

## The Anglican Crackup

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The consecration of the Rev. Gene Robinson as a bishop in the Episcopal Church USA (ECUSA) in Durham, New Hampshire, November 2 was the culmination of a three-month story that has precipitated the biggest crisis in the Anglican Communion since 1534, when Henry VIII declared that he and not the Pope would be the Supreme Head of the Church of England.

The earlier breakup came about because Henry wanted a church that would permit him to divorce his wife. The current crisis came about after a majority of ECUSA bishops decided that their church would not bar episcopal office to an open homosexual living in a committed relationship with another man.

The Episcopal Communion, comprising 38 autonomous national “provinces” under the titular head of the archbishop of Canterbury, began to come apart at the seams. In due course, disgruntled bishops in the Southern hemisphere—especially in Africa—declared their churches in “impaired communion” with ECUSA, or at least with the New Hampshire diocese, while conservative Episcopalians in the United States spoke about creating a church of their own.

Throughout the story, American journalists for the most part handled the conflict with a high degree of fairness, paying respectful attention to both sides without a lot of spin in one direction or the other. But their grasp of the underlying doctrinal and ecclesiastical issues was less impressive.

The story began in the first week of August, when the leaders of ECUSA met at their triennial General Convention in Minneapolis with an agenda that included deciding whether to ratify the New Hampshire Diocesan Convention’s selection of Robinson as its next bishop. Despite the fact that questions involving gays and lesbians have bedeviled mainline Protestant denominations for several decades, the news media showed up in droves—doubtless in part because the Supreme Court June decision overturning Texas’ sodomy law had ratcheted up interest in the “normalization” of same-sex relationships in American society.

The press recognized that the problem was not just that Robinson was gay—the church had been ordaining gay men to the priesthood and promoting them to the episcopate for centuries, albeit without officially acknowledging that it was doing so—but that he was “openly” gay, and, for many critics, that he had “broken” his marriage vows by divorcing his wife. Michael Paulson of the *Boston Globe* and NPR’s Mara Liasson on the Fox Special Report with Britt Hume, among others, made this point.

During the convention, the press was briefly galvanized by last-minute accusations that Robinson had inappropriately touched a man in Vermont and had started a website that had been discovered to have links to pornography. Both accusations were immediately investigated and found to be without merit.

One opponent walked out and another wore ashes on his forehead as a sign of mourning, but protesters were generally respectful of the decorum that is a hallmark of Episcopalians in conference. Only the conservative press—the *Washington Times* above all—went so far as to refer to a “melee.”

Most of the coverage noted, without extended commentary, the relatively irenic way in which Episcopalians were conducting themselves. “Civility reigns at the convention,” wrote the *Washington Post*’s Alan Cooperman August 3.

Although characterized by a hierarchical governing structure symbolized in a presiding bishop, the ECUSA scrupulously followed its practice of deferring to the autonomy of dioceses and ratified Robinson’s selection. As expected, this brought the threat of internal schism within the ECUSA to the fore.

All the reporting ran interviews with priests, lay delegates, and bishops who saw the actions of the convention as leading to decisions down the road on the part of some parishes, and possibly some bishops and dioceses, to split from the church in the United States and possibly join other provinces within the Anglican Communion. (In their own defense, they repeatedly claimed that it was the church in the U.S. that had split from “traditional” or orthodox Anglicanism.)

The other provinces in question included those in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, some of whose bishops issued powerful statements attacking the convention’s decision. Their opposition signaled the deepening of a fissure in the Communion that had become evident in 1998 at the Lambeth Conference, a gathering of the heads or “primates” of all the Anglican Provinces that is hosted every 10 years by the archbishop of Canterbury.

Then, the African bishops in particular were openly critical of many Western European and American provinces for having abandoned a more “traditional” reading of Scripture with respect to homosexuality, and in the end pushed through a nonbinding resolution that called homosexual practice “incompatible with Scripture” and declared, “We cannot advise the legitimizing or blessing of same-sex unions nor ordaining those involved in same gender unions.”

In response to the outrage of Third World bishops and conservative Americans at ECUSA’s ratification of Robinson’s selection, the recently appointed archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, agreed to call an extraordinary meeting of the Anglican primates at Lambeth to discuss the crisis. Before it took place, however, nearly 2,700 dissident American Episcopalians met in Dallas in early October to encourage the archbishop to seek ways to discipline the ECUSA, whose leaders were called upon to repent and reverse their “unbiblical and schismatic” actions.

