

BEYOND THE HOMOSEXUALITY DEBATE

1 Introduction

The Anglican Communion is, sadly, struggling with the issue of homosexuality at the present time. An onlooker might feel the Communion is being torn apart by this issue. To some extent, this issue bubbled under the surface in some of the Provinces for sometime, but things came to a head with the consecration of Gene Robinson by the Episcopal Church in the USA. Many different meetings and events have taken place since then aimed at resolving the disagreements that have ensued since that consecration. What is, however, often overlooked is the extent to which wider issues not directly related to homosexuality are at play in the discussions. Some of these are issues outside the religious sphere, and hence over which members of the communion have little control over. In this short article, I hope to look at one such issue and then make a recommendation for the way forward.

2 African Christianity

I recently concluded a research into African Christianity which has taken me three years. I looked at over one hundred books written by African pastors, mostly from the African Instituted Churches, and tried to distil from their work how Africans (in both Africa and Britain) understand the doctrines of God, Jesus Christ and Salvation and how they use the Bible. The research showed, in line with previous studies, that African Christianity is “integrated” and “holistic” because it sees the spiritual and material world as woven together and treats human beings as a whole rather than splitting them into separate aspects. This is, in fact, the traditional way Africans look at the world (i.e. the African worldview) and they retain it within Christianity. So they tend to see God as a powerful being who is interested in their general welfare, not just in their souls, as the Western missionaries taught them.¹ Salvation for them has a scope, including within it 1) deliverance from the power of evil principalities and human enemies;² 2) wholeness and peace, such that one can be said to be in salvation if one is at peace with oneself, neighbours, friends and God;³ and 3) progress in life, such as good health, a flourishing business, and having children.⁴

My study found, as many previous studies had done, that there is among African Christians a strong commitment to practising a Biblical Christianity. African preachers faced with congregations for whom the main authority of Christian truth is the Bible tend to make frequent reference to the book. Part of the attraction, in the words of the African theologian, John Mbiti, is that the Bible gives Africans “liberation from ready-made and imported Christianity, liberation to generate the kind of Christianity which more fully embraces the totality of their existence.”⁵ Another reason is that the traditional African worldview and the worldview of the Bible are quite similar. As in the Bible, Africans experience the physical and spiritual aspects of the world as integrated. So they do not see the Bible as a history book, rather they

¹ Enang, quoted by Mbiti, *J Bible and Theology in African Christianity* (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1986) p154.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid, p32.

easily attach the Biblical worldview to their traditional one and weave their individual stories into those of the Bible, without feeling the need to engage in elaborate contextualisation.

Even though these are conclusions reached by studying the African Instituted Churches and their pastors, it should give an idea of what one would find among African Christians within the Anglican Communion. The traditional African worldview should be the same no matter the church denomination, although for Africans within the Anglican Communion the Anglican traditions they have inherited and their continual interactions with members of the Communion from other parts of the world would also have some influence in their theological thinking.

3 The North American/European Context

The same kind of link we see between theology and philosophy in Africa can also be seen in North America and Europe. Just as African traditional worldview has made its mark on African Christianity, secular philosophies have left its imprints on Western Christianity. For example, Since the Enlightenment, theological discourse in North America and Europe (not just among Anglicans) has been conducted with regards to the philosophical ideas of rationalism and empiricism. An example of this is the view extending from D F Strauss to R Bultman which saw many Biblical stories as “myths” and set about to “demythologise” the book in order to make it intelligible to the Western mindset. Even though Barth and others pushed back some the extreme aspects of this influence, and restored some respect for the Bible, theological discourse in North America and Europe has never returned back to the pre modern era. The strong anti-religious aspects of the Enlightenment have meant that the population of North America and Europe and the dialogue partner of protestant Christian theology in that region are significantly agnostic. This continues to inform the assumptions theologians have to make about their readers and in that way has influenced the theological development in this region.

I attended a presentation recently in Nottingham, England on Biblical interpretation and the speaker began by presenting us with the ideas of the renowned atheist, Richard Dawkins. This was for the presenter a natural place to start, but it is a starting point that itself shows the nature of the philosophical context of Western theological discourse. Dawkins’s own website describes him as “the world's most prominent atheist⁶” who “asserts the irrationality of belief in God and the grievous harm religion has inflicted on society, from the Crusades to 9/11.”⁷ His book, *The God Delusion*, which, as the name suggests, argues that people are deluded to believe that God exist, is among the best selling books in Europe and America. So it is quite understandable that the presenter at my Nottingham lecture should begin with the view of this atheist – he is in effect beginning with where many people in North American/European are. But the way such a starting point is taken for granted at this gathering, made me wonder whether the participants are aware that this starting point might not be where other people around the world are.

