

ANGLICAN GENDER DEBATES: TWO SUGGESTIONS

This paper offers two suggestions in relation to the issues of gender which currently exercise the Anglican Communion which it is hoped may prove acceptable to all parties. It was triggered by the writer's attendance at a conversation between Katharine Jefferts Schori, Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church in the United States, and a congregation gathered in Salisbury Cathedral on Monday, 14th July 2008, shortly before the Lambeth Conference. The writer wishes to acknowledge his gratitude to Bishop Katharine for the seed thought which she sowed on that occasion.

I: GOD'S LAST WORD ON HOMOSEXUALITY?

Last year we justly celebrated the bicentenary of the triumph of British Christians and in particular, from the Church of England, William Wilberforce and the evangelical Clapham Sect, who together brought about the end of the slave trade. There is a lesson to be learned about the use made of the Bible on both sides of the campaign which to my mind has considerable application to the debates currently exercising the worldwide Anglican Church on issues of gender.

I have before me a thought-provoking and extremely well-researched article by Professor John M.G. Barclay of the University of Durham, which appeared in *The Expository Times* for October 2007 under the title "Am I not a Man and a Brother?" The Bible and the British Anti-Slavery Campaign'.¹ Barclay documents the use of the Bible made by campaigners on both sides, pointing out that in terms of verses and passages directly cited, it was the *advocates* of the slave trade who had very much the best of the argument. Consider for instance the following paragraph from Leviticus:

As for your male and female slaves whom you may have: you may buy male and female slaves from among the nations that are round about you. You may also buy from among the strangers who sojourn with you and their families that are with you, who have been born in your land; and they may be your property. You may bequeath them to your sons after you, to inherit as a possession for ever; you may make slaves of them, but over your brethren the people of Israel you may not rule, one over another, with harshness. (Leviticus 25:44-6 RSV)

This and other passages (Exodus 21:1-4; Joshua 9:3ff.; Jesus' silence about slavery in the gospels as well as Paul's tolerance of it in 1 Timothy 6:1-4 and the entire letter to Philemon) enabled supporters of the slave trade to claim for their case abundant sanction in Holy Writ. So Barclay (5) details a tract published pseudonymously under the name of the Revd Raymond Harris in 1788, titled *Scriptural*

¹ Professor John M.G. Barclay, "Am I not a Man and a Brother?" The Bible and the British Anti-Slavery Campaign', *The Expository Times*, Volume 119, Number 1, October 2007, 3-14.

Researches on the Licitness of the Slave Trade, Shewing its Conformity with the Principles of Natural and Revealed Religion, Delineated in the Sacred Writings of the Word of God, which manages to conclude that 'the Slave-Trade, being so visibly authorized by the positive sanction of those Sacred Writings, must be essentially just and lawful in its principles'. Barclay comments:

He thus forces the choice: either accept God's will in Scripture, with God's own definition of justice, or admit that you do not take Scripture to be the unerring Word of God, but prefer your own prejudices and opinions. (5)

It is a dilemma that is sometimes expressed today. Wilberforce himself was hard put to reply.

On slavery itself, as Wilberforce admits, the Bible needed a bit of 'explanation' - the hermeneutical task was evidently more complex, and certainly too complex or potentially embarrassing to raise in Parliament. But he feels the 'principles' of the Bible are on his side (the principles, not the explicit rules), and the New Testament especially so (implicitly prioritized over the Old). (Barclay, 7).

But the theological battle was not finally won until the evangelical abolitionists broadened their field by developing a fresh approach according to which the 'Negro' slave was doubly reclassified as a *brother* - being both a human being and a potential fellow Christian. Slavery was therefore a fundamental injustice to a fellow man, a neighbour and a brother; and as such it was genuinely and manifestly contrary to a Scripture which preaches philanthropy, tenderness, pity and compassion.

And here's the rub. Those who are most concerned about homosexuality in the Church today tend to make their case from Bible texts in ways very similar to the eighteenth century advocates of the slave trade described above. Key texts such as

You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination (Leviticus 18:22 RSV)

(generally preferred to

If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death, their blood is upon them (Leviticus 20:13 RSV)),

are treated without qualification in precisely the same way in which Leviticus 25:44-6 quoted above, just a few chapters later, was used by the slave traders. As Barclay has shown, in order to win the battle against slavery, this method of lifting proof texts from Leviticus and elsewhere was precisely what the abolitionist evangelicals had to abandon. So I would argue that *to resume it today in the matter of homosexuality is implicitly to reinstate the defeated case for slavery*. If Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 are God's word to us today about homosexuality, then presumably Leviticus 25:44-6 is his word to us today about slavery. I think our African brothers and sisters in Christ would have something to say about that.

Barclay goes on to comment:

Whether rightly or wrongly applied, this scriptural language [about 'brotherhood'] merged easily with Enlightenment moral philosophy, whose influence was undoubtedly greater than many who appealed to the Bible knew or cared to admit. (13).

