Reason – the third leg of the stool - is Tradition brought up to date. It is our continuing attempt to define, interpret and formulate our belief.

An advertisement for the Anglican Church in the United States of America says: ‘There’s only one problem with religions that have all the answers. They don’t allow questions’. In the Anglican Church we not only allow questions, we encourage them. We are ‘Homo Sapiens’, the thinking animal. God has given us the freedom and the ability to think for ourselves and when we neglect to use that gift we are less than human.

One modern theologian has claimed that such neglect was mankind’s original sin. He points out that long before Adam and Eve had committed the sin of pride or disobedience, they had already committed the sin of sloth by refusing to think for themselves; by letting a serpent do their thinking for them.

It was this precise sin that caused the tragedies at Jonestown and Waco. People were prepared to follow, without question, the teachings of a deluded leader. The same sin lay behind the gas chambers of Nazi Germany. People followed the leader and obeyed orders, without question, and refused to think for themselves.

Whenever we abdicate our God-given right to think for ourselves, we sin. We become less than what God intends us to be.

So the Anglican Church encourages questions. We believe the Gospel can stand up to all the testing we might choose to give it and that, if it can’t stand the test, it is not worthy of our allegiance.

In the event we have little to fear. Truth, as John Stuart Mill reminded us, always benefits from collisions with error.

Keeping the balance

This three legged stool - Scripture, Tradition and Reason - is not the exclusive property of the Anglican Church.

The Protestant Churches have long laid claim to the Scriptures, often giving the Bible an infallible authority that it obviously does not possess.

And the Roman Catholic Church - at least up until the time of the Second Vatican Council - leaned heavily on Tradition, giving an infallible authority to the Church - which it obviously cannot possess.

Other Christian groups have given an almost infallible authority to human reason or experience. The 'Liberal' movements of the early Twentieth Century often over emphasized our intellectual achievements and some modern Charismatic movements with their over emphasis on personal experience have sometimes been guilty of their own brand of infallibility.

The fact is that an exclusive dependence on any one leg of the stool will nearly always degenerate into rigidity and legalism. The three legs must go together if the stool is to stay upright. And if Anglicanism has a particular genius it is our ability to hold all three legs together, if not always in balance.

So what do Anglicans believe?

The difficulty in defining what Anglicans believe lies in the fact that the Anglican Church has no belief of its own. Back in 1661, Bishop Jeremy Taylor of Down found it necessary to defend this position. He said: 'What can be wanting in the Church of England? We have the Word of God, the Faith of the Apostles, the
Creeds of the Primitive Church, the Articles of the first four General Councils, a holy liturgy, excellent prayers, perfect Sacraments, faith and repentance, the Ten Commandments, the sermons of Christ and all the precepts and counsels of the Gospel. We teach the necessity of good works. We live in obedience to God, and are willing to die for Him, and do so when He requires us to do so. We speak honourably of His Holy Name. We worship Him. We love His servants. We pray for all men. We love all Christians, even our most erring brethren. We confess our sins to God and to our brethren who we have offended, and to God’s ministers in cases of scandal or of a troubled conscience. We communicate often. Our priests absolve the penitent. Our Bishops ordain priests and confirm baptised persons, and bless their people and intercede for them. And what could there be wanting?’

Nearly three centuries later the Archbishop of Canterbury, Geoffrey Fisher, stated the matter a little more succinctly when he said: ‘We have no doctrine of our own - we only possess the Catholic Doctrine of the Catholic Church enshrined in the Catholic Creeds and these Creeds we hold without addition or diminution. We stand on that rock’.

Think about it

One of our problems is that very few of us have developed any distinctive personal life. Everything about us seems second-hand, even our emotions. In many cases we have to rely on second-hand information in order to function. I accept the word of a physician, a scientist, a farmer, on trust. I do not like to do this. I have to because they possess vital knowledge of living of which I am ignorant. Second-hand information concerning the state of my kidneys, the effects of cholesterol, and the raising of chickens, I can live with. But when it comes to questions of meaning, purpose and death, second-hand information will not do. I cannot survive on a second-hand faith in a second-hand God. There has to be a personal word, a unique confrontation, if I am to come alive.
- Alan Jones. Journey Into Christ

The important thing is never to stop questioning. Curiosity has its own reason for existing. One cannot help but be in awe when he contemplates the mysteries of eternity, of life, of the marvelous structures of reality ... Never lose a holy curiosity.
- Albert Einstein.

The majority of people live below the level of belief or doubt. It takes application and a kind of genius to believe anything.
- T. S. Eliot

Berdyaev often said that most of us just absorb the prevailing outlook. In the Middle Ages, those who were thus ‘cabbages’ were believers. Only original thinkers were atheist or agnostic. Today in Western Europe it is the other way round. Cabbages are now atheist, original thinkers Christian.
- Sister Anna

I question that I may come to reason. I reason that I may perceive the truth.
- Peter Abelard