I have now lived in Britain for many years and I get a similar feeling when I notice my European colleagues instinctively try to explain miraculous event in the Bible as

⁶ <http://richarddawkins.net>

⁷ <http://richarddawkins.net>

natural or sociological phenomena. So, for example, the feeding of the five thousand (Matt 14:21) and the four thousand (Matt 15:38) would be seen not as miracles in the sense that the bread and fish multiplied but, probably, in the sense that when the crowd saw somebody bring out their food and give it to Jesus, they were moved and started bringing out and sharing the food they were keeping for themselves. I have also often been struck by how doubt about the existence of God is often presented as the logical position arising out of the existence of suffering. "How can a good God exist, yet there is so much suffering," the question goes. I must say that in all the time I lived in Africa I never heard that question asked once. So this response that is taken as natural in the West is, really, another indication of how much human reason has become part of the fabric of their theological thinking – that is a mental attitude which says, I will believe in miracles and the existence of God only if it makes sense to me.

4 The Homosexuality Debate

I have gone over these issues in this way because I believe that the lack of awareness of how theological ideas are influenced by where people are in the world is a factor in the disagreement over homosexuality within the Anglican Communion. There is, within the worldwide Anglican Communion, a North/South dimension to the homosexuality debate. Even though there is a variety of voices from each region of the world, it is fair to say that much of the support for the idea that homosexuality should be treated as an acceptable lifestyle among Christians and their ministers has come from North America and Europe, whereas the staunchest opposition has come mainly from countries of the South, that is Africa and Asia. This follows the trend whereby Africans, for example, whose worldview, automatically, weaves together the natural and the supernatural and who feel close to the world of the Bible tend to be conservative in religious/social issues, whereas North Americans and Europeans for whom any automatic link to the supernatural had been severed by the Enlightenment, in general, tend to be liberal on those issues.

So the philosophical/spiritual background of the members of the Communion, which is not entirely within their control but, rather, is dependent on where in the world they are from, can have the effect of pulling the Communion in different directions. Yet, sadly, there is still not enough awareness among Anglicans of this factor in this and other disagreements.

What is needed is greater interaction of ideas between different regions of the Communion. This should happen at much lower levels than between bishops. It would add to existing interaction that happens between bishops, which tend to be around controversial issues and often makes a big show of disagreements. Perhaps each Province might include as part of the education of their ministers a study of what happens in other regions of the Communion. This would require humility and openness on all sides. Such material need not be centrally articulated and imposed; rather each Province can develop their own. What is important is that part of its aim is to show what people in other parts of the Communion believe and do and why. I believe that this will have a long term unifying effect throughout the Communion. It would not automatically remove disagreements, but it could give rise to new levels of dialogue and reduce the incredulity that accompanies the disagreements that arise! It would also mean that underneath the present leadership will be growing a new generation of Anglican ministers who understand each other better. Greater

understanding between the members of the Communion would make it better able to proclaim the good news of God's kingdom.

5 Conclusion

The present debate about homosexuality is causing much pain within the Anglican Communion. Some insight into the issue can be gained by studying how some of the theological positions being taken on it are related to the way the people who hold them view the world. I have given the example of Africans who have a worldview in which physical and spiritual life are integrated and for that reason are likely to be conservative on religious/social matters, and North Americans and Europeans whose environment are agnostic in comparison and as a result are increasingly liberal on social issues. This difference in philosophical climate, which is not within the control of anybody within the Anglican Communion, has the effect of pulling parts of the Communion in different directions.

The current debate is highlighting these differences and demanding measures that would increase understanding between the different regions of the Communion. I have suggested that in addition to existing mechanism, that Provinces within the Communion be encouraged to devise modules/courses which could form part of ministerial education with the aim of teaching people in one region what those in other parts believe and the roots of those beliefs. The intention would not be to impose a single view or to make them adopt what other people believe but to make them understand where other people are coming from. This, in my view, would have a unifying effect at a level below the bishops and the public glare they attract. It will also bring out something which would serve our Communion well beyond the homosexuality debate.

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Biographical

Chigor Chike is a Church of England priest in East London. He comes originally from Nigeria but has lived in Britain for many years. Chigor studied theology at Oxford University and has written many articles and books on the life of black people in Britain. His recent publications include *Voices From Slavery* and *African Christianity in Britain*.