E-Mail conversation on two themes: the nature of our interpretation of Scripture – provisional or final; and the role of the theological 'expert' in the Church's interpretive processes.

Background from the project: in November 2010 the Steering Group for the project reviewed the observations made by the Regional Groups of the way Scripture was engaged with through the first Case Study. These observations suggested there might be 'gaps' between the way we actually engaged with Scripture and the 'received wisdom' of the way we say we engage. A report of these observations was sent to the Reference Group and this 'conversation' began its life from two specific observations that suggested [a] that there was a view expressed that once we had studied and understood what the Bible might be saying on a particular subject there was no more to do or say; and [b] that there was a gap between what the 'academy' taught in relation to way we go about viewing and interpreting Scripture and how this was transmitted to those in the pew.

This E-mail conversation arose, in the main, from these two observations but went on to touch other matters too. Like any on-going conversation this one is open-ended but, in so being, invites others to join in.

Participants:

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Professor Jesse N K Mugambi, Professor of Philosophy and Religious Studies, University of Nairobi, Kenya [JM]

Professor Anthony Thistleton, Professor of Christian Theology, University of Nottingham, England. [AT]

AT It is rightly stated that interpretation is a long process. I compare this with the thought that some evidently consider that they have come to understand a text or passage without the need for further thought. Although the Report is a little critical of academic theologians, I think that practical application and academic theories of interdisciplinary hermeneutics converge on this point. Schleiermacher's formulation of the Hermeneutical Circle is a good case in point. He argues that we need both the "whole", or the bigger picture, and the "parts", which stand in a reciprocal dialectical relationship to understanding both the "whole" and the "parts" of words, grammar, and vocabulary.

Furthermore this initial "leap" into the hermeneutical circle involves refinement and correction in an almost infinite series of correcting, checking, and intuitive insight. The process is virtually endless. This is not only addressed by Schleiermacher. Dilthey, Heidegger, Gadamer, Betti, and Ricoeur, all underline this point, how ever they may formulate it technically. Gadamer underlines the use of the ear, to "listen" to the text. Students claim that their attitude to reading the Bible is utterly different after a course in hermeneutics than before. Bernard Lonergan makes the point from a Roman Catholic viewpoint, and Heinrich Ott, from a Protestant viewpoint. In lay terms, it is crucial to point out that understanding a text is not an event, but a long process. It is possible also to see this from a historical point of view: we need a succession of Commentaries over many centuries to understand a text as fully as we can. We also need the whole Church, not just a lone individual.

My other concern arises from your entirely correct principle that we cannot extract biblical themes without a historical and linguistic context. Here I simply hope that each of the passages to which the case studies refer depends in turn upon careful and prolonged exegesis, exposition, and application, rather than simply the references in the abstract. Both Gadamer and Wittgenstein make it abundantly clear that understanding comes not only from looking at contexts in life, but also in the very process of applying them to life. These are not exhaustive comments, but I am in the midst of marking, and judge them to be the two most important.

AKMA I venture to submit that "finality" is not a datum we ever observe in the field of interpretation. Where we seem to attain finality, we generally do so by excluding interpretations that would disrupt our posited finality. These disruptive interpretations come from sources that don't count, from conspiracy theorists or misguided autodidacts or loud-voiced ignoramuses. They come, perhaps, from fundamentalists or heretics (and centuries ago we might confidently have added "Jews" and "infidels" and "free-thinkers" to the list,

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though we have more recently learned to value interpretations from Judaism and from the areligious academy). We usually speak and write, though, as if we actually had attained the finality that a conspectus of the history and breadth of biblical interpretations teaches us that we haven't. One can't, without tiresome repetitiousness, always qualify one's interpretations by saying "so far as we know" or "as today's knowledge permits" or "for the time being". Still, if our rhetoric in casual discussion expresses at least an aspiration to finality, we ought not be surprised when our listeners and readers infer finality from what we teach. We should in fact expect them to, all the more so when under the stress of controversy, we intensify the claims to certainty of our interpretive ventures over against the erroneous versions proposed by others. So interpreters couch their claims in a rhetoric of overstated finality, and audiences then come to expect interpreters to deliver that finality. In other words, although Prof. Thiselton quite rightly observes that "interpretation is a long process" (and endless process, speaking kata sarka), the interpretive habitat in which we participate produces the impression of finality as a predictable result of our hermeneutical discourse. "Provisional" hermeneutical confidence doesn't suffice to sustain our interpretive claims in this sort of interpretive ecology, so our rhetoric asserts the finality that we can't supply. We write cheques on the Bank of Finality that our accounts cannot honour._But this is a systemic problem; we can't expect to ratchet down the (implicit and) explicit claims to interpretive authority as long as audiences, including especially the audiences that distribute temporal rewards such as publication, advancement, and remuneration, expect them to deliver finality. No party seems likely to deflate its rhetoric of certainty, so we may anticipate that the problem of divergence between a popular expectation of interpretive finality and the historical evidence that all interpretation always proceeds by way of refinement, adjustment, and sometimes even reversal will persist for the foreseeable future. No one's immediate interests are served by insisting on interpretive provisionality.__

