



Anglicanism / Episcopal Church

by Randal Woodland

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A portrait of Henry VIII (1542), the first Supreme Head of the Church of England, by Hans Holbein.

The controversy surrounding the consecration of The Reverend V. Gene Robinson as the first openly gay bishop in the American Episcopal Church in 2003 brought into sharp relief the complex ways in which members of the worldwide Christian body known as the Anglican Communion have dealt with issues of sexuality, a complexity rooted in historical struggles and shaped by contemporary pressures.

The Anglican Communion

The Episcopal Church in the U. S. A., a small but influential mainstream Protestant denomination, is one of 38 national churches loosely joined in the Anglican Communion; these churches fully recognize each others' ministries and acknowledge the leadership of the Archbishop of Canterbury, a mark of these churches' historical origins in the Church of England.

The Church of England itself was created amidst political and sexual controversy in the sixteenth century, specifically in Henry VIII's desire to divorce Catherine of Aragon and marry Anne Boleyn, in hopes of producing a male heir to the English throne. When Pope Clement VII refused to grant an annulment, the king broke with Rome, had himself (and subsequent monarchs) declared Supreme Head of the Church of England by the Act of Supremacy (1534).

Theological Positions

From a theological perspective, the creation of the Church of England was the particular English expression of the trends of the Protestant Reformation across Europe, as groups in various countries separated from the strict centralized authority of the Roman Catholic Church.

Along with other Christian churches, Anglican churches share a central belief in the salvific action of God through Jesus. Other core doctrines are found in the historic affirmations known as the Apostles Creed and the Nicene Creed.

The distinctive aspects of Anglican practice include an ecclesial structure rooted in the historic episcopate, an emphasis on liturgical worship deriving from *The Book of Common Prayer* (first published in 1549), and a theological approach often characterized as the *via media* (middle way), distinct both from the hierarchical authority of the Roman Catholic and Orthodox branches of Christianity and from a religious understanding centered on the experiences of the individual believer that characterizes most Protestant denominations.

Anglican theologian Richard Hooker (1554-1600) used the image of a three-legged stool, or tripod, to explain the grounding of Anglican faith in scripture, reason, and tradition; all three are needed for stability. The result was a polity that drew on both the traditions of the church and the integrity of the individual experience.

The churches that evolved from Henry VIII's Church of England have historically not defined themselves by rigid adherence to particular doctrines (whether on matters of sexuality or other issues), but by this *via media* that strives for a unity of truth revealed in scripture, understood by the reflection of reason on experience, and lived out in the tradition of the Church through the years.

The Anglo-Catholic Revival and Gbltq Identification with the Anglican Tradition

Until recent years the policies of the Episcopal Church (U. S. A.) have not been more notably supportive of gay men and lesbians than other denominations, but there has nonetheless been a notable presence (often *sub rosa*) and acceptance of gay men and lesbians in Episcopal churches, particularly in urban areas. Although this acceptance is in part due to the absence of sustained and overt condemnation of homosexuality from the typical Episcopal pulpit, such tolerance may also derive from the cultural identification of the Episcopal Church with upward social mobility and from the effects of the Anglo-Catholic revival on the aesthetic life of the Episcopal Church.

Often called the "Oxford Movement" because of its origins in that university, this nineteenth-century revival sought to recover the richness of the spiritual and liturgical life of the earlier Christian tradition that such leaders as John Henry, (later) Cardinal Newman felt had been lost. Worship services became occasions for liturgy that emphasized the mystery and wonder of spiritual truth, rather than the cold rationality of the Enlightenment or the aesthetic preferences of the Puritans.

Drawing inspiration from the church traditions of the Middle Ages, Anglo-Catholic parishes embraced elaborate liturgical vestments rich in color and texture, Neo-Gothic architecture adorned with paintings, sculpture, and tapestries, and musical offerings inspired by the full heritage of Western religious music. Douglas Shand-Tucci has explored how gay men such as the architects Ralph Adams Cram and Bertram Goodhue spurred a liturgical renaissance in the final decades of the nineteenth century that was nurtured by the gay artistic communities of large cities.

Research that analyzes these connections is only beginning to appear, but the cultural aptness of the identification of gay men with the Anglican tradition can be found in literature. In Evelyn Waugh's novel *Brideshead Revisited* (1945), Charles Ryder is advised by his uncle to choose his associates at Oxford carefully: "Beware of Anglo-Catholics--they're all sodomites with unpleasant accents." Andrew Holleran's *Dancer from the Dance* (1978) offers the more provocative suggestion that Malone, the novel's mysterious protagonist and sometime-escort, numbers an Episcopal bishop among his regular clients. In *More Tales of the City* (1980), Armistead Maupin gleefully imagines a cannibalistic cult operating at Grace Cathedral in San Francisco.

Gay Activism and Conflict

The twentieth century was marked in the Episcopal Church, as in other denominations, by the rise of gay activism among church members. Gbltq Episcopalians joined with supportive friends in the organization Integrity, founded by Dr. Louie Crew in 1974. It continues its mission of offering support to members of the gbltq community and works for more inclusivity throughout the church.

Yet the greatest growth in church membership in the Anglican Communion in the twentieth century was in Third World countries, where the character of the church (responsive to local conditions) has taken on not the ethos of an East Coast metropolis, but that of fervent missionary work, particularly in competition with Islam. This cultural conflict underlies the virulently anti-homosexual views of Anglican church leaders in Africa, who have been most vociferous in their condemnation of changing attitudes toward homosexuality by Anglicans in other countries.

In 1998, the conflict among different Anglican churches came to a head at the Lambeth Conference, a decennial gathering of the leaders of the churches comprising the Anglican Communion. After much

discussion and debate, the conference adopted strongly anti-homosexual resolutions, over the objections of many bishops from Western Europe and North America.

