

African Responses to New Hampshire and New Westminster: An Address

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When I received a letter from the President of the Historical Society asking if I would consider being the speaker at this year's annual meeting I was flattered.¹ Then I read the fine print: would I consider talking about "the position of the third world Anglican churches in the current crisis...it would be helpful to have a clearer picture of the response of the African churches than the rather cryptic press accounts sometimes provided." The "crisis," of course, is the situation we now find ourselves in as a global communion following two events in North America: the decision at General Convention 2003 to ratify the election of a man who is a practicing homosexual to be the Bishop of New Hampshire, and his subsequent consecration, and the decision by the Diocese of New Westminster in Canada to allow the blessing of same-sex unions within the diocese and the production of a liturgy for that purpose. These events have resulted in a perhaps unprecedented negative response by many in the communion. With regard to the letter of invitation I must be fair – the topic was left completely up to me – I was in no way coerced to speak about this subject. But the letter made its point: grave misunderstanding is far too easy if we know little about the context from which a statement is made or a position is taken. Even those of us Anglicans who live within the same culture have had a difficult time communicating with each other recently. How much more confusion is possible if we speak from differing culture contexts? The topic which the President's letter suggested was both timely and crucial. But I immediately saw the potential landmines.

First, although I have lived in Africa and I love Africa, and although I have spent much of my academic life seeking to comprehend that wonderful place more deeply, I am not an African and I cannot presume to speak for Africa.² Africa is an immense, varied, and complicated place. I am well aware that whatever I say some of my African friends will be well within their rights to question my judgement, or even my presumption to render an opinion. There is no one "African position" on the subject of homosexuality; neither is there one monolithic opinion about the wisdom of the actions of the Canadian and American churches, although it is quite clear that there is a majority opinion. Second, I was immediately aware of who my audience would be for this talk, and aware that many in the room would not share my own opinions about the meaning of the present situation. And finally, I am deeply conscious that our present troubles have left many of us emotionally raw. The issues of sexuality with which we have been struggling (and which can now be seen to involve also issues of culture and race, of money and power) touch all of us at deep levels of our being. Anger is not far from the surface of conversations. I have told my students many times that I would much rather be a church historian writing about these events three hundred years from now.

I see my task to attempt a description of some of the more important characteristics of Anglicanism as it has emerged in the non-western world, and especially in Africa, over the past several generations. It is now clear that the missionary movement of the 19th century gave way in the 20th century to a Christianity whose "centre of gravity" (to use the wonderful turn of phrase of Andrew Walls) had shifted south.³ More and more, in the 21st century and beyond, the theological and ecclesiological agendas of the global church – including Anglicanism – will be set not in New York, Canterbury, Geneva, or even Rome, but in Nairobi, Lagos, Beijing, Singapore, and Lima. There will probably come a day when students wishing to do doctoral research in church history will find it necessary to learn Korean, Mandarin, and Yoruba and students wanting to do advanced research in biblical studies will find Spanish more helpful than French, and Kiswahili and Arabic of more relevance than German or English. Christianity has already become increasingly marginal to western intellectual discourse and soon western Christianity will become increasingly irrelevant in the theology of world Christianity.⁴ The European and North American hegemony over the Christian world is fading away. Already we are seeing the churches of the south, in spite of their relative poverty, beginning to flex their theological and ecclesiastical muscles. Nowhere is this truer than within Anglicanism. While Anglican churches in the west continue to shrink and to grow grey, the large numbers of people worshipping in Anglican churches in parts of the southern hemisphere, and notably in Africa, continue to grow. I recently had dinner with an American bishop the evening before giving a lecture in her diocese. During the conversation over the meal I asked how many Anglicans there were in the diocese. I learned that the most recent census stated that there were about 40,000 Episcopalians within the geographical boundaries of the diocese. From the parish lists the diocese could identify the names of only half that number. I wondered how many of those were actually in church on a

given Sunday. She estimated that there would be approximately 5,000. I confess that at that point I mentioned that I knew an Anglican parish in Nairobi (St. Stephen's, Jogoo Road) that has almost that many in Sunday services every week.

With increasing numbers, the churches of the south will eventually have the power and the will to shape the theological direction of world Christianity. In fact in several ways this has already taken place, as I hope to show in a moment. If one is interested in seeing where Christian theology is going, watch Latin America, the Caribbean, Asia, the Pacific, but especially – watch Africa. The growth is amazing. This growth is beginning to give birth to theology. So what are the theological issues which are important to the global south? What are some of the major concerns with which the church will grapple in the next generations as the gospel continues to make its way southwards? Not all of the present and future trends of global Christianity or global Anglicanism will make people in the Northern Hemisphere happy. Some of these trends will make “conservatives” very uncomfortable and some will make western “liberals” cringe. But be assured, we in the west, whether we are liberal or conservative theologically, will not be setting the agenda. No doubt we will have influence for a while at least (the western churches still have larger bank accounts and more institutional resources), but our influence is waning. I will begin by touching on several themes that I take to be crucial characteristics of African Anglicanism.⁵ Each of these characteristics has played a part in the response of African Anglican churches to GC 2003 and to New Westminster. I will then discuss two attitudes towards Africans which have emerged in the midst of the fierce rhetoric which has swirled around the Communion in the past couple of years, attitudes which will make any move towards reconciliation extremely difficult.