AT   I agree entirely with Dr. Adam, but should like to offer two or three explanatory qualifications.

First, I think that we need to make a careful distinction between an "absolute" finality of biblical interpretation, which is impossible, and provisional or "working" finality, which may apply to some, but certainly not to all, biblical genres. The first, as Andrew Adam states, is clearly impossible. At an academic level, Schleiermacher has demonstrated the provisional nature of all hermeneutics conclusively. At a popular level, why do even Fundamentalists write later or "more recent" commentaries, if they really believe that someone has reached a "final" interpretation already?

But when Luther and Calvin spoke of claritas scripturae, they meant that, for certain specific genre, interpretation was secure enough for them to make some theological assertions with reasonable confidence, and then to take the next step in practical action. This especially denoted doctrinal statements or confessions, which Erasmus would not make, because he thought that all interpretation was irredeemably provisional. Clearly they did not think that all interpretation was final, because (1) they wrote numerous commentaries which discussed more than one view; and (2) in practice they admitted a degree of plurality in texts which Umberto Eco calls more "open" ones, and from which doctrine was not to be inferred. These included, for example, ones which even they allegorized, for all their reservations about allegorical interpretation.

The other main qualification concerns how appropriate it is to talk of the "the Bible" (as if it is uniform) in this context, when different genre demand different replies to these questions. In New Horizons in Hermeneutics (1992), in the concluding chapters I suggested twelve or thirteen models of interpretation, which depend both upon genre and the situation and stance of the readers (pp. 558-620). This alone, if it is right, would suggest that a final interpretation not only cannot in practice be found, but that it would also greatly impoverish the creative possibilities of interpretation. At a popular level this must perhaps begin with a recognition of the difference between open and closed texts. The former would include poetic, symbolic, and metaphorical texts, such as most psalms and most of the Book of Revelation. The latter would include pre-Pauline tradition in 1 Cor. 11 23ff. And 1 Cor. 15: 3-5, and a few purely factual statements, largely in Mark and Luke.

AKMA For the sake of precision and mutual understanding, though, I will note that [Professor Thiselton] and Eco have not yet convinced me that the heuristic benefits of identifying some texts as "open" and others as "closed" outweigh the problems that arise from deciding which are which, how "open" closed texts might be and how "closed" open texts might be, and so on. Yes, certainly, we recognise a wider range of tolerable interpretations of some texts than others. No, that certainty doesn't rule out the possibility that we will sometime realise more interpretive possibilities relative to the "closed" text, nor that we eventually come to think that

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the "open" text bears a narrower range of acceptable interpretations. (It doesn't help us to interpret a text such as 1 Cor. 11 23ff. if we decide in advance, or on the advice of our betters, that it is a "closed" text; rather, as we look over the interpretations that seem plausible to us, we note that the range of plausibility seems particularly narrow, and we thus label them (provisionally) "closed".)

Second, the sense that Prof. Thiselton identifies -- what we might call the "durably provisional" sense -- seems exactly the goal of Anglican interpretation, if I understand him aright. It doesn't exclude the novel or eccentric (confident that truth will outlast fashion), and it doesn't invest in unsustainable finality (humbly aware that, as Newman says, "after all our diligence, to the end of our lives and to the end of the Church, it must be an unexplored and unsubdued land, with heights and valleys, forests and streams, on the right and left of our path and close about us, full of concealed wonders and choice treasures"). It is mutable (in the "time makes ancient good uncouth" way), but not capricious. It is patient of controversy, trusting that a commitment to mutual respect, apostolic faith, and common prayer will bring us toward a viable sense of where we stand.

