

*Samuel Seabury,
Anglican*

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*Samuel Seabury,
Anglican*

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The Right Reverend Samuel Seabury

Foreword

This small pamphlet is offered towards the celebration of the 200th anniversary of the consecration of Samuel Seabury as bishop: an event which brought episcopacy to Anglicans in the newly-independent United States of America. Its primary aim (in relation specifically to Bishop Estill's instruction that the propers for Sunday, November 18, 1984 may be those for Seabury's Consecration as on p. 377 of *Lesser Feasts and Fasts*) is to provide some assistance to the clergy of the Diocese of North Carolina in preparing for this observance and especially in preaching on that Sunday. It therefore does not pretend, even within its extremely modest scope, to be chiefly biographical in approach, and is certainly no substitute for the substantial lives of Seabury which exist.

Richard W. Pfaff

Chapel Hill
December 1983



A few facts will provide the necessary biographical minimum about Seabury. He was born in 1729 at North Groton, Conn., the son of a Congregational minister who the next year received Anglican orders in the wake of an Anglican revival which threatened the monolithic Puritanism of the region. The young Samuel, having graduated from Yale, was sent to Britain to seek ordination; and, with a year's medical training under his belt, was ordained deacon and (two days later) priest in 1753, in London.

After stints in New Jersey and Long Island, he found himself as rector of St. Peter's, Westchester (N.Y.) when the unhappiness of many of his fellow colonists was crystallizing into a determination to separate from the control of the British Crown. Seabury opposed this determination with vigor and some eloquence, and his *Letters of a Westchester Farmer* form one of the most extensive expressions of the loyalist position. Despite his outspoken Toryism and indeed his service as a chaplain to the British forces, he retained the respect of his fellow clergymen to the extent that, shortly after the war ended, the presbyters of Connecticut elected him as one of two possible candidates for bishop (with Jeremiah Leaming, who declined), provided that a satisfactory consecration could be arranged.

The subsequent story is widely known: how Seabury was unable to work out a way by which English bishops could confer succession in the face of the new political situation; how (partly through the suggestion of Dr. Martin Routh, the precociously venerable president of Magdalen College, Oxford) the Scottish Episcopalian bishops were approached; and how, Seabury having been consecrated by three of their number on November 14, 1784, he returned to New England under the promise that he would try to lead the American Episcopal Church in the liturgical direction of its Scottish older sister.

Seabury's actual episcopate lasted just over ten years. The problems he faced as the first Anglican bishop in the United States were basically threefold: to build up the church in the area where his specific jurisdiction was recognized (primarily Connecticut, and later Rhode Island and other parts of New England as well); to work with Anglican leaders elsewhere in the 13 states to try to bring about something like a national Episcopal Church; and to carry out the liturgical strategy he brought with him from Scotland. Again, the extent of his success is fairly well known. By the time of his death in 1796 there was a thriving diocesan organization in many parts of (southern) New England; there were five American bishops, and the certainty of a purely American succession was established; and there was a Prayer Book for the American church which, in spirit if not always in letter, reflected clear Scottish (and behind that, Non-Juring) influence.

In, admittedly, a comparison of small things with great, Seabury may be seen as Peter to William White's Paul—if one limits the comparison to the struggle between the two apostles over the ground rules of the nascent church. Without undue strain on credulity, we may affirm that Seabury's singlemindedness, perhaps at its most attractive in his determination not to leave Great Britain without having secured episcopal orders and at its least attractive in his dealings with White, made him (under God, as he would have been the first to say) the *petra* on which Anglicanism in the newborn United States was established.

But the views for which Seabury is chiefly remembered—concerning episcopacy (for it) and American independence from Britain (originally against it)—are not really to our purpose now. Our independence from the mother country is scarcely a live issue; and, though the place of episcopacy in Christ's church is a question of great import in ecumenical conversations, its value as preaching material to the ordinary Anglican faithful may be questioned. Besides, what we commemorate Seabury *for*—the achievement by which he would be most readily identified in, say, ordination exam questions—does not necessarily supply us with any idea of the man. It is only by letting him speak for himself that we can get some sense as to the fittingness of our remembering that man as anything more than the possessor of the head on which the Scottish bishops laid their hands. In brief, though

it is the act of the consecration of Samuel Seabury that our calendar commemorates on November 14th every year, we need to feel some congruity about this observance: that is, that the man who was so consecrated was himself a not unworthy recipient of that particular grace—indeed, that in our hazy Anglican way we would sense an appropriateness about regarding him as among our particular, if modest, saints.

