²³ How can we be good? By delighting in the creative Trinity.

The formularies would add a sense that all our striving to be good is simply a response to the grace of God. Thus the structure of the Cranmerian communion: first God speaks to us in the law, an epistle, the Gospel, the creed and the sermon; then in response we turn to God in thanks, and to one another in prayer, and examine ourselves in confession; then, reassured by words of comfort, we receive the bread and wine and are sent out to spread to others what we have received ourselves. (This theological structuring is unfortunately obscured in order 1). The articles tell us that good works 'do spring out necessarily of a true and lively faith' and use the image of right behaviour as fruit (Article XII), but say little of character change. In short, the formularies seem to be saying, if you want goodness (the fruit)

21 ACCM, *Occasional Paper 22*, ACCM, London 1987, paras. 12, 46, 15, 21. Usually referred to as 'ACCM 22'.

22 Thomas Traherne, *The Way to Blessedness*, The Faith Press, London 1962, pp 106, 115. First published circa 1670.

23 Traherne, *The Way to Blessedness*, p 136.

make sure that you have true faith (the trunk) and have received grace (the roots). This is presumably why there is no homily on the subject of sanctification – though there is one on ‘Good Works, and first of fasting’ it is answering the question ‘what should we do?’ and does not concern itself with the issue of what might be called virtue ethics (‘how can I be good?’).

How to be good III: a voice from the seventeenth century

Originating as a sermon preached in 1662 to Trinity College, Dublin, but soon published separately, *Via Intelligentiae* is Jeremy Taylor's contribution to the debate on learning. The introduction puts the work in a pluralist context: where there is such a range of firmly held points of view, where is true learning to be found?

In the first half, Taylor's focus is mainly negative: he details eight unworkable theories of learning or obstacles to it. And in this section his main concern is to say that the only learning that really counts is learning that makes us better; anything else is ‘but the skinning of an old sore.’ Thus for example analytic clarity ‘is a very good way, so far as it can go: and would prevail very much if all men were wise.’ But the truth is that all people are not wise! The model fails because it fails to ask the basic question of how our character is to change such that we will become learners: it attempts to give us a map before it starts the battery of the car and is therefore doomed.²⁴ Reason will not in itself do the job; ‘wickedness does corrupt a man's reasoning’ like a wolf who tries to learn to write but ends up spelling all the words L-A-M-B. ‘Every man understands by his affections more than by his reason... a man's mind must be like your proposition before it can be entertained.’ Moreover our love for the world in general and the interests of our group in particular distort what counts as ‘reason’:

When we run through all the propositions of difference [between churches] and see that in every one of them they serve an end of money or of power, it will be very visible that the way to confute them will not be by learned disputations.²⁵

In the second half of the work, Taylor presents his method of ‘moral formation’ in which ‘it is not the wit of the man, but the spirit of the man, not so much the head as the heart, that learns the divine philosophy.’²⁶ Significant learning, then, takes place directly from God as ‘the Spirit of wisdom teaches us by secret inspirations, by proper arguments, by actual persuasions, by personal applications, by effects and energies...’ A Quaker Bishop? No indeed:

Which principle diverse fanaticks, both among us and in the church of Rome, misunderstanding, look for new revelations, and expect to be conducted by ecstasy and will not pray but in a transfiguration... [The Holy Spirit] is to be found in churches and pulpits, upon altars and in the doctors' chairs; not in conventicles and mutinous corners of a house.

²⁴ Taylor, *Via*, pp 365-368.

²⁵ Taylor, *Via*, pp 371-373.

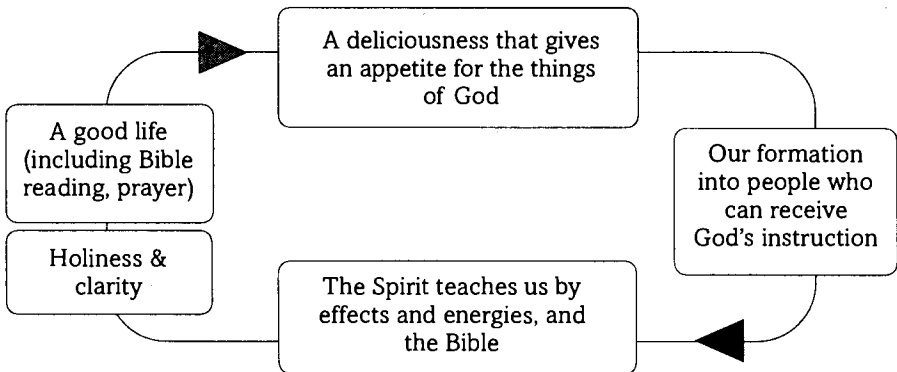
²⁶ Taylor, *Via*, pp 373-375.

No Quaker here, then. The point is not that the Holy Spirit will teach us new *facts* by direct contact with us, but that he will make us new people:

He opens the heart and creates a new one; and without this new creation, this new principle of life, we may hear the word of God, but we can never understand it; we hear the sound, but are never the better.²⁷

The intelligent and learned will err if they are ungodly, while others, 'not so learned it may be, not so versed in the Scriptures,' may understand not 'by reason' but 'by love.' In Hornby's terms, unless the battery is working in the car, we will be unable to profit from the map – even if the map is Scripture.

