

**From Theology to Politics: The Anglican Church and the Clamour for Gay Rights**

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## Introduction

On 4<sup>th</sup> May, 2014, the BBC reported that Bishop Gene Robinson, the first openly gay bishop in the U.S. Episcopal Church, was divorcing Mark Andrew, his partner of 25 years. According to the report, Bishop Robinson said he was “forever grateful” to Mark Andrew and that the details of their split were private. According to the BBC, Robinson who had become a symbol and champion of LGBT rights by the time of his retirement as bishop in 2012, said that it was “a small comfort to know that gay and lesbian couples are subject to the same complications and hardships that afflict marriages between heterosexual couples.” He added: “My belief in marriage is undiminished by the reality of divorcing someone I have loved for a very long time, and will continue to love even as we separate.”<sup>1</sup>

It is important to note that the clamour for LGBT rights around the world threw the entire body of Christ, including the Anglican Church, into turmoil. The ordination of Robinson as Bishop of the New Hampshire Diocese of the Episcopal Church in 2003 sharply divided the global Anglican Communion with hundreds of parishes in the United States as well as several African bishops opting to form their own independent associations to protest against this act. The leadership of the Anglican Church was now face to face with a theological problem that was slowly deteriorating into a full-blown political conflict. With LGBT sympathizers openly holding marches around the world to fight for their rights and voice their need for constitutional and spiritual inclusion, the Church needed to take a stand. On the 19<sup>th</sup> of April, 2014, BBC had published the account of the difficulty Justin Welby, Archbishop of Canterbury, was facing in giving the Church direction on this matter. According to this report, the Archbishop had spoken

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<sup>1</sup> BBC News. ‘Gay US bishop Gene Robinson to divorce husband’ BBC News  
<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-27278938> accessed on 6th December, 2019.

of the struggle to do “what is right and just to all” on the issue of gay marriages in the Church of England, admitting that the Church had caused “great harm to gay and lesbian groups.”<sup>2</sup>

In this paper I wish to make a brief analysis of the situation the Anglican Church has found itself in and propose an alternative theological solution to the debate in doing this I shall raise three questions: First, is the Anglican Church dealing with a theological or a political problem when contending with the ordination of gay bishops? Second, what would be an appropriate biblical paradigm for addressing the clamour for inclusion of gays and lesbians in Church life and leadership? Last but not least, might there be a way of owning this problem while staying faithful to the Scriptures?

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

### **From theology to politics**

The Anglican Church, as any other Christian denomination, may find itself sunk in confusion regarding social questions primarily because of unwillingness to settle the cardinal question of what informs Church doctrine and practice. A vegetarian restaurant draws its menu from the vegetable family. Engineers concern themselves with the laws of physics and mechanics. Philosophers draw their distinction from the world of ideas. On the question of gays and lesbians clamouring for all kinds of rights, sadly the Church seems to elevate other sources of authority than its raw material, i.e. the bible. As a result, political opinion and cultural diversity become the yardstick for decision-making. For instance, the church has bought into pluralism and tolerance and given these ideals the same definition of love the Gospels talk about, thus confusing Jude's concept of loving as to "snatch" some from the fire with giving practices the Bible condemns the status of acceptance. In doing this, the church has slowly moved from using theology to decide her matters to ensuring political correctness or even voting on matters God has spoken clearly about. For this reason, all LGBT questions, but especially that of gays and lesbians, are increasingly being directed by cultural and philosophical considerations instead of biblical theology.

While biblical theology is discoursed on from a cultural perspective, such cultures are ordinarily subsumed under the unchanging authority of Scripture for the very reason that culture keeps changing. Right here our definition of biblical theology is important. The *Moody Handbook of Theology* defines this notion well. Biblical theology, in this rather than the liberal sense, takes its material in a historically oriented manner from the Old and New Testaments and arrives at a theology. It is exegetical in nature, drawing its material from the Bible as opposed to a philosophical understanding of theology; it stresses the historical circumstances in which

doctrines were propounded; it examines the theology within a given period of history (as in Noahic or Abrahamic eras) or of an individual writer (as Pauline or Johannine writings).