Not that this pamphlet is meant as a preliminary dossier for canonization (the obviousness of Seabury's shortcomings would make the job of Devil's Advocate in his case almost too easy). Rather, it attempts to extract some of the flavor of Seabury's spirituality through a laying-out of a few main emphases of his, as expressed in his own words. To this end, the materials used have been not his better-known works like the political *Letters of a Westchester Farmer* or the correspondence about securing (or, later, maintaining) the episcopacy, but rather his collected sermons, published in 1793 as *Discourses on Several Subjects*;¹ together with the excerpts from his journal from 1791 to 1795 edited by Anne W. Rowthorn as *Miles Before I Go to Sleep* (Hartford, 1982), and miscellaneous works collected in photo-reprint by Kenneth W. Cameron as *Samuel Seabury's Ungathered Imprints* (Hartford, 1978).² The *Discourses* consist of 15 sermons in the first volume and 22 in the second. Though they never rise to the heights of the most impassioned or eloquent preaching, these sermons can be taken to represent Seabury's spiritual teaching, and put him into the tradition of the nobler sort of 18th-century Anglican piety.

Among the characteristics most clearly discernible in Seabury's preaching we may distinguish the following: an appeal to reason and common sense (in contrast to the intellectual authoritarianism of the Puritan orthodoxy and the anti-intellectual tendencies of the

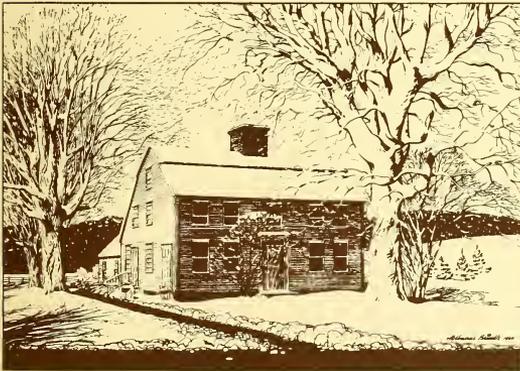
¹Page references are to the Hudson (N.Y.) 1815 edition, but I have also consulted the New York 1793 edition in the Bodleian Library at Oxford: this belonged to William Van Mildert (1765-1836), successively Regius Professor of Divinity at Oxford and bishop of Llandaff and Durham.

²Especially *A Discourse on II Tim. iii. 6* (originally preached 1773), pp. 7-14 in Cameron; cited as *II Tim.*

“enthusiastic” revival movements of his time); an ecclesiology rooted in an awareness of the church’s extension in time and space; a stress on both sacramental and preaching elements in worship; a moral approach more generally accepting of than rejecting of the social order and suggestive rather than prescriptive; and a subsuming of moral considerations into finally ascetic ends. None of these characteristics is at all surprising; it is almost a commonplace that all are distinctively Anglican.

If this attempt to identify some of the principal themes of Seabury’s preaching turns up nothing unexpected, it does lead to an historico-theological point of some importance. The ecclesiological position of Anglicanism in the newly formed United States was dubious, probably anomalous. Anglicanism as a distinctive expression (brand? branch?) of Christianity is defined by its polity, its worship, and its ethos. In 1784 the only polity that seemed truly Anglican was that of an episcopacy in apostolic succession and in the political setting of an established church (to this only the bishops of the Scottish Episcopal Church

provided even a partial exception). In 1784, likewise, the Book of Common Prayer known to Anglicans in America—the English 1662 book—was usable only in the context of an established church; and beyond that had a liturgical tone (especially the theological sparseness of the Communion service) which seemed to many thoughtful and scholarly Anglicans of the 18th century to require correcting, supplementing, and enriching. Given, then, the impossibility of Anglicanism’s becoming the established church of the new nation, and the perceived undesirability of using the English 1662 Prayer Book even with the offending political references removed, one conclusion emerges clearly: that the survival and vigor of Anglicanism in the post-Revolutionary United States lay not so much in the stratagems by which an apostolic episcopacy was secured, nor in the liturgical compromises which resulted in the 1789 (American) Book of Common Prayer, as in the existence—indeed the persistence—of a genuine Anglican ethos in the United States. To this ethos Samuel Seabury is more than an important witness: he is a prime creator, as the following passages testify.