JM   I have perused the texts and would like to make the following remarks:

1. Conflicting interests in the interpretation of sacred texts: Sacred texts are communal property, intended for enhancing convergence among the members of a community of faith. Within every community of faith, however, there are competing interests, and it is the task of the interpreters to harmonize or synchronize those interests with reference to the common sacred texts. Jesus was challenged to explain his apparent deviation from the norms entrenched by the Pharisees and the Sadducees. It is in the context of that challenge that he was questioned about specific references to the Torah. In our contemporary context the Anglican Communion is both culturally diverse and doctrinally broad, with a spectrum ranging from the literal to the analogical hermeneutical uses of biblical texts.

2. Applied Ethics: The selection of specific sacred texts for illustrating personal and social norms is a matter of applied ethics. The ethical presuppositions are often not disclosed, but prior disclosure is essential for conclusive resolution of differences in interpretation. Jesus resolved conflicts of interpretation by exposing the different presuppositions of the parties involved. The parables of the "Good Samaritan" and the Prodigal Son are helpful illustrations of this point: 1) The Good Samaritan: The Questioner; the Pharisee; the Priest; the Lawyer; the victim; the Samaritan; Jesus the Teacher. 2) The Prodigal Son: The questioner of Jesus; the father; the older son; the younger son; the Samaritan; Jesus the teacher. Appeal to "The Word of God" is not adequate for resolution of conflict, since there may be contradictory texts with regard to a specific controversial issue. Daniel Patte's book on Ethics of Biblical Interpretation is relevant here.

3. Language: The Bible is read in many languages, and within each language there are several versions of the Bible. The variety of Bible versions in a particular language indicates differences in hermeneutical and exegetical interests among the respective teams of translators. In Tropical Africa foreign languages are used for theological and pastoral training, while African languages are used in liturgical, ritual, counselling and Bible Study sessions. This situation resembles the situation in pre-modern Europe when most written interpretations of the Bible were in Latin while the Christian worshippers spoke various European languages. In Tropical Africa the language of Bible interpretation among most lay Christians is different from the language in which the pastors are trained. It is important to keep this discrepancy in mind when considering the outcome of this Project.

4. The Academy and the Community: The tension between the "Academy" and the "Community" is prompted by differences in perception between the elite and the ordinary Christians. Which perspective should prevail? Some people would prefer the elite interpretation, while others would prefer the "popular" perspective. Resolution of the divergence between these perspectives is not easy to deal with. The elite claim authority on the basis of academic and professional training. The laity claim authority on the basis of their faithfulness to tradition. Which position is more valid than the other? It depends on the context and substance of the controversy. Ideally, each perspective should be articulated by its own advocates. It is unrealistic to expect the unschooled laity to articulate the concerns of the elite. Likewise, it is unrealistic to expect the elite to articulate the concerns of the laity, especially when one group uses one language while the other group uses a different language as explained above.

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5. Sets of Variables: The differences in interpretation of a bible text arise from a wide set of variables, and it is often difficult to identify the operative set in a particular conflict. One side in the conflict may presuppose one set while the other side presupposes a different set. In such circumstances resolution of conflict is tedious and frustrating. Mediation will require appreciation and understanding of both perspectives.