Paul Enns, the author of this Handbook, concludes by defining biblical theology as “that branch of theological science which deals systematically with the historically conditioned progress of the self-revelation of God as deposited in the Bible.”<sup>3</sup> In this sense, the Church would do well to anchor its synods, conferences and overall decisions from a historical-grammatical reading of homosexuality as a whole instead of letting changing political processes take over her identity.

Charles Hodge states at the beginning of the first chapter of his *Systematic Theology* that, not only is theology a science, but that, like every scientific discipline, theology must include something more than a mere knowledge of facts. As a science, theology “must embrace an exhibition of the internal relation of those facts, one to another, and each to all.”<sup>4</sup> He adds that if one biblical fact is admitted, then others that are related to it cannot be denied.

That the Anglican Church leadership has relocated its authority on the question of gay rights from the bible to socio-cultural and political experiences and legislations is obvious. In the earlier-cited BBC article, Justin Welby, Archbishop of Canterbury was quoted as declaring:

You look at some of the gay, lesbian, LGBT groups in this country and around the world - Africa included, actually - and their experience of abuse, hatred, all kinds of things. ... We must both respond to what we've done in the past and listen to those voices extremely carefully ... Listen with love and compassion and sorrow And do what is possible to be done, which is not always a huge amount.”<sup>5</sup>

It is clear that the Archbishop was at great pains to see the communion break to pieces because of this question, but he does not hide his leaning towards the Episcopal communion. The

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<sup>3</sup> Paul Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology*. (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2008) pp2

<sup>4</sup>Charles Hodge. *Systematic Theology*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library 2005).

<sup>5</sup> Op.cit, BBC World Service.

rest of his statement which we have not cited here mentions his concern about the innocent killing of gays in certain countries on the basis of their sexual orientation. His sorrow over this is clear.

Besides sulking over the fate of the Episcopal consequences of ordaining gay clergy leading to a split in the communion, the Archbishop seems to allow the killings or “persecution” of gays in respective countries to provide an emotional argument for including them in communion and softening condemnation of their practices as unfit for the Church. Yet, we must ask a question as to why the Anglican Church has found itself in this position of battling with the problem away from clear biblical injunctions on same-sex marriage and relationships. We propose three main reasons. First, the historical developments following Lambeth 1998 led to a clear split within the Anglican Communion on the question of same-sex relationships. Second, there is the demographic shift of the Anglican population to the global South. The third reason is related to this. With a demographic shift Southwards, there is the question of a cultural shift given that the South tends to be more conservative than the North which has continued in the direction of sexual tolerance. Let us look at these closely.

On the first point, University of Aberdeen scholars, Christopher C. Brittain and Andrew McKinnon (2011) interviewed seventy clerics of the Anglican Church to draw the conclusion that “The conflict over homosexuality,” which had embroiled the Anglican Communion over the preceding 15 years, was not primarily a conflict about homosexuality or about sexuality per se, but rather that the conflict had been so intense because “homosexuality” had become “a salient symbol, to which different Anglican constituencies (Evangelical, Liberal, and Anglo - Catholic) have brought their own agenda.” They add that the conflict “does not simply reflect a pre-existing division between “liberals” and “conservatives,” but the emerging schism reflects the

construction of a new religio-cultural identity of "Anglican Orthodoxy," which has increasingly polarized the Communion.”

Drawing their argument from the proceedings of the 1998 Lambeth Conference, Brittain and McKinnon trace the politicization of this question to two main camps that emerged during the deliberations. They state:

In the lead-up to the Lambeth conference in 1998 ... the dispute began in earnest at the international level ... The conference drafted Resolution 1.10, which was intended to serve as a compromise resolution but did little to quell the conflict. It identifies "homosexual practice as incompatible with scripture" while it also "calls on all our people to minister pastorally and sensitively to all irrespective of sexual orientation and to condemn irrational fear of homosexuals." ... Since the resolution left the more militant parties on both sides feeling dissatisfied, it may well have intensified the situation. Lambeth 1998 thus failed to resolve the tension building both within and between Anglicans in different countries (Provinces) of the Communion.”

