

Andrew K. T. Yip and Michael Keenan (2004) 'By Name United, By Sex Divided: A Brief Analysis of the Current Crisis Facing the Anglican Communion'

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Abstract

The current controversies in relation to homosexuality - which emanated from the western quarters but quickly engulfed the entire Anglican Communion - highlight two significant issues. In our view, the first issue, regarding the 'religious citizenship' of lesbian and gay Christians, is generally a western concern. The second issue pertaining to the prospect of the disintegration of the Anglican Communion, however, needs to be examined within a global context. On the first issue, we argue that, since the contemporary western religious landscape (and society in general) prioritizes the authority of the self rather than that of religious institution/tradition, the traditional religious discourse that marginalizes lesbian and gay Christians is undermined by an increasingly sophisticated reverse discourse. This reverse discourse, equipped with lesbian and gay affirming theology and documentation of lived experiences, also converges with contemporary cultural (secular) discourse of human rights and personal liberty, which values social diversity, including sexual difference. We believe that the social and political currency of the reverse discourse will proliferate, thus eclipsing the traditional discourse that appears increasingly out of step with contemporary western socio-cultural reality. On the second issue, we welcome the heightened significance and relevance of (local) culture and Christianity in the debate. We argue that the decentralization (i.e. de-westernization) of the Anglican Communion should be welcomed, for there are various versions of Christianity, the conception and practice of which are closely informed by local cultures. Thus, to force the production of a unified Anglican response to moral or social issues that are differently defined across cultures may prove counter-productive.

Keywords: Anglican; Belief; Christian; Church; Gay; Homosexuality; Identity; Lesbian; Priest

Introduction

1.1 Summer 2003 has proven to be a summer of discontent for the Anglican Communion. Various controversies that emanated from the western quarters (i.e. England, Canada and the USA) - surrounding gay priests and religious affirmation of same-sex relationships - very quickly engulfed the entire Communion. The contentiousness of such issues extended beyond Anglicanism when the Vatican published a document that calls upon governments to refrain from legally recognizing same-sex relationships. The inconclusive outcome of the two-day Primates' meeting at the Lambeth Palace in October 2003 shows that this contention is set to continue, and may have some historic and far-reaching impacts on the 70- million strong Communion.

1.2 Given the high level of Press coverage since May 2003, there is no need for us to reiterate at length the events that underline the precariousness of the current state of affairs. Suffice it to say that the collective impact generated by the Jeffery John (in England), the Gene Robinson (in New Hampshire, the USA) and the diocese of New Westminster (in Canada) episodes has compelled the Anglican Communion to take a closer look at two related - but contextually distinct - issues. The first issue focuses on primarily the western quarters of the Communion, where there is an increasing tussle between supportive and opposing voices regarding homosexuality. Fundamentally, this is about the 'religious citizenship' of lesbian and gay believers in the Christian community. The second issue, located within a broader geographical and cultural context, pertains to the threat of disintegration of the worldwide Anglican Communion, as a result of the schism between member churches that toe the official line and those that refuse. On this specific issue, the voices of particularly non-western member churches cannot be ignored. Though financially dependent on their western counterparts, these member churches now constitute a substantial part of the Communion in terms of numbers. Nigeria, for instance, is the largest member of the Communion, with 17.5 million

believers.

1.3 The first issue regarding the 'religious citizenship' of lesbian and gay believers needs to be considered within a broad sociological framework that examines the state of Christianity and its religious authority structure in contemporary western society, as well as the place of lesbian and gay Christians within this context. Focusing on Christianity, sociologists of religion have argued that the contemporary western religious landscape is characterized by the declining influence and significance of institutional religion and its religious authority structures (e.g. Yamane 1997; Davie 2000). While we think that this does not necessarily signpost the eventual demise of Christianity, it does incontrovertibly demonstrate that contemporary religious orientation and practices within the western context have become increasingly internally-referential and reflexively-organized, where the inner voice of the self - rather than the voice of religious institution or tradition - occupies the driving seat of the individual's journey of faith (e.g. Heelas 1998). This is evidenced by empirical research on Christians in different social spheres, but particularly those with dissident identities, such as lesbians and gay men (e.g. Yip 2002a; Wilcox 2003). Significant transformation such as this has heightened the need for religious authority structures to re-assess their social position and roles.