AKMA I note particular emphasis on the perception that a hermeneutical gap separates the academy and the pew. Relative to the discrepancy between academic and vernacular interpretation, we ought to acknowledge from the outset that academic interpreters draw on a richer, more extensive fund of interpretive resources. To speak with brutal candour, in the aggregate biblical scholars know more and know better what to make of biblical texts. (That does not, of course, mean that particular non-technical interpreters cannot outshine most academics for interpretive wisdom, nor that particular highly-trained interpreters are necessarily better at interpretation than less-thoroughly-instructed others. It simply means that most of the time, the odds of a sound interpretation are better with an interpreter who (for instance) knows the relevant languages, history, and cultures.) Whatever one thinks of such a claim, it ought not be scandalous; we devote long intervals of time and large sums of money to education in order to produce exactly this effect. Under optimal circumstances, everyone would nod and agree: "That's why we set them to teaching, and endow them with libraries, and why we attend to their teachings".__So the problem of a gap between academy and pew seems more likely to me to be the convergence of a problem of communication (on one hand) and of congregational education (on the other). As to the first, I encounter a great many academics who express themselves murkily, and who put no extra effort into enhancing their students' capacity to communicate. In those cases, we have ample reason to expect that lucid communication not be a frequent outcome of advanced theological education. The lecturer's ideas will have been awkwardly framed, making it less likely that a student will grasp them firmly and clearly; and the student will have recognised no incentive to communicate clearly, may even model her or his prose on that of the high-flown lecturer, and will thus have a diminished chance of apprehending and articulating clear theological and interpretive ideas.__As to the second problem, several aetiologies come to mind. Perhaps the minister and congregation exemplify the sort of theological inquirer who wants not so much to learn about the Bible and theology as to find authority figures who will reaffirm the congregation's predispositions. Perhaps the clergy leader feels insecure about his or her own intellect, and so arranges the teaching ministry of the congregation so as to perpetuate their dependence on their ordained leader. Perhaps theological education seems less important to the congregation and minister than some other form of activity. Perhaps education risks stirring up conflict, or undesirable independent thinking. Whatever the cause, education for all the people of God will always tend to minimise the perception and effects of a problematic gap. But we should not think that having abundant highly theologically-literate clergy (were that ever the case) itself constitutes a problem; rather, we should emphasise to one another and to our students the paramount importance of understanding ideas well enough to be able to communicate them clearly, and to build and sustain a congregation's trust that the leader isn't patronising them, or leading them by the nose, or manipulating them.__

JM This "conversation" via the Internet is interesting. In my earlier comments I listed several variables that ought to be taken into consideration in the quest for an "Anglican" approach to scripture.

Any "Text" makes sense only from the perspective of its author, sender and recipient. These "agents" (authors, senders and recipients) are products of their respective cultures, and the language of the text is also a cultural product. In this conversation about the possibility of an "Anglican" interpretation of Christian Scriptures, it is essential to appreciate the actual cultural contexts of the various communities (Dioceses and Parishes) which constitute the "Anglican Communion". I would like to illustrate this point:

In East Africa there are dozens of English versions of both the Old and the New Testament. There are also dozens of these scriptures in a wide range of African languages (not dialects!). The Elite (schooled theologians) are trained in foreign languages (English, French, German, etc), but the majority of members of their congregations do not normally read the Bible in these "academic" languages. Thus the chasm between the "theological academy" and the "community of faith" is quite wide.

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The "community of faith" in the East African context is trans-denominational. Within the same family there will be Anglicans, Presbyterians, Methodists, Baptists, Charismatics, Pentecostals - possibly even agnostics and Muslims. When it is time to read scripture in such a context, it is impossible for any person to appeal to his or her "denominational" interpretation of any verse quoted or cited from the Christian Scriptures. In all the rites of passage (birth, puberty, marriage, death, etc) members of the family and the neighbourhood will be present, and they will worship together, sharing their reflections on scripture without specific reference to denominational biases.

So the phrase "Anglican Interpretation" becomes an "academic" expression rather than a practical one. Perhaps the starting point in this "conversation" would be to clarify what the adjective "Anglican" refers to in doctrinal and institutional terms. The history of the establishment of Christian communities (dioceses and parishes) under the tutelage of mission agencies sponsored by the Church of England is such that cultural particularities evolved throughout the British Commonwealth, and these cultural particularities make it difficult discern any specifically "Anglican" interpretation of the Scriptures.

The fixing of the Biblical Canon predates the establishment of the Church of England. The Anglican Lectionary, though widely distributed throughout the Anglican Communion, is often not used for devotional and preaching purposes in my part of the world - priests and lay preachers use their discretion to prepare their sermons and meditations using texts which they find more contextually appropriate.

In view of this contextual illustration, I am wondering what "Outcome" is expected from this Project. The "Anglican Academy" itself does not have a "consensus" with regard to Interpretation of Scripture. Nor do the communities of faith which bear the adjective "Anglican". This "conversation" via the Internet is illustrating the insight that the quest for an "Anglican Reading" of Christian Scriptures is elusive.

As an academic exercise this "conversation" is helping to elucidate the complexity of searching for an "Anglican Reading" of the Bible. Beyond that elucidation I do not expect any consensus to emerge which will formulate an "Anglican Reading" with which the entire Anglican Communion would resonate.

Yet, perhaps, the academicians may continue to converse among themselves, sharing the fruits of their academic research. Whether this conversation will have any impact on devotional and liturgical reading of the Bible within the Anglican Communion remains an open question.

