

AN OPENLY GAY BISHOP? AN AFRICAN THEOLOGICAL RESPONSE

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“The consecration of a bishop, who divorced his wife and separated from his children, now living as a non-celibate homosexual, clearly demonstrates that authorities within Ecusa (the Episcopal Church of United States) consider that their cultural-based agenda is of far greater importance than obedience to the Word of God, the integrity of the one mission of God in which we all share, the spiritual welfare and unity of the worldwide Anglican Communion and our ecumenical fellowship and inter-faith relationships”

These words capture the sentiments of over two thirds of Anglicans world wide, represented by Nigerian Archbishop Peter Akinola, the Primate of the Global South, a communion of the Anglican Church in the developing world. The ordination of Gene Robinson has created a serious crisis of faith and morality in the Anglican Communion, as well as sent ripple effects to Christianity the world over. It has also cast the Christian faith in bad light in the eyes of people of other religions. The consecration has rightly drawn the greatest condemnation from many Anglican primates the world over, whose failure to arrive at a clear position on this issue early in October, revealed the growing lack of doctrinal and moral clarity in their communion. The spiritual head of the Anglican Communion, Dr Rowan Williams condemns the consecration as ‘ a matter of deep regret’, which has serious consequence for the cohesion of the Anglican Communion. The Irish Primate, Dr Robin Eames, describes the ordination as compromising the Church’s future. In his own reaction, Bishop Peter Jensen of Sydney, Australia points out that the consecration does not fulfill biblical requirements; while Bishop Thomas Brown of Wellington, New Zealand, lamented that Robinson’s sexual practices (not sexual orientation) does not fulfil the scriptural requirements for the episcopacy. There was no doubt some marginal support for this consecration, from a diocese in Sweden and within the Episcopal Church of the U.S. itself, demonstrated by the presence of 50 bishops at the consecration. Unfortunately, the presiding bishop, Frank Griswold, contrary to Anglican tradition, overruled the objections of a substance portion of the congregation to the consecration and went ahead with the ceremony. However, as the Nigerian primate, bemoaned by their presence and participation in the consecration of an openly gay bishop, these bishops violated their obligation to guard the integrity of the faith, the unity of the Church and Christian morality. The consecration of Gene Robinson has some wide ranging implications for theology, ecumenism, church life and spirituality in general. It has cast ahead a shadow that would be long and dark.

Many Catholics would no doubt see this as yet another proof that the priesthood and episcopacy in the Anglican Church have no basis in Scripture or tradition. However, this is not the issue here. Even though the Catholic Church does not yet see the Anglican priesthood and episcopacy as being in communion and continuity with the Apostolic Office of Peter in the person of the Pope and the bishops in communion with him, whatever happens in any Christian community affects Christendom as a whole. Since 1992, when the Anglican Church accepted the ordination of women into their priesthood, Catholics and traditional Anglicans are raising serious concerns about the beliefs and practices of the Anglican Church with regard to ministry and morality. However, while scripture does not condemn women ordination as sinful, it clearly condemns homosexual practices as sinful. Since the 19th century, when the Anglican Church defined itself, it has accepted the normativity of the Holy Scripture as the primary controlling authority for Church life and practices. Indeed, since the early 20th Century, Protestant theologians have given greater attention and resonance to the theology of the Word as assuming primacy over individual life styles. Already by the 19th Century, the Enlightenment had done considerable harm to faith and life especially undermining Christianity and her moral teachings. No longer was there to be assumed that there is a Christian ideal of the good life; each individual was to pursue whatever s/he deems fit. This moral point of view created a climate of moral and cultural relativism, sundered the bond between the individual and his limited worldview and God who offers us the infinite horizon. It also undermined the submission of mind and will to God who reveals himself to us and who comes down from his transcendence to meet us in our hiddenness and self-absorption.