Some Characteristics of Anglicanism in Africa

1. Christianity is a non-western religion

I was disturbed recently to discover that my alma mater (the Faculty of Religious Studies at McGill) has gone the way of many university religion departments. In the attempt to classify and organize itself, the faculty now advertises that it teaches two different streams of religious traditions – western and eastern. Those who teach Hinduism and Buddhism are teachers of “eastern” religion; those who teach Judaism, Christianity and Islam teach the religions of the west. (Sadly, no one teaches the indigenous religious traditions of Africa or, amazingly, the religions of the native people of North America!). The result, of course, is that “Christianity” has been re-invented and marginalized as a religion of the west.

The reality, however, is that Christianity has its origins “in Asia, not Europe... the gospel was in Africa before it was in Europe, in India before it was in England, and in China before it was in America.”⁶ To characterize Christianity as “western” domesticates the faith and implies that if a non-western person becomes a Christian, he or she is changing cultures – leaving behind Indian, or African, or Chinese culture and becoming European. Of course, to our shame, this has often been true. Missionaries both past and present have confused the gospel with the culture in which they learned it and have attempted to make converts in their own image. Anglicans have been as bad or worse than most, importing vestments, buildings, and liturgical expressions appropriate for northern Europe into tropical climates and making a mockery of the articles of religion which declare that “it is not necessary that Traditions and Ceremonies be in all places one, and utterly like; for at all times they have been divers, and may be changed according to the diversities of countries, times, and men's [and women's] manners, so that nothing be ordained against God's Word.” (Article XXXIV) All Saints' Cathedral in Nairobi is a beautiful building, but no one can deny that it is a chunk of England dropped into the middle of Africa. My family and I once had the very strange experience of singing “In the bleak mid-winter... earth stood hard as iron, water like a stone” in a parish church in central Kenya on a warm Christmas Eve in the middle of a tea plantation. The experience was made only a bit less incongruous by the clear view of snow-capped Mt. Kilimanjaro, many miles to the south, which we glimpsed from the church yard after the service.

The good news is that African Christians are beginning to sort out the differences between gospel and the European clothing in which it has often been dressed. Drums rather than organs, testimonies and dancing rather than (or as well as) processions and finery, are only the visible tip of the iceberg. African Christianity, Anglicanism included, is struggling to express its life and thought in authentically African

ways, a trend which has required African Christians to go back behind the missionary Christianity which they received, to the sources of the faith.⁷

2. Theology as reflection on praxis

The language of this topic may be recognized as the language of Latin American liberation theology. That brand of “third world” theology has been done primarily from a political context. Although not all non-western world theology is as overtly political, there is little theology emerging from the southern hemisphere that is unconcerned about pragmatic issues of life, with issues of how the gospel actually relates to real people in real places. Theology as reflection on praxis, in other words, is (as the gospels and Paul’s letter are) occasional and local in character.

The domestic tasks of Third World theology are going to be so basic, so vital, that there will be little room for the barren, sterile, time-wasting by-paths into which so much Western theology and theological research has gone in recent years. Theology in the Third World will be, as theology at all creative times has always been, about *doing* things, about things that deeply affect the lives of numbers of people.⁸

I once heard the Ghanaian New Testament scholar John Pobee remark that when third world theologians get together, the Latin Americans want to talk about justice, the Asians want to talk about religion, and the Africans want to talk about culture. Although his observation is something of a generalization, it is a fairly good map of the general territory of theological concerns. Theology in the south is pragmatic, practical, focused on issues of life and death. Some of this will come as a surprise to some “conservatives” in the western world who seem to think that Africans are just black people who think like them. Third world theology is clearly focused on the world and the relation between the gospel and the world. Since theology is seen as reflection on praxis, it is mission-centred theology, focused on God’s mission in the world and on our place in reference to what God is doing in the world. Such theology is also biblical in its focus since most African theologians and church leaders will insist that praxis be tested by scripture. But mission-focused it is and such theology will insist that culture be taken seriously as the site of God’s blessing and God’s judgement. African theology will not shy away from discussing issues of family, sexuality, and procreation. In fact issues such as circumcision, polygyny, levirate marriage, and fecundity have been central issues for African Christian theology.⁹