Old Glebe House, Woodbury, Connecticut



Seabury window in St. Giles' Church, Cambridge, England

For Seabury, as for many other 18th-century Anglicans, religion and reason were not far from being functions of each other. This could be true even of the eucharist, despite (or perhaps even because of) its being the central mystery of the Christian religion. So he can say, on the command "This do in remembrance:"

It is our duty to inform ourselves, as exactly as may be, of its true meaning, that our obedience may be the obedience of reasonable men, and not the effect of ignorant superstition. (I. 144)

Reason is most obviously exercised in hearing sermons—a spiritual activity which Seabury suggests requires rational more than emotional effort:

If upon this occasion I ask your candid attention, I hope you will not refuse it: it is all I shall ask. I wish not to obtrude my own sentiments upon others; nor do I expect to obtain your approbation any farther, than as what I shall say, shall be agreeable to the principles of sober reason, and common sense. . . . (This) sermon was written at a time when a spirit of enthusiasm prevailed much in this country: when religion itself was made to consist in a set of affected phrases; and he was esteemed the best preacher who made the most noise with predestination, free, irresistible (sic) grace, imputed righteousness, etc. and when in support of these tenets, this man's exposition, and that man's commentary, and the other man's opinion were quoted, to the neglect of common sense, sober reason, and the holy scriptures. (II Tim. 8)

Not that Seabury was a mere rationalist, in the pejorative sense of the term. But he is never obscurantist or anti-rationalist; reason will always have its place, though that place will sometimes be limited.

. . . no revelation from God can be contrary to human reason. The conclusion, I take it, is just, and drawn from true principles; only let reason be free from prejudices, and unclouded by vicious affections. . . . But here a distinction arises, which has often been made, and is certainly just, that there is a vast difference between a thing's being contrary to our reason, and above our reach. . . . The true province of reason, in all such cases, is to examine the evidences, or arguments upon which our belief is required; if these are sufficient, according to the nature of the case, reason will require our assent, even where it cannot fully comprehend the whole matter. (*II Tim.* 10-11)

Indeed, to decline to use human reason, or to permit the rational faculty to be blunted, is close to being a kind of sin:

Since then reason is the gift of God to us, a gift prior to any revelation of his will; and is that faculty by which we must judge of the purport of that revelation which he has been pleased to make, certainly it is our duty to cultivate and improve this faculty to the best of our power, to guard it against those prejudices and evil affections that might weaken or pervert it, and with modesty and sincerity of heart apply it to the understanding of those writings which convey to us the will of our creator, particularly the scheme of redemption through Christ. (*II Tim.* 13)

This confidence in reason is, of course, by no means the whole story. However rational the deliberations of a 'religious' man, the context of the Christian religion is nonetheless that supernatural entity called the church. Seabury's sense of the church is, as Anglican ecclesiology has tended to be, more vividly historical than doctrinal—and ecumenical at least in an historical dimension.

Another property of Christ's church in this world is, that it is catholic or universal. . . . The world is its scene: But, as members from the whole world cannot meet in one place, for the purpose of worship and communion, the church must necessarily be divided into different portions, each portion being a member of the one church of Christ. Locally considered, these portions may be denominated particular churches, and take their names from the city where the bishop resides; as the church of Jerusalem, of Antioch, of Alexandria, etc. The union of a number of these churches, under a metropolitan or archbishop, is denominated from the country; as the church of Egypt, of Syria, of France, of England, etc.

In the mode of their worship, in the particulars of their discipline, in their rites and ceremonies, they may differ: but, so long as they retain the government, faith, and sacraments instituted by Christ, they are parts or members of his church; and their bishops have the right, not only of communion, but of being considered true and valid bishops of Christ's church, wherever they shall go. . . . (l. 187)

That, for his own time and place, Seabury was on shaky ground here is obvious: the prevailing congregationalism of New England, and the predominance of non-episcopal denominations throughout the new nation, make the somewhat Cyprianic line he took sound rather unrealistic (perhaps another characteristic of Anglican ecclesiology?):

This view of the subject necessarily supposes an union of christians with each other, and with Christ the head of the church. . . . Hence appear the guilt and danger of departing from the unity of the church. (l. 188)

But it is again characteristically Anglican that a certain shakiness, or at least vagueness, of ecclesiology tends to be compensated for by a firm connection between ecclesiology and liturgical theology; the threefold ordained ministry is specifically a eucharistic ministry. So with Seabury, for whom the meaning of priesthood is primarily eucharistic:

When Christ commanded his apostles to celebrate the holy eucharist, in remembrance of him, he, with the command, gave them the power to do so; that is, he communicated his own priesthood to them in such measure and degree as he saw necessary for his church, to qualify them to be his representatives, to offer the Christian sacrifice of bread and wine, as a memorial before God the Father of his offering of himself once for all. (I. 156)

This eucharistic emphasis notwithstanding, preaching remains a primary office of the ordained ministry, one to be taken seriously by the hearers as well as the preachers—not only (as we have seen) as a focus for the Christian exercise of the faculty of reason, but also as an integral element in worship and as bearing directly on the moral welfare of the faithful:

The business, therefore, of hearing sermons is not of that trivial nature, which many people suppose it to be. If we wish to make it conducive to our growth in grace, it must be accompanied with serious and patient attention, with a disposition to receive instruction in religious knowledge, with faith in the goodness and truth of God, and a determination to obey his will to our utmost ability. (II. 261)