So politically dramatic was the period following Lambeth 1998 that, although the conference on the one hand was followed by an increase in bishops coming out to state that they were gay and some of them being ordained, several bishops boycotted Lambeth 2008. Some chose to meet in Jerusalem a month before Lambeth 2008 and called their conference the “Global Anglican Future’s Conference (GAFCON) Evidently, although the Anglican Church was accustomed to theological and social conflicts such as the Church’s position on slave trade and slavery, none of these had ever divided the communion the way this question did.

Second, to understand the shift from reading the clamour for gay rights as a theological question, one needs to look at Philip Jenkins’s prediction that the Christianity of the future would lean towards the Global South. In *The Next Christendom* Jenkins states that there is bound to be a revolution. To quote him:

Over the past five centuries or so, the story of Christianity has been inextricably bound up with that of Europe and European-derived civilizations overseas, above all in North America.... Over the past century, however, the centre of gravity in the Christian world

has shifted inexorably Southward, to Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Already today, the largest Christian communities on the planet are to be found in Africa and Latin America.<sup>6</sup>

Jenkins adds that, historically, low birth rates in the traditionally Christian states of Europe implies that Christianity in these nations is either declining or stagnant. Consequently, while in 1950 a list of the world's leading Christian countries would have included Britain, France, Spain and Italy, none of these would be represented in a corresponding list in 2050. Jenkins's predictions are corroborated by other studies including several Pew Review statistics. Brittain and McKinnon observe that regular Church attendance in the Church of England amounts to less than a million people compared with about 17.5 million of the Anglican Church of Nigeria. In essence, the Anglican Church may not principally be dealing with a theological problem, but one of realignment with regard to the emerging redefinitions of global Christianity. In effect, the gay debate becomes a mere catalyst to the bigger picture of competing allegiances between Southern and Northern Christianity. The boldness of certain African communions to openly pronounce their willingness to break off from the European communion is symptomatic of this future realignment. The Archbishop of Canterbury is thus hard-pressed to retain the Northern Communion with its leaning towards liberal sexuality, but is not willing to lose control of the Southern majority.

This leads us to the third reason for the shift from theology to politics in the discussion. The Global South tends to be more conservative or orthodox in its understanding and manifestation of Christianity. With most congregations in Africa and Latin America leaning towards both a literal interpretation of Scripture and a charismatic expression of faith, liberal theology has little room in the church. For this reason, passages such as Exodus, Leviticus ...

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<sup>6</sup>Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (NY: Oxford University Press, 2002)

and Romans 1:18-30 are taken as God's unchangeable Word and so anyone who wishes to interpret Christianity differently would find the Global Southern communion unwilling to collaborate. Jenkins in *The Next Christendom* even predicts that the Church of the Global South will necessarily shape the doctrinal positions of the future Church. As a result, the same-sex debate remains a trigger for this anticipated realignment.

Drawing from the foregoing observations, it is clear that the clamour for rights by gays in the Church is a smoke screen for a deep-seated power struggle, not just between the liberal and conservative camps, but also between the future control of the Anglican communion. It is more than hegemony. It may very well resurrect the whole question of who controls the "high" and who controls the "low" Church. In essence, who ends up being the real leader of the Anglican Communion and what Anglicanism really means?

### **Towards a Biblical paradigm for inclusion**

In 1948, the newly-formed United Nations came up with a document it titled the "Universal Declaration of Human Rights."<sup>7</sup> This was the first time in human history that a global organization sought to impose human rights on the world. Notably, throughout history, the Church had not discussed rights at this level. To this day, the church is yet to come up with a binding document on rights to be observed by all. Thus, the clamour for gay rights does not originate in the Church and has not topped the agenda of many a church conference except for sessions such as those of the Lambeth Conference. The church does not give individuals or