3. Theology as the servant of evangelism and holistic mission

While teaching in a Kenyan theological college I had the good fortune to have a student named Jeremiah Muathe. Muathe would come to class every Monday morning after chapel with his newspaper in hand. While the class gathered he would be deeply engrossed in consuming the front page. One of the reasons for his interest was that his Bishop, David Gitari,¹⁰ was often on the front page. At that particular time in the life of the church in Kenya the press would follow Gitari (and other church leaders) and report on his sermons and other public speeches extensively. The bishop was highly critical of the government and, since there was no opposition party in the country at the time, church leaders were often the only people in the country with the moral authority to speak for justice. Muathe also brought the paper to class on Tuesdays – since that was when the press reported on what parliament had had to say in response to Gitari’s Sunday sermons. Muathe’s interest in politics led me to think that I had him figured out. My experience of my own church in Canada led me to think that most Christians were either left-wing liberals interested in social and political change or right-wing conservatives interested in evangelism. I assumed that Muathe must be in the former category.

A while later students had an Easter break and most returned to their home villages for a short visit. When the semester resumed I greeted Muathe one morning and asked about his time at home. His response was instructive. He told me that he had had a wonderful time. He had gathered the youth of his parish and, with some musical instruments and a sound system, they had gone to the local marketplace where they had sung and preached the gospel. Quite a number of people had been saved, he said. I was amazed. Few people in the west seem able to hold together the tension which views mission so holistically. He was interested in both the “spiritual” and the “social”; mission was about helping people to have a personal relationship with Jesus and about justice for the poor.

Muathe, I learned, was not alone. In fact he was the norm. African Anglicanism had, and has, a distinct lack of dualism in its approach to mission. Mission includes words and deeds, heart and mind, the inward

and outward. The so-called "Decade of Evangelism" declared at Lambeth 1988 did not happen because the west recognized its poverty in this area, but because the Asian and African bishops insisted on it. Lambeth 1998 spent time discussing the issue of global debt, not because the western bishops thought that it was time, but because African bishops had lobbied for years to have this issue addressed. Some of the rhetoric recently heard about Africa seems to assume that Africans hold the traditional position with regard to sexual ethics because they are not interested in social justice. Nothing could be further from the truth. African church leaders have stood up to tyrannical regimes often when no one else in their countries had the courage to speak. Bishops have been tireless in their advocacy for the poorest and the weakest. To argue that African Christians are conservative on sexuality because they are not advocates for justice is a sad misjudgement of the reality.

4. The community as the locus of faith

One of the more obvious characteristics of western culture is our belief in the autonomy of the individual. Descartes' maxim "I think (or, rather, "I doubt") therefore I am" reached creedal status in the post-Enlightenment period. For conservative evangelical Christians this often meant that mission could be reduced to "personal evangelism" or "leading individuals to Christ," to helping people, one by one, to make a "personal decision." Evangelical Anglicans have sometimes been accused of having a low ecclesiology, because such a priority has been set on individual evangelism. Similarly, the so-called "left" wing of the church has often perceived itself as the champion of individual human rights. The movement for gay rights is, from one perspective, part of a continuum which views the emancipation of the individual as a central part of Christian mission.

In contrast to western individualism, African Christians see the community as the locus of faith. It is not Descartes' "I think therefore I am" that rings true in Africa but, rather, Kenyan Anglican theologian John Mbiti's maxim: "I am because we are."¹¹ An individual exists only as a part of a family, a household, a clan. Individual human rights are important for Africans, but not if they are perceived to be damaging to the community. The individual's personal preferences are limited by the good of the whole. Even conversion is often a group decision. In a recent visit to a Muslim country I came across an African Anglican priest who in the last two or three years has been the catalyst for several hundred African Muslims coming to faith in Jesus Christ. The particular ethnic group which this priest has found himself ministering to seems to have come to a group decision to turn from going in one direction in order to turn to Christ.

This emphasis on community is one of the many reasons that African Anglicans are so incredulous over the actions of General Convention 2003 and the Diocese of New Westminster. They believed the Communion's own rhetoric over the last decades which asserted time and again that we were a family. The family had said that we believed in "mutual responsibility and interdependence in the body of Christ."¹² The Lambeth Conference had voted overwhelmingly against allowing the blessing of same-sex unions or the ordination of those in same-sex relationships. The Archbishop of Canterbury had urged Canada and the United States not to go ahead. Indeed, the Primates Meeting had issued a statement signed by the Primates of the Canadian and the American churches which said that the consecration of a bishop living in a homosexual relationship would damage this family. And yet Gene Robinson was consecrated. For the Primate of the Episcopal Church to say that he understood that the family would be damaged and yet to go ahead and perform an action which would cause that damage was almost incomprehensible for most Africans. African Christians (not just bishops, by the way, but virtually every African I know) are upset, not just because they believe that homosexual acts are immoral and unbiblical (which they do), but *also* because the action taken in putting a practicing homosexual in a position of authority in the church has brought shame on the family. To know that the consecration of Gene Robinson would, in the now-famous phrase, "tear the fabric of our Communion at its deepest level,"¹³ and yet still to go ahead and do it is a grievous offence against what it means to belong to a family.