AKMA Dr Mugambi's contribution deserves acknowledgement, and we ought to be able to advance from it to greater clarity about our role and goals.

The most important aspect of the letter raises the question of our role in the discussions over "The Bible in the Life of the Church". Granted his observation that '[t]he "Anglican Academy" itself does not have a "consensus" with regard to Interpretation of Scripture. Nor do the communities of faith which bear the adjective "Anglican" ', is there any point to our correspondence? The rhetoric of the past decade or more of conflict among Anglicans makes it clear that some are utterly convinced that their neighbours are reading Scripture incorrectly (and vice versa), so that isn't news — it can't be our job to point out the obvious. Presumably as well, the Archbishop of Canterbury and the extensive apparatus of committees and task forces that commissioned us don't want us simply to say, 'Well, some read Scripture thus, and others read Scripture so, and there's no adjudicating among conflicting interpretations'. Moreover, I take it that they hope that something we say will have a particularly 'Anglican' flavour to it (whatever 'Anglican' may mean).

So in response to one of Prof. Mugambi's questions, perhaps we should ask the question of whether there is any characteristic that distinguishes (however faintly) Anglicans' interpretation of Scripture from other bodies' interpretations. We might then be able to aggregate the widely varying interpretive practices of global Anglicanism. So Prof. Mugambi has suggested that any 'Anglican' approach to Scripture must take account of a text's author, sender, and recipient, of the cultures that form and inform these three, and of the actual cultural contexts within which Anglicans read Scripture.

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Some Anglicans would probably want to dissent from the last point; Scripture, they would say, speaks with a single voice regardless of whether it is read in East Africa, Scotland, Singapore, New Zealand, Jamaica, or Chile. So one precise topic for examination concerns the extent to which we as participants in the Bible in the Life of the Church project support the premise that 'Anglican' interpretation should be allowed elasticity relative to the cultures into which the Anglican Communion extends.

The posited chasm between the theological academy and the community of faith looms large also in his letter. I'm not sure what more there is to be said about this topic. On one hand, it's manifest that seminar rooms and library stacks shelter interpretive practices that rarely occur in the practical settings Prof. Mugambi notes (communal observation of rites of passage, for instance). But surely this has always been the case, even in Oxfordshire, even in the University of Nairobi and its environs. 'Difference' doesn't constitute a problem so much as do the degree and kind of authority accorded to scholars and communities. So elite interpreters often invoke markers from their privileged social location to authorise interpretations ('In the original Hebrew it says', or 'As Barth says in the Kirchliche Dogmatik' or 'According to the principle lex orandi, lex credendi'); what markers provide support for feet-on-the-ground interpretations? I have heard it asserted that such-and-such 'has always been believed', or that a particular pastor or preacher or teacher lent his (usually 'his') personal authority to a particular interpretation ('Father Postlethwaite says'). Communal interpretations can appeal to undebatable warrants from personal conviction as well: 'the Holy Spirit tells us', or 'our hearts tell us', or 'we're just certain of it'. Have we anything to say about the divergent sorts of warrant, the divergent kinds of claim to authority, that these patterns of difference engender? And (as Prof. Mugambi points out) what difference does it make if a body of elite interpreters decides that such-and-such is the appropriate model for Anglican interpretation, if the actual interpreters whom he keeps in view do not themselves accede to that standard?

The historic answer to these questions has been something to the effect of 'Local communal interpretations are all right as long as they stay local, but once they venture out into the intersubjective world beyond the local horizon, they must adduce support that is in principle available and subject to evaluation by their neighbouring localities'. That opens the door to elitism (if locality X reads the Bible in one vernacular and locality Q reads the Bible in another vernacular, they will need to seek out some mediating version. Knowledge of such a mediating version will plausibly fall to someone who knows more than one of the vernacular languages as well as the mediating version (and the possibility remains that the mediating version would be the Greek or Hebrew text) — or perhaps the interpretive guidance mediated by the Book of Common Prayer (though the varieties of 'Books of Common Prayer' around the world, and its absence in some provinces, problematise that approach).

All of which underscores the importance of Prof. Mugambi's contribution to the project. Are there, in fact, any interprovincial brakes on unsatisfactory interpretive practice, and whom would we trust to operate those brakes if there are any?

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