How then are we to become the sort of people who will be so changed by the Holy Spirit that we will recognise the truth when we hear it, 'as clear as the windows of the morning'? This is a matter of the heart, so what we need is 'a deliciousness that makes us love the things of God.' The alternative (seeking learning without a change of life and of character) is mere 'prettiness', missing out on the true 'spiritual *cabala*' which 'tends directly to holiness'.²⁸ The key is to obey God in the little we thus far and fallibly understand him to have said, mercilessly mistrusting our own and our society's understanding of the good life, and God will make us people who can receive the next revelation he has for us. To express this in diagram form, there is a circular effect:



'Deliciousness' is a quality in us, which responds appropriately to the attractiveness of God. As such it is equivalent to what Taylor elsewhere calls appetite – to say that God restores our appetite for God and God's desires, is to say that God makes himself delicious to us. This is a key and indeed dominant theme in *The Great Exemplar*, and Scott feels Taylor is ahead of us here:

Those writers who have stressed the ethical role of story have recovered Taylor's sense of the importance of imagination for human life, and this is a great advance. But they have little to say about the human person as one who hungers, craves and desires.²⁹

27 Taylor, *Via*, p 376.
28 Taylor, *Via*, p 380.

29 Scott, *Christian Character: Jeremy Taylor and Christian Ethics Today*, p 36.

Taylor holds that we were created with three appetites: to love God and have desires like God's, to 'beget one like himself' as God had done (love for neighbour and society develops from this basic appetite), and to love oneself (though this appetite should be subordinated to the other two). However, the Fall brought Sin into the equation and our appetites are now distorted; for Taylor, therefore, it was self-evident that moral formation needed to start by giving us back right appetites (or restoring right deliciousnesses). To restore right appetites (Ford would say 'to transformatively overwhelm our desires') is the role of 'religion'; but religion means first and foremost the prayerful living of a godly life.³⁰ 'A good man is united to God as a flame touches a flame...'³¹ but he will probably not even notice that this is happening! This seems to fit well with the contention of Astley, Boone, Green and Ford that forgetting oneself is the best way of being changed. As Meilander provocatively puts it, 'the examined life is not worth living.'³²

Some conclusions

If it is true that our actions form us, the tendency in both lay and ordination education for our actions to set the agenda is surely to be applauded and reinforced. With the theorists of action-reflection, we would want to say that action is not merely an end result of a theological course or lay learning experience, but an integral part of it. However, we might add with Jeremy Taylor and Laurie Green (and with GoodNews the faith-healer in *How to be Good*³³) that this is the case not merely because it gives us material to reflect on, but also because doing it will make us different people. If I house the homeless I can not only get the homeless housed, learn a useful skill and have a new perspective from which I can reflect on the government's housing policy, but also become in some way a different person – I have discovered a new deliciousness, my desires have been overwhelmed. Perhaps theological students should assist at funerals until they come to terms with death, sit with drunks until they become accepting of them... Perhaps an *Emmaus* group could run a soup kitchen, or a mission to the local comprehensive be so 'adopted' by a congregation that prayer for it becomes part of its liturgy. If action forms character as much as character forms action, a church leader who says that she would like her church to be active in the community but judges that it is not yet ready may be dooming her church to perpetual immaturity.

For the theological educator, however, taking action seriously is not an easy option. Formation on the Newman paradigm is not hard to evaluate – you just set a test or assignment. Evaluating growth in holiness would be much more subjective and time-consuming. It is easy – perhaps too easy – to criticise duty ethics as outmoded; indeed Van der Ven claims that to think rationalistically about moral formation is one of the characteristics of (now obsolete) modernity.³⁴ It is more difficult to suggest ways to make a new paradigm work. We should note that Taylor

30 Jeremy Taylor, *The Great Exemplar* pp 5-47.
Scott, *Christian Character: Jeremy Taylor and Christian Ethics Today*, pp 34-39.

31 Taylor, *Via*, pp 380f.

32 Gilbert C. Meilander, *The Theory and Practice of Virtue*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, IND 1984, p 100.

33 Hornby, *How to be Good*, p 176.

34 Johannes Van der Ven, 'Moral Formation in the Church', *Concilium* 191 (1987), pp 117-127.

himself was an advocate of spiritual direction, and for the contemporary church the mutually accountable catechumenate-style group may perhaps be the adapted re-appropriation of this Anglican tradition. The danger, once again, is that instead of a means of assisting group members to take those actions that will lead to growth in character and dispositions, they will become only a path towards 'artificial goodness'.

Turning to look at the place of religious experience, we might say that for Traherne and Taylor religious affections have a crucial role both in restoring right appetites and in being the way the Spirit prompts us to right action. In one sense we cannot 'programme' religious affections, whether subjective or the result of objective interventions of God, into a curriculum. Taylor expects the experiences to come simply as a result of living a godly life, while the formularies would point us to the need to check that God's grace is truly operative in us and increase our fruitfulness by dealing with our roots. Astley, Ford and Green might go further and say that it is precisely as we forget ourselves in worship, study, action or the group that God will intervene and reveal himself to our affections. But there are certain things we can do to prepare others and ourselves for such experiences. We can ask God to provide them, expect him to do so, and stop whatever else it is *we're* doing (even if it's saying the prayer of humble access!) if he's obviously doing it. We can learn/teach the basics of theism, without which the religious experience would be incomprehensible.³⁵ And Taylor instructs us to be ruthless about linking such experiences to the unglamorous godliness of everyday Christianity.

The important question in the moral formation both of individuals and communities, in short, is not how they can derive the rules to live by, but how they can become people whose dispositions and desires will naturally lead them to act in a Christ-like manner. If Anglicanism is designed to point us to God's grace until we forget ourselves in it, to 'shape' us until our disciplines overwhelm and transform us, to start our flat batteries of desire, it might turn out to be a way to be Good after all.

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35 Jeff Astley, *The Philosophy of Christian Religious Education*, p 131.