It should be noted that most of the declarations by African bishops and synods announcing that they are now in a state of impaired communion or out of communion with ECUSA and with the Anglican Church of Canada are worded in such a way that they make it quite clear that they do not believe that it is they who have broken communion. The Diocese of Egypt, for example, said that "by their actions, they have chosen to step out of communion with the Anglican Communion." The Archbishop of Central Africa wrote,

“...you have broken our fellowship. To sit with you and meet with you would be a lie.”¹⁴ They believe that they are responding to their clear perception that the North American churches have broken communion. To go ahead and share the Eucharist together at the Primates Meetings, therefore, would be to pretend that the relationship had not been broken.

5. The reality and near proximity of the invisible world

The emphasis on family and community found within African Christianity is not limited to the visible world or the world of the living. The ancestors, the “living dead” and spirits both benevolent and malevolent are a reality which few Africans will deny. Although many missionaries tend to demythologize African beliefs in the invisible world, labelling such convictions as superstition and attempting to reduce practices to an anthropological or a psychological level, Africans are not usually dissuaded. Many of the theological students I taught in Africa came to an awareness of their call to ministry through a dream or a vision. Although most theological curricula in Africa (patterned as most are on western models) do not include courses which help students to learn how to deal with problems requiring exorcism, most African pastors will eventually encounter such pastoral issues in their ministry.

The issue of how best to deal with issues of the invisible world are matters of intense, sometimes heated, discussion in African churches. Some years ago, at 4:00 one afternoon (Kenya is very British – in some ways), I joined some theological students for tea. I was just beginning a conversation with a pair of students from central Kenya when a young woman student from eastern Kenya (where the ancestors are taken very seriously indeed) came over to sit with us. Just before she sat down on the bench, she tipped her cup and let a few drops of tea fall to the ground. I didn't really notice. The students I was with certainly did. They immediately began to challenge this action, declaring it to be idol worship and very dangerous. They reminded her of the second commandment and they demanded that she explain why she would possibly want to pour out a libation offering to the ancestors! After they had had their say, she calmly replied that she was simply honouring her Father and her Mother. For these students the spiritual, invisible world was real, alive, and very close.

It should not be a surprise, therefore, that actions which are considered sinful and damaging to the church should be objected to with rhetoric which makes reference to the spiritual world. After the attacks on 9/11 Archbishop Gitari's sermon included a reference to this event as another example which demonstrates the reality of Satan. According to one source, some Nigerian bishops expressed their objections to Gene Robinson's ratification as “devilish and satanic... from the pit of hell.”¹⁵ For many Africans such a description is not simply ranting (although no doubt ranting has occurred on all sides in the “debate” recently), but rather an attempt to understand how people who call themselves Christians and Anglicans could possibly have done such a thing. “An enemy has done this,” Jesus says in one of his parables (Mt 13:28). I would tend to agree.

6. Suffering and the cross

The passion of Jesus carries great meaning for African Christians, most of whom know suffering intimately. The eucharistic liturgy of the Anglican Church of Kenya emphasizes the cross and the blood of Jesus more than any recent western liturgies. “Far from finding these notions of Christ's sacrificial death embarrassing or abhorrent, the Kenyan prayer book celebrates the sacrificial nature of Christ's death for human sin.”¹⁶ The cross is not an image of hopelessness and despair for Africans. Rather, in the cross African readers of the New Testament see both the identification of God with African pain and the atoning work of the Lamb, a note which finds an echo in the memories of African traditional sacrificial rituals.

War, persecution, AIDS, and international debt are issues that the third world bishops are always pressing the Communion to discuss. But instead we have been through decades of discussion of the issue that western church leaders want to talk about – sexuality. The leaders of the non-western Anglican churches are now growing impatient. They have often experienced their suffering continually being put on the agenda for a future meeting while the issues of the west garner most of the attention.

7. The Bible and its relevance

Until very recently western theological education was dominated by the assumption that the historical critical method was all that most seminarians really needed to learn about the Bible. This assumption led

to Scripture being reduced to “history” and history being reduced to a human story about human religious experience. In practice this meant that the Bible was cut off from “theology” while theology itself was reduced to religious anthropology.