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<sup>7</sup> United Nations, *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. (United Nations, 2015)  
[https://www.un.org/en/udhrbook/pdf/udhr\\_booklet\\_en\\_web.pdf](https://www.un.org/en/udhrbook/pdf/udhr_booklet_en_web.pdf)

groups any rights. Besides, the church does not defend anything authoritatively outside the canon of Scripture. While fundamentals such as the right to life can be deduced from passages such as Genesis 1:26-27 and chapter 9:5 as well as the commandment not to kill, the only clear sexual injunctions include exhortations to fidelity in marriage between a man and woman as well as the importance of meeting conjugal needs between spouses. (1 Corinthians 7:4) Recent clamours for constitutional rights which have necessitated the clamour for abortion and gay rights are foreign to the Church. In essence, the Anglican Communion finds itself battling, not with these specific clamours, but with competing worldviews that drive the respective lobbying. These worldviews include secular humanism, relativism and postmodernism. Pitted against biblical absolutes, moral relativism in particular demands a reconstruction of the social order to include individual interests and orientations. The Church, therefore, finds itself at a place where its authority is challenged by these worldviews which redefine everything including such terms as “love” and “inclusion.”

John Anderson (2011) suggests that it is impossible to read this crisis away from international relations and that the debate is intensified by the clash between Church values and international rules. According to him, Lambeth failed to deal with the problem and so there arose attempts by the 2004 Windsor Report to appeal for the recantation of the Episcopal Church in America, a halt on future blessing of same-sex marriages as well as the need for future theological reflection on the matter.<sup>8</sup> With increased differences, there was recommended a common Anglican covenant that “would make explicit and forceful the loyalty and bonds of affection which govern the relationship between the churches of the communion.” This was pushed for in 2010 but it did little to solve the division. The North-South way of viewing moral

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<sup>8</sup>John Anderson, “Contesting Values and Searching for “Rules” in the Anglican Crisis”, *Politics and Religion*, 4 (2011), 428–447

behavior in the Church remained different. The North which tended to be more pluralistic in its application of values openly clashed with the Global South which continued to lean towards a conservatism that would view the clamour for gay rights as both Western and unbiblical.

The Bible as shall be seen below, becomes the only useful paradigm in returning the question to its foundation in what god has said on same-sex marriage, while providing for redemptive love of all caught up in sin. Paul is very categorical in 1 Corinthians 6<sup>9</sup> that homosexuals will not inherit the Kingdom of God. He adds in Romans 1:18-30 that the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against men who “burn” for other men and women who “exchange” the natural relationship with women and desire sexual relations with other women. With the Early Church having dealt with this as a prevailing cultural problem, there was sufficient guidance on the matter for all Christians. For the Anglican Church to resurrect another way of addressing this by introducing standards posed by global political changes, is to miss a clear biblical paradigm.

## **Conclusion**

To bring this discussion to a close, we make some remarks on the possibility of owning this crisis as a Church while staying faithful to the Scriptures of the Bible. We propose here with the Global Southern church as well as with the conservative wing of the Northern communion that the Bible would be the most useful tool in resolving this conflict on three grounds: First, because it adjudicates over all cultures equally. This is the way Andrew Walls viewed the Gospel, *vis-a-vis*, as both “prisoner and liberator of culture.” 2 Timothy 3:16-17 would add that all Scripture is profitable for instruction, correction and rebuke. Second, the clamour for same-sex rights in the church is a global political agenda and not a spiritual injunction. The Bible

preceded the United Nations 1948 Charter on Human Rights. Lastly, there is a sense in which persons who find themselves trapped in same-sex relationships can be loved redemptively as human beings made in the image of God, but this redemptive love is not democratic in its application. We are to love them the same way Jude advised, “Be merciful to those who doubt; save others by snatching them from the fire; to others show mercy, mixed with fear—hating even the clothing stained by corrupted flesh.” (Jude verses 22-23).

This is not the same as condoning homosexual practices. Jude, indeed, advises that, in relating to those caught up in the works of the flesh, we should avoid being contaminated by their associations and mannerisms. He adds in verse 24 that God is able to keep us from stumbling and present us before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy. Certainly, the Episcopal Church had gone too far by ordaining Bishop Robinson and it is a pity that the discussion was moved away from theology to politics. As long as the advice by Jude remains a matter of opinion to the Anglican Church, the adoption of a political solution will inevitably lead to a divided communion with very little hope for restoration of the original status quo of a united Church.

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