“We want the leadership severely sanctioned or disciplined,” Pittsburgh Bishop Robert Duncan told Susan Hogan/Albach of the *Dallas Morning News* October 10. Given that neither the archbishop of Canterbury nor the Anglican Communion as a whole has the juridical authority to sanction or discipline a member church, such a demand seemed like little more than empty rhetoric. In retrospect, it may have been far from that.

The main story out of the October 16-17 Lambeth summit was that Williams managed to keep the Communion from fracturing on the spot. All primates signed a statement that was alternatively interpreted as slapping American wrists or simply stating the facts:

“In most of our provinces, the election of Canon Robinson would not have been possible since his chosen lifestyle would give rise to a canonical impediment to his consecration as a bishop,” it read. “If Gene Robinson’s consecration proceeds, we recognise that we have reached a crucial and critical point in the

life of the Anglican Communion and we would have to conclude that the future of the communion itself is in jeopardy.”

The primates also agreed to put off taking any irrevocable step for a year, pending the report of a new commission established by the archbishop of Canterbury “to consider his own role in maintaining communion within and between provinces when grave difficulties arise.” The significance of this commission was missed by the American press, but not by the British.

The first reporter to suggest what was afoot was Jamie Doward of the London *Guardian*’s weekly *Observer*, writing for the *Guardian*’s online edition October 18: “It is understood that under Williams a team of ecclesiastical lawyers has been drawing up plans to establish common laws across the communion. The potentially seismic move followed a private meeting of Anglican leaders in Hong Kong last year at which it was agreed they would look to draw up a common body of canon law establishing key areas on which the Church was bound to agree.

“The move is seen by ecclesiastical experts as the first step to establishing an overarching legal framework which would give the communion more powers to discipline member churches that threaten to break ranks.”

On October 24, the London *Times*’ crack religion correspondent Ruth Gledhill, in an article headlined “Church draws up secret plans for Anglican ‘Pope,’” disclosed that at Lambeth the primates had been presented with a proposal to give the archbishop of Canterbury “the power to intervene in the affairs of churches outside England.” Such a proposal, Gledhill noted, “would have to be agreed by the Church’s separate provinces.”

She went on to quote the communications director of the Anglican church in Wales as saying, “They are looking to have an Anglican version of the Holy Office and a Magisterium. They won’t call the archbishop of Canterbury a Pope but that is what he will be. If it looks like a duck and quacks like a duck, then it’s a duck.”

Before the prospect of so radical transformation of church polity could become widely bruited about, however, journalistic attention shifted to the impending consecration in New Hampshire. After that event took place, the question was how to track a process whose real consequences seemed murky at best. As Gledhill put it in a story headlined, “World’s churches cut links over gay bishop,” there were few who “could say what was actually meant by “broken” or “impaired” communion.

So while we wait to see what shoes will drop and where, here are some lines of inquiry that journalists might consider pursuing further.

**Schism in America.** In the image of a broken family that haunts the Anglican tradition, if the American church moves toward divorce, there will be issues surrounding the disposition of the property of a parish if and when it leaves a diocese and of the property of a diocese if and when it leaves a province. On the first matter, there is fairly well established case law that the property of a parish belongs to the bishop of the diocese in which the parish is located. But it is less clear what happens when a bishop and/or his diocese attempts to disaffiliate from the Episcopal Church in this country.

Besides formal schism (actually attempting to set up an alternative church), it will be important to track the *defection* of conservative Episcopalians who simply stop going to church. That may be more prevalent

than outright schism—actually setting up an alternative church—especially given the legal and ecclesiastical complexities of establishing a new ecclesiastical body. A steep decline in giving to individual parishes, and especially to dioceses and the national church, would have a major impact on the ability of the church to fund its missions, parishes, and social services—though it would hardly be likely to reverse the decision on Gene Robinson’s consecration.

**Bankrolling the Conservatives.** Some attention has been paid to the funding of the Episcopalian dissidents. In an October 24 *Washington Post* article by Alan Cooperman, Gene Robinson charged that the American Anglican Council (AAC) and the Institute for Religion and Democracy (IRD), which share headquarters in Washington D.C., are beholden to some wealthy donors who are driving the opposition to him as part of a larger conservative political agenda. Cooperman singled out members of the Richard Mellon Scaife family, who contribute at least \$200,000 annually to AAC, and Howard F. Ahmanson, who gives between \$50,000 and \$100,000 to IRD. Parts of this story were also reported by Jack Taylor of the online news service TR&I Publishing. As the story unrolls, it will be important to follow the money trail.