The leadership of the African churches became indigenized around the middle of the 20th c. As this happened it was recognized that theological education also needed to be taught indigenously, that theology which was truly African needed to be developed, and a reading of the Bible that took African readers and African culture seriously was also a priority. As African biblical scholars and ordinary African Bible readers began to take responsibility for their own interpretation of the text, the weakness of western theological traditions to answer African questions soon came to the surface. Knowing the past history of the text was important, but not good enough. Knowing western exegetical methods was interesting, but often irrelevant. Most western scholars, it seemed, did not take the believing community seriously in their work. Assumptions underlying some methodological approaches seemed deistic and at odds with an African worldview.

Since Lambeth 1998, the General Convention of 2003, and subsequent contentious events in the life of the Anglican Communion, it has often been noted that the Bible has played an important part in the discussions. In fact some have said that the real issue is not sexuality but the place of the Bible. Indeed the Windsor Report gives such careful attention to the issue of scripture that one is tempted to think that the members of the commission also thought that the authority of the Bible needed to be a central issue in our ongoing discussions.

Some North Americans, however, have argued that the problem has been that Africans simply read the Bible and attempt to obey it without any due consideration to issues of interpretation. Nothing could be further from the truth. African Christians are intensely aware that the Bible came to them packaged in western interpretation. They are determined to break free from that western hegemony and to read the Bible with their own eyes. Once they have done this, however, they are certainly willing to obey the words of scripture as it addresses them. The question for the west is whether we are actually willing to obey scripture once it has been interpreted.

Western Responses to Africans

The characteristics of African Anglicanism mentioned above bring us some way towards understanding the response to GC 2003, but the vigorous nature of the reaction should probably lead us to ask whether western reactions and attitudes have heightened the tension. We might recall that the question many Americans asked after 9/11 was, “Why do they hate us?” American and Canadian Anglicans appear to be asking similar questions following the response of non-western Anglicans to the consecration of Gene Robinson and the blessing of same-sex unions in New Westminster. Two issues have emerged repeatedly.

Imperialism

Perhaps a brief and very selective history of American Episcopalianism would be a helpful place to begin. When Anglicans living in the American colonies were denied episcopal leadership by the Church of England, American Anglicans decided that they would not wait for a change of attitude in England. Instead they went to Scotland where they found a church willing to give the Americans the gift of episcopacy, and Samuel Seabury was consecrated and sent back to the United States as the first bishop. When it was thought by advocates for the ordination of women that the communion was dragging its feet on the question, a service was organized in Philadelphia in order to ordain the first American women priests. It was technically illegal, of course, but widely proclaimed to be “prophetic.” When conservatives in the United States found that the process of trying to exist within a liberal denomination had simply become too frustrating, a group of disaffected American Anglicans enlisted the help of the Primates of Rwanda and South East Asia, and the Anglican Mission in America received its first bishops in a service held in Singapore; more were consecrated some time later in Denver. And although the communion did not want the Episcopal Church to go ahead with the ordination of a practicing homosexual, still the consecration went ahead. It should be emphasized that so-called “liberal” and so-called “conservatives” have had a tendency to act in the same way – if they are not given what they want, they will take it.

My friend Ian Douglas, who teaches at the Episcopal Divinity School in Boston, related to me that, shortly after the events of GC 2003, he was the only American representative at an inter-Anglican meeting on mission. The experience was an uncomfortable one. The observation that was made to him repeatedly at this conference was that there was a connection between the events surrounding Gene Robinson and the attitude of the present American administration under George Bush. In both cases an imperialist attitude was evident to most non-Americans.¹⁷ If the United Nations won't do the job of dealing with Saddam Hussein, then America will go ahead and do it anyway – even if most countries in the world oppose such a unilateral action. And when the Anglican Communion through the Lambeth Conference, the Archbishop of Canterbury, The Primates Meeting, and the Anglican Consultative Council (that is, through all four of what the Virginia Report calls the “instruments of unity”¹⁸) ask the American church not to go ahead, and warn of dire consequences, still America goes ahead. America, it seems, whether the Church or the State, will get what it wants.

A similar point is expressed by Scott Benhase. He writes, “We are acting like the American Empire. If, for example, we place ourselves in the shoes of an African bishop, we might see things differently. We might see the Episcopal Church's behavior as yet another case of American imperialism telling the uneducated and unenlightened African Anglicans what they ought to believe and how they ought to think and act, simply continuing the self-righteous thinking that the West has always held towards that part of the world.”¹⁹

The comparison between Bush and Robinson has not gone unchallenged, of course. Carter Hayward writes, “I am told that some of the Southern Primates – choosing to remain ignorant about who Gene Robinson really is – view him the same way they view George W. Bush, as a symbol of Western imperialism. Perceiving Bishop Robinson through the lens of such a superficial analysis of the very real complexities of neo-colonialism and imperialism enables these men not to notice the stunning difference between the Bishop of New Hampshire and the President of the United States....The distinction between the two is almost as stark as that between the Caesar and the poor man from Nazareth.”²⁰ Hayward's analysis could be challenged on a number of different levels. Perhaps it is simply enough to say that imperialism has many faces; being on the “left” rather than the “right” does not exempt one from cultural arrogance.