Protestant theologians like Karl Barth, Brunner, Cullmann, Bonhoeffer among others tried to recover the truth-content of Protestant theology and morality. They concentrated on the centrality of Christ in salvation history and the essentially revelational and transcendental nature of the Christian truth, and its hold on human life and reality in general. The sentimentalized image of God and the humanized and diluted morality of many liberal Protestant theologians in the early 20th century were particularly contested in the writings of Barth. This convenient theology has once more re-emerged in our times both in Protestant churches and even in the writings of some Catholic thinkers. However, the Christian according to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, is called to pay the price of discipleship, which is a call to die to oneself. This calls for the priority of the values of the Christian faith over and above individual preferences or orientations. The Christian life accordingly has a definite limit within a secular culture. That limit is the dividing line between authentic Christianity and other appealing ways of life projected by a secular culture. It can be said following the thought of Bonhoeffer that what took place in New Hampshire is the triumph of 'cheap grace'. Cheap grace is the one we confer on ourselves without due regard to

the requirements of the Gospel. It is cheap grace for instance to preach forgiveness of sin without repentance; it is also cheap grace to talk about Christian life without prophetic and courageous witnessing and it is cheap grace to accept the grace of the episcopate without accepting its moral demands.

Christianity faces a serious challenge in the face of the triumph of the gay-consciousness. The concern of the foremost Protestant thinkers about the future of the Christian faith is also shared by the Catholic Church, which, especially in North America is still reeling under the weight of the clergy sex abuse scandals. Central to this challenge is the desire of people to find meaning and direction in life and attain an integral salvation in Christ. The men and women of our time want to find answers to the challenges that face their lives and faith today. They want to know why they must follow the path of the Gospel and practice the Christian faith. The people of God want the whole Gospel (or the total Christ following Irenaeus) and not some minimalized message that abandons the individual in the cycle of personal weakness and subjective whims and caprices. How does the Christian faith help them to respond to the deepest longings of their souls for love, happiness and peace? How does the Christian faith provide the measuring rod for determining and grounding the moral demand in personal and inter-personal relationships? This problem is heightened by the present lack of clear leadership especially in Protestant churches. Christian faith is gradually turning into a subjective concern amplified in some instances by the unfortunate twisting of the message by some church leaders to their narrow perception of truth, faith, morality and life.

Most Catholics still listen to the Magisterium because they see in her the centre of truth and faith and the bastion of the moral good that Christ wishes to offer his people in the Church. They see the Christian tradition as the repository of undying truth about the meaning of faith and life. Thus in the mist and storms of the struggle for the true face of Christ to emerge in the present clash of truth and morality, the true Catholic faithful would normally look towards the Magisterium, which serves the ministry of authentically interpreting the Word of God and the Sacred Tradition that goes back to the Apostles. Faith and morality from the Catholic perspectives is not a question of individual opinion and practices. Individual acts or new social realities do not necessitate the reinterpretation of doctrine, rather doctrine and moral demands precede the individual acts and offer the bases for their interpretation and evaluation in the light of faith. This is the cutting edge between Catholic and Protestant theology. The Anglicans particularly emphasize the primacy of Scripture and this is why the consecration of an openly gay bishop in New Hampshire, in obvious violation of Scripture, is a major doctrinal problem for the world wide Anglican communion. However, where do the Anglicans fall back for truth in moments of doctrinal crisis like the present one? This is where the Magisterium (in

the Catholic Church) comes in to interpret the truth and set the conscience of the people of God at peace. The lack of some kind of structural and doctrinal form and Apostolic authority in the Anglican faith is evidently clear in these trying times. The consecration of Robinson was justified on the basis of an extended exegesis that interprets the Bible and morality based on evolving and directionless new social realities outside the analogy of faith. Here again, the viewpoint of the Protestant thinker Barth rings out clearly that God and morality are 'wholly other', that is above us and we ought to conform ourselves to the truth and not bend the truth to conform to our life styles.