1.4 Indeed Christianity is increasingly considered - albeit to varying degrees - by believers and non-believers alike, in cultural and human terms, rather than its transcendent nature. This, in turn, causes decreasing emphasis on exclusivity, uniqueness and superiority, which underline the traditional discourse of Christianity. In other words, Christianity in western society has been relegated from the centre of social life and authority to, at best, one of the myriad of options that inform life choices. The key word of the times seems to be 'inclusivity' (e.g. Porterfield 2001). Therefore, rather than religious authority structures converting lost souls and returning them to the flock, Christianity needs to reach out and embrace people as they are, where they are. Expressed differently, Christianity needs to open its arms to embrace the diversity of human life. This non-traditional religious discourse is clearly informed by the broadening cultural (secular) discourse of citizenship that emphasizes human rights as well as personal liberty and happiness, reflective of significant social processes such as individualization and de-traditionalization in society at large that lead to the freeing or empowerment of agency (e.g. Bauman 2001).

1.5 The tension within the western Christian community on the issue of homosexuality clearly demonstrates the tussle between these two competing discourses. On the one hand, there is the traditional discourse that upholds moral absolutism, predicated primarily on scriptural inerrancy and traditional authority, most clearly illustrated through the stance of conservative evangelicals. This discourse, with its strict boundary of sexual morality, marginalizes people with counter-normative identities, such as lesbians and gay men. Admittedly, this discourse, over the years, has broadened its boundary of tolerance to include people with homosexual orientation, as long as they do not 'practise' - an attitude based on the 'love the sinner but hate the sin' ethos.

1.6 In recent years, however, the credibility and moral authority of this traditional discourse has been increasingly challenged, even undermined, by a non-traditional reverse discourse. Not only does this reverse discourse engage with scriptures and traditions (e.g. lesbian and gay theologies, see Stuart 2003), it also, rather significantly, draws upon contemporary cultural discourse of citizenship and human rights. Strengthened by such religious and cultural resources and vocabularies, the reverse discourse attempts to reflect much more accurately contemporary socio-cultural reality, arguing that moral absolutism is, or should be, a thing of the past, and that in today's society, respect for cultural pluralism and social diversity (thus sexual difference) is *the* value on which contemporary life should operate. The value of deferential compliance to institutional authority is increasingly being eclipsed by the value of personal liberty and rights. Thus, there is a convergence between the religious reverse discourse and the cultural discourse that in turn lends the former significant social and political currency.

1.7 Against this backdrop, the traditional discourse appears authoritarian, disrespectful of diversity, averse to progress, and irrelevant to contemporary socio-cultural reality. Thus, 'The Bible says so' as a justification for the censure of homosexuality is increasingly considered outdated, and indeed tyrannical. Such justification is increasingly out of step with social attitudes towards sexual diversity and the basis of legitimate authority, particularly among the younger generations. More importantly, the lesbian and gay community in general, and the lesbian and gay Christian community in particular, are growing in confidence, visibility and sophistication in effecting social change, particularly in the area of legal reform (e.g. in terms of relational and employment rights, see Yip 2002b). Indeed, progressive social and political development renders the traditional discourse and conservative religious authority structures seemingly out of place in contemporary western society. This, in turn, undermines their moral authority and credibility.

1.8 The first author, in his survey of 565 British lesbian, gay, and bisexual Christians^[1], documented empirical evidence which shows that there is a significant number of individuals who are increasingly

dissatisfied with traditional discourse and the conservative aspects of the Church. For instance, 97% of the sample 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that 'Churches have encouraged heterosexism in society', 96% argued that 'Churches have contributed to the perpetuation of homophobia in society', and almost 94% thought that 'Churches have not taken due account of the experiences of gay, lesbian and bisexual Christians in their examination of the issues of human sexuality'. Further, almost 93% thought that 'Christian sexual ethics should be concerned much more with responsible behaviour and justice to individuals, rather than the acceptability of particular kinds of genital acts'.

1.9 In addition, almost 96% of the sample argued that 'same-sex genital acts are always compatible with Christian principles', and about 85% thought 'the traditional biblical exegesis on homosexuality is inaccurate'. Close to 90% of the participants also argued that their sexuality, like heterosexuality, was created by God and should be fully accepted. This 'ontogeneric argument' that all human sexualities are created, blessed and sustained by God - and therefore of equal value - is clearly at odds with the Church's official position that continues to propagate heteronormativity. This argument is increasingly supported by the popular (secular) view that homosexuality is inborn and it is not a hindrance to one's ability to lead a responsible and fulfilling life.