Racism

Racism is perhaps a harsh term to drag out in the midst of such a tense time in the life of Anglicanism. It is difficult, however, to find another term that is appropriate to describe some of the rhetoric being used about Africans at this time.

A seminal event was the interview given just prior to Lambeth 1998 by John Spong, at the time the Bishop of Newark, to Andrew Carey, a journalist for the Church of England Newspaper. Although Bishop Spong claims that his statements were taken out of context,²¹ the language which he used about the African bishops is very hard to interpret positively:

They've moved out of animism into a very superstitious kind of Christianity. They've yet to face the intellectual revolution of Copernicus and Einstein that we've had to face in the developing world. That's just not on their radar screen....Scientific advances have given us a new way of understanding homosexual people. At the Lambeth Conference and in dealing with the Third World this knowledge hasn't percolated down, and it's not going to change overnight....If they feel patronized that's too bad. I'm not going to cease to be a 20th century person for fear of offending someone in the Third World....I would rather they were Christians than animists, even superstitious, fundamentalist Christians of a type I have primarily experienced in Africa.²²

Spong's comments may possibly have contributed to the galvanizing of African and other non-western bishops in favour of a motion re-stating a traditional view of marriage and sexuality at Lambeth that summer.²³ It also seems likely that Spong's statements had an influence on some of his fellow western bishops and some other “liberal” Anglicans who, immediately following Lambeth, began to accuse Africans of a wide range of unpleasant and immoral behaviour. Richard Holloway, then the Primus of Scotland, stated, “We tried to understand that they live in Islamic countries and therefore Islamify

Christianity, making it more severe, Protestant and legalistic.”²⁴ Africans were not the only target of his scorn, however, for he was convinced that American conservatives had bought African votes on the sexuality resolution at Lambeth with “chicken dinners.” Bishop Walter Righter echoed the vote-buying accusation.²⁵ In more than a few diocesan newspapers in Canada and the United States, bishops attempted to explain the overwhelmingly conservative vote on the sexuality resolution as the result of African ignorance of theology, science, and culture. And the slanderous rumours of Africans votes being bought persisted.

In November 1998 *The Living Church* published a short article by Bishop Herbert Thompson of Southern Ohio entitled, “The Africans Did Not Do It.” Thompson, an African-American, had grown tired, it seems, of hearing Africans “blamed” for the Lambeth vote. His article analyzed the numbers.

The 526 affirmative votes represents a broad consensus across the Communion. If we were to assume that the “no” votes were broadly spread across the First World or the “North,” it is clear that a majority of those bishops voted in favour of the resolution. The Archbishop of Canterbury and I both voted “yes.” If all 70 “no” votes and the 45 abstentions had come from bishops of North America, the United Kingdom and Europe, it would have carried in just those areas by a margin of almost 3 to 1. Further analysis indicates that if all the African bishops had been present and voted “no,” with 45 abstentions, the resolution would still have passed 302-294....The resolution represents the mind of the Anglican Communion as expressed by the bishops of the Communion around the world.²⁶

Thompson’s analysis did little to calm the rhetoric. Not as much has been said about twenty dollar bills or chicken dinners recently, but the suggestion that Africans can be bought has continued.²⁷ The assumption behind such rhetoric, of course, is that Africans are not intelligent enough to think through these issues themselves and that if they had been left on their own they would have been won over by the superior logic of those on the other side of the issue. My own experience is that Africans are perfectly able to think for themselves and that on the issue of homosexuality the church in Africa – not just the bishops or the archbishops – was convinced of their position well before Lambeth 1998.

A new element has emerged in the discussion – the idea that African Christians have no right to speak to the west about homosexuality since their own culture contains elements which are unsavoury. I will quote only one example of this rhetoric, although more cases of such an opinion are easy to access. In a recent book Stephen Bates discusses the use of the internet in the recent crisis making the following observation:

It is an irony that ... [the internet] should be used as a means of squashing a diversity of practice, and that the morality it vows to impose should be that of the developing world, a morality which in the case of Nigeria tolerates polygamy, child sacrifice and the stoning to death of adulterous women (but not their male partners) seemingly without demur but cannot contemplate how a loving relationship between couples of the same sex could be allowed.²⁸

It is true that polygamy exists in Nigeria. It is also true that some parts of Nigeria (and some other African countries) live under some version of Shari’a, Islamic law, and that some elements of Shari’a are extremely harsh and inhumane and that the international community should address hard questions to the Islamic world about their treatment of citizens, especially women. It is simply false to state that Africans practice child sacrifice, now or in the past. Such behaviour has never been a part of African culture. What is quite astounding about Bates’ statement, aside from its ignorance of Africa, is that he would blame the church for existing in the midst of such a context. The Anglican Church in Nigeria does not tolerate polygamy, if by that toleration Bates means that the church recommends the practice as a model of Christian marriage. The churches of Africa have struggled hard and long to find appropriate ways to minister to people in their midst who are polygamists, but no Anglican body in Africa has ever suggested that polygamy is the ideal for Christians. Far from tolerating Shari’a, the African churches, especially in Nigeria and the Sudan, have suffered the loss of property and much martyrdom because they refuse to submit to Islam.