He concludes,

There was, in fact, no new exegetical advance in the interpretation of the biblical texts about slavery....What changed was the classification of the slave, and therefore, on that basis, the applicability of the biblical text: as slaves were reframed, redescribed and re-presented as 'brothers' and 'men', so they could be found in the love-commandment, the parable of the Good Samaritan, the parable of the sheep and the goats, and elsewhere, whatever might be said in texts more explicitly concerned with slaves and slavery. This is not quite a bypassing of the explicit texts, in order to appeal to the more abstract 'principles' of the Bible. This is rather a refusal to let slaves remain locked within the texts that speak about slaves, and to let them roam, as agents and as objects, across the whole biblical canon, under the labels 'brother'/'sister' and 'man'/'woman', not under the label 'slave'. It is this act of hermeneutical liberation (born of both religious and philosophical change) that turned out to be most significant for social reform - liberation from the very category 'slave'. (14)

Application to the present day gay/lesbian controversy should not need much spelling out. It seems to me that on this issue evangelicals and conservatives can therefore give themselves permission to relax. What is perhaps the brightest jewel in their crown was won by allowing God to speak to them from directions other than the Bible, and not least from the apparently godless Enlightenment that was going on around them. That was OK by God, and it worked pretty well for the slaves.

II: HOLY ORDERS?

Let us turn now to the consecration of women as bishops in the Church of England and elsewhere. This is where the outside world - indeed much of our own laity - thinks the Church of England in particular has gone crazy! Why all the fuss? Why can't women have equality of promotion prospects such as they expect and enjoy everywhere else?

There is a simple explanation of why in some masculine quarters the prospect of women bishops causes such discomfort. It is a matter of human psychology which could be instanced from all over the globe and most of history. *Men in general find it extraordinarily hard to cope with being told what to do by a woman.* Once past adolescence most men will readily accept orders from another man. But deeply rooted in the masculine psyche is a horror of being subject to a woman. So a woman in authority will need to have very much more strongly developed gifts of leadership if she is to succeed than a man in the same post. She will have to break through some very deep-seated and probably unrecognised emotions within her male subordinates if she is to win their co-operation.

This is why the commonly heard argument that consecrating women as bishops is no more than the logical consequence of ordaining them as priests - as though one were no more than a senior version

of the other - conceals a fallacy. For there is a qualitative difference between priests and bishops. In the Church of England as at present constituted, any priest or deacon at his/her ordination has to make a public vow of obedience and submission to the ordaining bishop. This at present would be the case when that bishop were female, a situation not yet encountered. She would be demanding of her clergy absolute obedience according to canon law, to a degree that she would not be able to demand in the outside world of, say, business or politics.

It is the absoluteness which causes the problem. We are dealing here with something lying very deep within the masculine psyche. The psychoanalysts will have a word for it, perhaps 'pathological'. The Freudians, we may surmise, will think in terms of emasculation. This may be, to borrow Al Gore's phrase, An Inconvenient Truth, but for many men, true it will be. For them, absolute obedience to a woman just won't work. And I suspect that something like this lies behind passages like 1 Timothy 2:12² in the much demonised St Paul. We may bewail human nature and masculine vanity or arrogance, but while we are stuck with them, demanding that men make an unconditional surrender of their wills to women is a sure recipe for disaster.³

Until not that long ago, the boot was on the other foot. In the marriage service, a bride used to have to make a vow of (unconditional) obedience to her husband. Some did so willingly, some unwillingly. Today she has the choice. But to the best of my knowledge no one has ever suggested that the vow should be reversed. Now perhaps, in twenty years' time he may find himself in just such a position! The hen-pecked husband, after all, is the stock of much comedy. But if a man had to vow eternal obedience to his spouse on their wedding day, there would be, I fear, in Hamlet's phrase, 'no more marriages'. *A fortiori*, such an oath to a woman bishop, for whom he feels no romantic attachment at all, is for many a man going to prove traumatic, and for some, even out of the question.

And here we reach the point which sparked this essay. Bishop Katharine, at the meeting referred to in the header, was asked how the American Episcopal Church, over which she presides, coped in practice with relations of authority between its ordained orders. She replied, if I remember rightly, that in her Church such relations were very much less formal than they are in the Church of England. In effect, a bishop may lead but not so absolutely command. Difficulties are resolved whenever possible by discussion and negotiation rather than by fiat. And there we have the key. I believe that *much of the unhappiness among those who fear the prospect of women bishops in the Church of England and elsewhere in the Anglican Communion could well vanish if the authority of all bishops over their clergy were made less absolute.*

² 'I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men.' (RSV)

³ I except here submission to a female monarch, where a number of very different issues are involved which go beyond the scope of this paper.

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This is the price, enshrined in canon law, which we will need to pay if we are to have women bishops. For we are dealing here with two 'archaisms' (I use the word descriptively, not pejoratively): exclusively male leadership and absolute obedience to that leadership. These two belong together. Absolute authority is workable if all orders are male, as in the Roman Catholic Church. It will not be workable if the upper echelons are female. To achieve that, it will be necessary to relax the disciplinary relationships between the orders as in the Episcopal Church in the US. That too is in principle workable. But to abandon the first archaism while retaining the second is to sew a new patch on to old cloth or to fill old wineskins with new wine. It is the combination which is disastrous.

I believe that this explains much of the fear among male opponents of the measure, some of whom may have been touched deep down for reasons they cannot themselves identify. Make the correction, and the change could work as well as it appears to in the United States.

'Beloved, let us love one another; for love is of God.' (1 John 4:7 RSV)

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