1.10 Qualitative data illustrate a similar critique of church authority and the traditional discourse. The following are typical:

I think the Church generally does not know how to deal with issues about sexuality.... I think the Church is doing more damage than good, both to itself and the people it's supposed to be caring for. (Joan, a bisexual woman)

I no longer have any respect for the Church of England, which is a shame really. The Church is a human institution. It's supposed to be inspired by God. But I think it loses sight of God very often. In fact, I think a lot of things have gone wrong in the Church. (Liz, a lesbian)

The church is a disgrace. I don't give a damn really. They [the church] could say what they want about me [being gay]. I follow my conscience.... The society in general has moved on quite a bit [regarding homosexuality], but the church is still in the middle ages. It's time they woke up. (Simon, a gay priest)

1.11 On the whole, the sample also placed a much greater importance on their self (i.e. personal experiences and reasoning), rather than the church, in the organization of their Christians lives (for more details, see e.g. Yip 2002b). Institutional Christianity, indeed, has been de-centred and relegated to being one of the many options individuals choose and negotiate for their construction of realities. Such findings highlight the prospect that the church - on this issue at least - risks ending up being an 'evangelical club' that reminisces about the pride of Christian moral absolutism and superiority, and becomes a preserve of inward-looking fundamentalists. Indeed, Repstad (2003: 161) argued that, 'Strict and demanding religious organizations will have difficulty in a liberal, anti-authoritarian society.' It is not unreasonable to expect that, unless western religious authority structures take into account significant progressive socio-cultural changes, they are ultimately fighting a losing battle.

1.12 As mentioned earlier, to address the second issue regarding the threat of disintegration of the worldwide Anglican Communion, we need to take on a global perspective. At the outset, it must be acknowledged that in most non-western societies such as Nigeria and Malaysia (whose Christian leaders have been articulate in the opposing camp of the current controversies), the aforementioned reverse discourse is generally absent (The Pew Research Center 2003). Underpinned by general cultural conservatism, the cultural discourse of sexuality (and homosexuality) in such societies coincide with the traditional religious discourse, thus lending it credence and moral authority. The view that homosexuality is a 'western disease', as a natural outcome of western cultural degeneracy and secularity, is pervasive in such societies. Even among the ethnic and religious minorities within British society (e.g. South Asian and Muslim), homosexuality is widely perceived as a 'western disease' (Yip 2003), against which their community needs to safeguard.

1.13 Within this broader context, we cannot ignore the aforementioned intricate and complex dynamic between (local) culture and religion. This is also where the fault line lies, as far as the unity of the Anglican Communion is concerned. The crux of the matter is that there is no one Christianity. Rather, there are various versions of Christianity, closely informed by local cultures, socio-economic forces, as well as the structural position and function of this religion in the specific culture (e.g. whether it is a majority or minority religion, and the extent to which it is 'ethnicized'). On some levels, such versions converge, but on others, diverge.

1.14 Viewed from this perspective, the schism that exists now may serve as a catalyst for the disintegration

of the Anglican Communion, at least on the issue of homosexuality. This need not be unbeneficial to Christians across the world. The Church of England itself was established as a result of a split from the Roman Catholic Church. This schism in Christianity is also illustrated by the East/West split of the Church of the Roman Empire (for more details, see Lossky *et al*/1991). Indeed, Christianity is a dynamic and evolving system of belief and practice, subject to changes across history. We do not think that a unified response to the current issue, on the premise that unity is strength, is necessarily the best. An enforced response of this nature often degenerates into a compromise that achieves little. As the world increasingly recognizes the importance of respecting diversity and pluralism - including that within the religious sphere - de-institutionalization and localization of this kind should be welcomed. Such de-centralization promotes the democratization of religious beliefs and practices.

1.15 The world is constantly changing. So are culture and religion. The worldwide Anglican Communion is culturally diverse. Despite referring to the same Bible, culturally-informed hermeneutics does produce divergent stances on a host of social and moral issues. This is evidenced in the debates among church leaders on issues such as Third World Debt, the consumerist culture and evangelism, where opinions are often closely informed by local cultural and socio-economic context. Indeed, we cannot but recognize the inextricable link between culture and religious thinking and practices. Therefore, the much-feared split may result in a Christianity that is more responsive to local cultures, and perhaps, in the end, it will be the Anglican Churches which survive!

Notes

¹The project, conducted in 1998, was a quantitative and qualitative project which aimed to document the lived experiences and life circumstances of 121 lesbian, 389 gay, and 45 bisexual Christians, 80% of whom attended local churches. Each participant completed a postal questionnaire, and 61 were interviewed at a later stage. Roughly 48% of the sample was affiliated to the Church of England, and approximately 27%, to the Roman Catholic Church. For more details, see Yip (2002b). Given that this is a (partially) hidden population, the sample is not representative, and the findings should not be generalized to the entire British lesbian, gay and bisexual *Christian* population. Nevertheless, the findings provide illuminating insights into the lives of this under-researched population.

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