I have heard American bishops telling their people that Africans have no right to talk about homosexuality because Africans practice female genital mutilation. Yes, some Africans still practice female circumcision, perhaps some church-going Africans even force their daughters to undergo this horrible procedure, but as a former missionary to Kenya wrote to me recently, "The Church has always been such a robust opponent of FGM [Female Genital Mutilation] that it has suffered large defections in the past by communities which had at first accepted the Christian message but then proved unwilling to give up this traditional practice. The Church has for a century now continued to educate communities and to support those individuals who at great personal risk have refused to submit to FGM."²⁹

If some on the left have been condemning Africa and Africans, some on the right, it seems, have just woken up to the reality of the strength and numbers and vitality of Anglicanism in Africa in time to use Africans for their own purposes. There are suddenly parishes all over the United States that have come under the authority of a bishop from Africa (or Latin America). How many of these parishes had strong, healthy relationships with African Christians before the recent crisis? Africans are welcoming and they want to help their sisters and brothers in North America whom they perceive to be threatened by the actions of GC 2003 and the Diocese of New Westminster. When they have been asked to help, they have tried, because they perceive that the gospel itself is at stake. But the motives of some western conservative Anglicans are not so clear to me. If the crisis were simply by some miracle to evaporate tomorrow, how many conservative parishes would continue to nurture a growing relationship with a diocese in Africa? I hope that I am wrong and that western parishes who have asked for help from African church leaders will develop serious and mutually beneficial relationships. My worry, however, is that some places will forget about their African friends once the crisis over sexuality has passed. How many western conservative churches will give serious attention to the ongoing crises in Africa over international debt, hunger, the need for clean water, the need for education, and the presence of HIV/AIDS and malaria?

In short the rhetoric which has been used to describe Africans during the current debate is filled with stereotypes. At best such rhetoric is used in ignorance by people who have little or no understanding of Africa. At worst it is used deliberately as a tactic to denigrate people out of anger because they hold a particular opinion. An America bishop fairly recently compared African bishops to Nazis and another to Tarzan swinging through the trees. It is hard to find a term for this other than racism.

Conclusion

The structures of Anglicanism are tilted towards the Northern Hemisphere. Most of the money of the Communion is in the pockets of those in the North. The language of the Anglican Communion tends to be English, the second, third or fourth language of most African leaders, a language not spoken at all by many African worshippers. For some reason official documents on the Anglican Communion website are sometimes translated into French, Portuguese or Spanish, but never, that I have seen, into Kiswahili or Yoruba or Dinka. When the Primate of a western church goes to the Lambeth Conference he takes a staff. The Primate of the Congo or Kenya cannot afford such a luxury. With resources and language and power in the hands of Anglicans in the western world, the fact that so many Anglicans in the west seem not to have been willing to understand Africa seems more than unjust. This essay has made an attempt to uncover a few of the reasons that many African Christians have had such a negative response to the events centred in New Hampshire and New Westminster and to show that many western responses to Africa have been less than kind, to say the least. My hope and prayer is that the vision of a Communion in which there truly is "mutual responsibility and interdependence" may one day become a reality; in the present climate it hard to see how that vision could possibly come to pass. But perhaps the Communion may yet grasp hold of the promise that there is resurrection on the other side of the cross.

Footnotes

1 Letter from Dr. Thad Tate, President of the HSEC.

2 Although it is certainly true that Anglicans from Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean have criticized the decision of GC 2003 to ratify Gene Robinson as Bishop and the decision of the diocese of New Westminster in Canada for allowing the blessing of same-sex unions, this essay will focus on African responses. There are two reasons for this limiting of the discussion. First, I have little direct knowledge of

Asian or Latin American Christianity. The limited experience that I do have leads me to think that it would be a simple thing for those with such experience to write an essay similar to this one from the perspective of those churches. The second reason, however, is more crucial. Although churches from across the global south have criticized the decision of GC 2003, many of the western responses to those criticisms have singled out “Africans” as responsible for most of their condemnation. Since “Africa” seems to be receiving most of the blame, it seems important to examine African responses in particular.

3 See Walls’ two very important collections of essays: *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, 1996) and *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History* (Maryknoll, 2002).

4 Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process*, xix.