**Homosexuality in the Third World.** In the run-up to the Lambeth meeting in mid-October, some African bishops were reported to have warned the primates that unless the Anglican Communion stuck to a hard line against ordaining homosexuals, “people would die” in developing countries, where opposition to homosexuality is much stronger than it is in the U.S. or Europe. Moreover, by condoning homosexuality, the Anglican Church would, in their opinion, be undermining their efforts to provide a moral alternative to the increasing attraction of Islam to Africans and Asians.

**The Authority of Scripture.** The theological heart of the dispute is the issue of biblical interpretation. The news media generally gave the evangelical critics ample opportunity to describe what they claimed to be the Bible’s clear rejection of homosexuality. But there was little effort to contrast the interpretive approach, or “hermeneutic,” of the dissenters and that of the supporters of the decision.

There is a fairly broad consensus among Bible scholars that Scripture is, no matter how divinely inspired, still a human document bearing the marks of the culture in which it was written and that, as a result, it cannot be transported uncritically into the present. Most scholars also agree that the Bible knew nothing about what is now understood as consensual sex between two men or two women. Most of those supporting Robinson’s election rely on such a hermeneutic to disregard Biblical passages that appear to condemn homosexuality as a genetic orientation even though they clearly condemn homosexual acts between men who were assumed to be “naturally” heterosexual.

But those American dissenters and Third World Anglicans who consider such condemnations as morally binding on all generations and cultures cannot evade hermeneutic challenges of their own. How do they handle biblical passages that seem to condone slavery, polygamy, or the treatment of women as property? Why does Jesus never speak about homosexuality at all (that is left for Paul, and then only in passing)? And why do the Old Testament and Pauline references to homosexual acts carry so much more weight for conservatives than Jesus’ explicit condemnation of divorce?

**Doctrine v. morality.** Many of the critics of Robinson’s consecration do not distinguish between doctrinal heresy and immorality. The Anglican Communion has long claimed to be bound by doctrinal orthodoxy as found in the historic Christian creeds, but it has never asserted an explicit *moral* orthodoxy. Homosexuality is not mentioned in any of the historic creeds. In what sense do the critics believe that condoning it is heretical?

**That Old Time Latitudinarianism.** In order to explain the actions of both the ECUSA and the archbishop of Canterbury, it is important to understand the role of a theological orientation called “Affirming Anglican Catholicism.” Both Frank Griswold, the presiding bishop of the ECUSA, and Rowan Williams himself subscribe to this view, which encourages a catholic, or inclusive, spirituality; is socially very liberal; and sees itself as a “crucial antidote to the rising tide of biblical fundamentalism” that is, in its opinion, “weakening the historic Anglican commitment to a balanced theology” (<http://affirmingcatholicism.org>). An expression of this orientation is “Reclaiming Christian Orthodoxy,” an address given in late October by Bishop Michael Ingham of the Canadian Diocese of New Westminster to a conference of the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement and made available by the Anglican Communion News Service on its website).

**Proponents of Affirming Anglican Catholicism reject opposition to the ordination of gay persons as “unAnglican” exclusivism.** In a letter to all clergy of the ECUSA dated August 20, Griswold wrote that different “forcefields of energy in which our various perspectives and ways of embodying the gospel constantly interact—challenging and enlarging one another and thereby more fully revealing God’s truth. Difference, and the capacity to welcome otherness, are essential to the vitality of these various forcefields.” Can such a capacious vision survive an overarching canon law that binds all provinces and dioceses to certain affirmations of faith and ecclesiastical practice and enforced by the archbishop or the primates acting as a central authority?

**A New Anglican Polity?** Despite Rowan Williams’ apparent personal belief that homosexuality ought not to be a bar to ordination, he has given his support to an exploration of a change in canon law that might centralize authority in either his office or in the primates acting together. If that happens, it will mark an unprecedented change in the governing structure of the Anglican Communion. It could mean the withdrawal of one or more national churches from the Communion and the creation of new provinces to replace them. It could also mean a single web of overlapping and mutually hostile jurisdictions. The unity of this church is clearly strained. We simply do not know at this time whether the strain will lead to divorce or to the continuation of a fractured, perhaps even dysfunctional, but still intact family.