Divisions in the Episcopal Church

Several events in the last decade have marked the efforts of the Episcopal Church to come to grips with issues affecting the glbtq community, including the ordination of openly gay clergy.

In 1996, a church trial was held of the Right Reverend Walter Righter for having ordained an openly gay man while Righter was an assistant bishop in the Diocese of New Jersey. The court dismissed the charges, finding that the Episcopal Church had no clear doctrine on this issue. The contentious issue came to a head with the consecration of Bishop Robinson in 2003, a move that exposed the deep rift in the denomination over glbtq issues.

The Episcopal Church has emerged as a deeply divided denomination. Many dioceses are led by progressive clergy and bishops, who are tolerant of homosexuality and supportive of glbtq parishioners. However, many conservative dioceses cling to traditional negative attitudes toward homosexuality and bitterly oppose the pro-gay attitudes of the liberal majority. Whether the divisions between these opposed camps can be healed is uncertain. It may be that the Episcopal Church may in effect exist as two rather distinct denominations, with attitudes toward homosexuality an important marker for a host of other differences on social and theological issues.

Out Clergy

Although the ordination of openly gay and lesbian priests remains a controversial topic, a number of ordained clergy have come out publicly. Notable Episcopal clergy who have written about the connection between their sexual identity and the Anglican tradition include the Reverend Malcolm Boyd and the Reverend Carter Heyward.

Boyd, who gained prominence for his connections to the youth culture of the 1960s and 1970s in books such as *Are You Running with Me, Jesus?* (1977), explored his growing understanding of self in his 1986 book *Gay Priest*, and has been poet/writer-in-residence at the Cathedral Center of Los Angeles since 1996.

Heyward, one of 11 women ordained as priests in a controversial 1974 service in Philadelphia, is a feminist theologian. She has been on the faculty of the Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts since 1975. She came out publicly as a lesbian in 1979 as a means of supporting Ellen Barrett, an openly lesbian woman who had been recently ordained.

Commitment and Blessing Ceremonies for Same-Sex Couples

The consecration of Bishop Robinson in November 2003 led to enormous press attention and to serious tensions both within the Episcopal Church and between the Episcopal Church and its critics in the Anglican Communion, particularly leaders of the African churches. Gathering less attention, but perhaps of equal import in the long term was a resolution acknowledging that a number of clergy and congregations in the church have held commitment and blessing ceremonies for same-sex couples.

Although the resolution fell fall short of authorizing same-sex marriage or requiring blessings for same-sex couples (as some had hoped), it nonetheless reflects the ongoing process by which Anglican churches, since the time of Henry VIII and Richard Hooker, have sought to discern spiritual truth: by attending to the tradition of the church, the insight of scripture, and the application of reason to human experience.

[Continuing Conflict

In response to the Episcopal Church's consecration of Bishop Robinson and to the practice of blessing same-sex couples by some congregations within the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Church of Canada, the Archbishop of Canterbury appointed a commission to find ways to prevent schism within the Anglican Communion over the issue of homosexuality. The result was the "Windsor Report," which called for dialogue on the issue and sensitivity to the differing positions within the Communion.

However, the report's spirit of compromise was soon violated when the Primates of the 38 Anglican provinces met in 2005 and in effect ejected the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Church of Canada from the Anglican Consultative Council, suspending them until they "repent" their actions and apologize for them.

In 2006, at the Episcopal Church's General Convention, tensions were exacerbated with the election of Right Reverend Katharine Jefferts Schori, Bishop of Nevada, as Presiding Bishop. She became the Episcopal Church's first female Presiding Bishop and the Anglican Communion's first female Primate. Inasmuch as only a bare majority of the members of the Communion ordain women priests and only a few have consecrated women bishops, the election of Jefferts Schori was considered provocative, especially since she supported the consecration of Bishop Robinson and favors blessing gay and lesbian couples.

However, at the 2006 convention, in an effort to respond to some of the demands of the Anglican Communion, the Episcopal Church also passed resolutions urging dioceses not to elect bishops whose "manner of life" presents a challenge to the wider church and not to develop same-sex blessings. These resolutions disappointed gay men and lesbians in the Church and did little to placate the conservatives.

In the aftermath of the 2006 convention several individual congregations and dioceses of the Episcopal Church announced that they would sever their ties with the Episcopal Church and seek alliances with African or Southern Cone primates. Other actions by conservative members of the Episcopal Church have led the Church to the point of schism, with a minority of Episcopal clergy and congregations refusing to recognize the authority of the Presiding Bishop and the national church itself.

The attempts of the Episcopal Church to accommodate some of the concerns of the conservatives have been roundly rebuffed. Although outright schism was avoided at the 2008 Lambeth Conference, the North American churches were isolated and Bishop Robinson was banned from participation.

With the realization that conservatives were not likely to be placated, the Episcopal Church in 2009 rescinded the moratorium on electing gay and lesbian bishops and on developing same-sex blessings.

In December 2009, the Los Angeles diocese elected the Rev. Mary Douglas Glasspool suffragan bishop. Her election--and approval by a majority of the church's other 110 dioceses--made her the denomination's first openly lesbian bishop.

In announcing that Glasspool's election had been approved by a majority of the Church's dioceses, Los Angeles Bishop Jon Bruno said that the approval shows that the Episcopal Church "creates no barrier for ministry on the basis of gender and sexual orientation," while conservatives predictably decried the action as "grieving the heart of God."

The Episcopal Church now seems irrevocably committed to recognizing gay men and lesbians as full members of the denomination. In taking this position, it has braved the alienation of other constituent members of the Anglican Communion. The Church's position within the Communion will likely remain ambiguous, particularly given the failure of leadership exercised by the current Archbishop of Canterbury.]

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