The gay rights movement has scored another cheap point. It is significant that the consecration of Robinson took place in a hockey stadium and not inside a Church. The symbolic nature of that act was not lost to many. The gay right movement is a secular-minded pressure group. They have infiltrated many political and religious institutions and would in due time create all kinds of difficulties and problems for society. Obviously, there is the need for the Church to be a welcoming community of the disciples of Jesus, which is open to all men and women in a spirit of love and compassion. Sometimes, we as a Church have not adequately responded to the heart aches of some marginal groups be it homosexual persons, women, divorced and separated couples, the poor and the sick members of the Church. We are often reacting to crisis instead of adequately responding to felt concerns before they explode into serious crisis that threaten the unity of the church and the faith of the people. However, the present crisis is not just a problem for the Anglican Communion, but for the whole of Christianity. The position of the Holy See is that this consecration like the ordination of women into Anglican priesthood poses new difficulties for the unity of the Anglicans and Catholics. In addition, it amplifies the need for other Christian groups to reflect once more on the position taken by the Catholic Church on homosexual relations and explore how far that teaching helps to preserve the sanctity of marriage, the healthy growth and preservation of society, the dignity of the homosexuals themselves and the unity of faith and morals. There is still the need to continue to re-appraise the Catholic position especially with finding the appropriate language to describe the homosexual acts itself that invites homosexual persons to self –evaluation in the light of revealed faith. In addition we need to be honest, sensitive and loving to homosexual persons both in the pastoral ministry as well as in choosing them for the priesthood. Their conscious exclusion from the priesthood, when such condition in the light of science and faith could be changed by therapy and the power of God's grace, should also be reappraised.

In the final analysis, it is worth noting that it is the 'new Churches' in Africa and Asia that have been calling for renewal and revival of the Christian tradition, which is clearly threatened by contemporary cultural currents especially in the Western

world. Most of these churches have not even celebrated the centennial anniversary of the Christian faith. The truth is that Christianity captures the imagination of the people of my continent, Africa. African Christians find in Jesus Christ the message of salvation and Christianity has been the greatest force of social and political changes in Africa. It has also brought some cultural transformations in Africa. At the same time, it has to contend with Islam and African Traditional Religion for what values would shape society and govern the hearts and minds of the people. I cannot forget the response given to my lecture on Sharia and the practice of the Christian faith in Nigeria by a Moslem professor some three years ago and how many Christians in Nigeria asked me whether Christianity still has relevance for we Africans. This professor, while acknowledging that the adoption of the Sharia Islamic law in a secular country like Nigeria threatened the country's federalism, noted that Sharia was a corrective measure by the Moslems to safeguard the morality of the land. The original sound morality of the 250 tribes in Nigeria according to him, is threatened by what he calls the 'negative Western-Christian values' that have given rise to contraception, abortion, international prostitution (which flourishes in some Western 'Christian' countries), among other evils. The African traditional religionists also hold that Christian morality as practiced both in Nigeria and in the Western world that brought the faith to Africa is not superior to the African traditional mores. Many of them do not see any reason to convert to Christianity, if it does not offer them a higher moral and spiritual perspective.

Thus if we are to have a truly universal Church whether in the Catholic Church and the Protestant Churches, we must also begin a journey to rediscover the truths of our faith, which could unify, ennoble and perfect various cultures around the person and work of Christ. There is a real need for fidelity to Christian values and tradition, while recognizing and supporting those who have special pastoral and personal needs. The lack of this fidelity worsened by the lack of courage to stand for the truth of the gospels out of human respect or vague show of compassion led to the consecration of an openly gay bishop, in New Hampshire. Christianity would lose its relevance if it recedes into the backwaters of ideological conflict between the liberals and the conservatives, the gays and the straight, 'we' and 'they'. Christianity is a revealed religion that demands the assent of faith and not an ideology that admits of mutually exclusive standpoints. Christians must work for the building of the kingdom of God based on the civilization of love. The kingdom of God is one of righteousness and peace, a kingdom of love and sacrifice, a kingdom of communion and submission to God's will. In that kingdom, we seek the path of personal and group transformation by conforming to the image of God in us and by laying ourselves before the light of Christ before whom we see ourselves as we are. The kingdom of God is also among us for with the Incarnation and Paschal mystery of Christ the power and reign of God has come. Thus while we still struggle with our personal histories and group

identities, we still believe that God's grace can change us to be what he made us to be. It is in this light that one hopes that what happened in New Hampshire would lead the Anglican church, and indeed all Christians a sincere and sober examination of conscience on how we have come to this point and where we are heading to in our journey of faith.

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