5 I have discussed a slightly longer list of characteristics of “non-western Anglicanism” in “The Changeless, The Changeable, and the Changing: Thoughts on the Future of Anglicanism(s),” *Anglican Theological Review* 86/3 (2004): 401-22.

6 Grant LeMarquand and Paul Marshall, “Martyrdom,” *New Dictionary of Christian Apologetics*, W.C. Campbell-Jack, Gavin McGrath and C. Stephen Evans, eds. (Downers Grove, forthcoming).

7 Cf. Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995).

8 Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process*, 10.

9 As Kevin Ward has recently said, “The church of Africa is highly aware of the complexity of sexual issues – the problems of youthful experimentation, casual relationships, prostitution, polygamy, unstable family life, violence against women. They have never been blind to the fragility of marriage and its diversity; nor to the widespread failure of Christians to model a Christian life.” See, “African Perspectives on Episcopacy and Sexuality,” in Andrew Linzey and Richard Kirker, eds., *Gays and the Future of Anglicanism: Responses to the Windsor Report* (Winchester and N.Y., 2005), 252.

10 At the time Gitari was the Bishop of Mt Kenya East. When the diocese divided he led the new Diocese of Kirinyaga until he became the Bishop of Nairobi and Archbishop of Kenya. He retired in 2002.

11 *African Religions and Philosophy* (Nairobi: Heinemann, 1969), 108.

12 See Eugene Fairweather, ed. *Anglican Congress 1963: Report of Proceedings*, (Toronto, 1963), 117-22.

13 “A Statement by the Primates of the Anglican Communion meeting in Lambeth Palace,” can be found at <<http://www.anglicancommunion.org/acns/articles/36/25/acns3633.html>>.

14 A listing of some of the statements issued after Robinson’s consecration by Anglican leaders from around the world can be found in Chris Sugden’s paper before the Lambeth Commission entitled, “What is the Anglican Communion For?” footnote 19. The paper can be found on the Anglican Communion website: <<http://www.anglicancommunion.org/commission/documents/200402whatisitfor.pdf>>.

15 Quoted by J. Patrick Mauney, “The Episcopal Church in the Anglican Communion, Post-Minneapolis,” *Anglican and Episcopal History* 73/4 (2004): 486. Mauney’s source for this quotation (which I have also used, see footnote 28) was the website “Virtuosity”; it is not always an accurate source of information.

16 Grant LeMarquand, “A Faithful Descendant: The Anglican Church of Kenya’s *Our Modern Services* (2002),” in Charles Hefling and Cynthia Shaddick, eds., *The Oxford Guide to the Book of Common Prayer Worldwide* (Oxford, forthcoming).

17 Douglas discusses this experience in the book that he co-authored with Paul Zahl, *Understanding the Windsor Report: Two Leaders in the American Church Speak Across the Divide* (New York, 2005), 17-19.

18 The text of "Virginia Report" can be found in James Rosenthal and Nicola Currie, eds. *Being Anglican in the Third Millennium: The Official Report of the 10th Meeting of the Anglican Consultative Council* (Harrisburg, 1997). It is important to note that the "Windsor Report" also draws attention to these so-called "instruments," apparently assuming them to be widely acknowledged by the Communion. See, The Lambeth Commission on Communion, *The Windsor Report 2004* (Harrisburg, 2004).

19 "Why the Episcopal Church Should Avoid Acting Like George Bush," *The Witness Magazine* (The online version can be accessed at <<http://www.thewitness.org/article.php?id=973>>.

20 "Make Us Prophets and Pastors: An Open Letter to Gay and Lesbian Priests" in Linzey and Kirker, *Gays and the Future of Anglicanism*, 324.

21 For Bishop Spong's interpretation of the interview see his book, *Here I Stand: My Struggle for a Christianity of Integrity, Love, and Equality* (San Francisco, 1999), 429-31.

22 "African Christians? They're just a step up from witchcraft," *Church of England Newspaper* July 10, 1998.

23 For the text of the resolution see <<http://www.aco.org/lambeth/index.html>>.

24 *London Times*, August 7, 1998.

25 *The Living Church*, September 13, 1998.

26 *The Living Church*, November 8, 1998.

27 For example, in a report given to Province IV of the Episcopal Church at the Kanuga Conference Center in June 2005, Jenny Te Paa, a Maori from New Zealand who was a member of the Commission that produced the Windsor Report, apparently stated that there was an attempt to "transfer...dollars, mostly from wealthy American conservatives, to buy influence in the Global South." See D. Lorne Coyle, "It was not the Anglican Communion's finest hour" posted at <<http://www.vitueonline.org/portal>>, downloaded June 13, 2005.

28 *The Church at War: Anglicans and Homosexuality* (London: I.B. Taurus, 2004), 11.

29 Email message from the Rev. Paddy Benson, November 14, 2003.

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