But whatever may be the deficiencies of those who preach the Gospel; we have a right to expect more fruit from their labours, such as they are, than we

see produced. This must be the fault of the Hearers; and it requires the consideration of their serious hours, and their earnest prayers to Almighty God, the giver of all grace, that they may correct it. The subject is important, and weighty consequences are dependent upon it—the glory of God, the honor of our Redeemer, the prosperity of religion, their own future welfare, and the future welfare of others. (II. 250)

Given that preaching has a strongly moral purpose, the moral tone of Seabury's sermons is, as might be expected, on the cool side. Avoiding the exhortatory urgency and fervor which he would have associated with "enthusiastic" preaching, he is perhaps more inclined to speak of one's duty in the state of life to which one is called than of effecting revolutionary changes in the social order; of the "proper use of wealth" than of levelling all distinction between wealth and poverty.

(One "weight that hinders us" being especially "eager desire of worldly wealth") We are apt to suppose ourselves free from covetousness, if we have a disposition to expend the wealth which we acquire. Attentive observation, however, would soon convince us, that prodigality and covetousness do sometimes live and reign very lovingly together. What difference does it make in the lust of acquiring wealth whether we consume it in sensual pleasure, in attracting the notice of others by grandeur, luxurious living, delicate dissipation; or hoard it up in a chest? In either case, the proper use of wealth is perverted, and more mischief than good is done with it. (II. 218)

Typically Anglican also is his disinclination to lay down specific shalt-nots. Reason and good will go a long way towards setting the Christian on the right road—

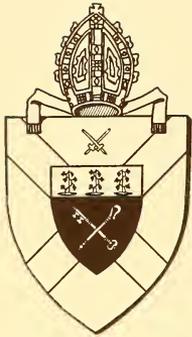
Fundamental principles of religion drawn from Holy Scripture, and from the Catholic Creeds and Doctrines of the Church, together with approved maxims of holiness, will enable us to judge, if not with scholastic precision, yet with propriety, and with security to our faith and practice, both as reasonable men, and as Christians. It is not to be expected, nor is it required, that every Christian should be a casuist, or deeply skilled in controversial divinity: But it is expected that every Christian be an honest man, and receive truth and reject error, as far as his best judgment shall enable him to distinguish them. (II. 254)

Unless you have faith in the goodness of God, all those delightful topics will be urged on you in vain. You cannot love that goodness in which you do not believe; nor imitate that goodness which you do not love; nor be transformed into the likeness of that goodness which you do not imitate. And yet, our resemblance to God in goodness is made the foundation of happiness with him. (II. 258)

—although the human tendency to blind self-importance must be kept in mind; otherwise the result is (in what may seem again a typically Anglican mode of thought) a combination of unbelief and unhappiness:

There is a strong propensity in human nature to be the contriver and carver of its own happiness. . . . This really is to disbelieve God; and the sin of such unbelief consists in this: It supposeth God to be ignorant of that which will ensure to us the true happiness of our nature, or that he hath represented things to us otherwise than they are, that he may acquire honour to himself from our obedience. (II. 221)

In general, Seabury can be said to conceive of the moral life in terms of happiness and virtue rather than of absolute justice. But, lest this seem too comfortably lukewarm, we might remember that this attitude is strongly reminiscent of the teachings of some of the Fathers, especially in the Greek tradition: the pursuit of happiness and virtue being seen less as a moral than as an ascetic matter, leading finally to that perfection which is happiness with God.



It would be excessive to claim for Seabury a place among the spiritual or intellectual giants of our Anglican tradition. His mind, his manner of expression, and (as nearly as can be ascertained) the level of his spiritual insights never soar. We can rely on him for an intelligent and perceptive approach to the matters he preaches about; but he will not ignite us.

It would be equally absurd to suggest that the particularly Anglican emphases which, as we have seen, are reflected in Seabury's preaching represent the sum and substance of Christianity. As a spiritual diet, such emphases alone would be both bland and monotonous. But mixed with, say, some Luther and Charles Wesley and Newman and Barth and Hans Küng, Seabury's teaching—if what has been extracted here from his sermons may be so summed up—adds an element of nutrition and flavor which are important for full Christian nourishment. If this seems too modest an assessment (why bother with the man at all if no more can be said for him than that?) we might reflect that it is pretty close to the assessment that we Anglicans make, in these days happily more irenic than Seabury's, for the place of Anglicanism in the whole spectrum of Christ's church; and that in commemorating Seabury with that kind of moderation we are only taking him as he may most usefully and most attractively be taken: not as an ecclesiastical controversialist or even ecclesiastical statesman but as a good example—one for which we may indeed thank God—of *homo Anglicanus*.

