

Churchman

EDITORIAL

Tout gai de reguennes

Connoisseurs of clever trivia will be familiar with Luis D'Antin van Rooten's now classic *Mots d'heures, gousses, rames*, a whimsical little book that recycles well-known English nursery rhymes in nonsensical (but often amusing) pseudo-French. His masterpiece is Lewis Carroll's famous *Un petit d'un petit*, that ode to a talking eggshell who made words mean whatever he wanted them to mean. The recent Primates meeting brings this to mind, not because any of them resembles *Un petit d'un petit*, but because the furious and entirely disproportionate reaction to their decisions shows just how far *Un petit's* principle of manipulating words has established itself in the post-Orwellian Anglican Communion.

The Primates meeting was supposedly about a number of pressing issues, like global warming and third-world poverty, with same-sex marriage (SSM) tucked in as one more item on the agenda. As it turned out—and as everyone fully expected from the start—discussion of SSM occupied almost the entire meeting and has been the only subject of comment ever since. The cacophony of voices condemning (or weakly attempting to excuse) the Primates' decisions has shown that there is widespread confusion about what they mean, and it is hard not to conclude that much of that confusion has been sown quite deliberately by parties who are opposed to them.

In these circumstances, it is vitally important to define what the issues are, separate them out from one another, and tackle them one at a time. The first question, and the one that the Primates seem to have been most united on, concerns the coherence of the Anglican Communion as a fellowship of churches. Behind all the rhetoric about 'choosing to walk together' there lies the uncomfortable fact that the American Episcopal Church (TEC) has consistently promoted an agenda that is at variance with that of most of its supposedly sister churches. It has invariably refused to moderate or to reconsider its position when challenged by the others to do so, and the reaction to the latest attempt to discipline it shows that its leadership is probably incapable of changing course. No

organisation can allow one of its members to behave in such a fashion, and it should be clear to everyone that the best solution would be for TEC to go its own way. Indeed, it is somewhat surprising that TEC's leaders want to have anything to do with such disagreeable partners, especially as they must know that they have no hope of winning them over to their views. The other Anglican churches have treated TEC with the degree of consideration that they have, mainly because they do not want to abandon those faithful Christians in TEC who side with the wider Communion. For its part TEC's leadership keeps the non-conversation going, perhaps because it cannot bear the prospect of defeat.

The Primates made it abundantly clear that they will not accept this situation indefinitely, and if future discussion concentrates on the question of institutional cohesion, TEC and its allies will have to leave the Anglican Communion, which is what they should have done long ago. Their departure need not be rancorous. If they can admit that they have chosen to walk apart from others, and accept that there are many within their own church who agree with the worldwide Communion and should be allowed to leave TEC without losing their property, the separation could be reasonably amicable. That would certainly be the best way to secure the 'good disagreement' that the archbishop of Canterbury wants to see and would be accepted by the majority of Anglicans worldwide. The snag is that the Americans are unlikely to take the hint and depart without a fight, which is regrettable when a peaceful severance would be in the best interests of everyone.

The second issue at stake is quite different and harder to define in purely institutional terms. This is that the Anglican Communion is the victim of widespread false teaching on matters of sexuality which cuts across provincial lines, at least in the West. It is probably true that almost all the churches in the developing world (Brazil being a notable exception) are conservative and monochrome on this subject, but the same cannot be said of the historic Anglo-Saxon churches. In their different ways, Anglicans in the British Isles, Canada, the USA, Australia and New Zealand are internally divided, with liberals being clearly dominant in the USA and probably in New Zealand and Canada too. Australia is an exception. Most committed Anglicans there are conservative, but because they are heavily concentrated in Sydney and a few other dioceses scattered across the country, it is the larger number of liberal dioceses, most of which are tiny (and sometimes virtually bankrupt) that elect the primate and ensure that the wider Communion is given a distorted impression of what the church is really like. In the British Isles, conservatives are strong

in Ireland and in the Church of England, though it is also in the latter that the most vocal opposition to the Primates' decisions has been expressed—at least so far.

The archbishops of Canterbury and York desperately want to avoid serious discussion of the doctrinal aspects of the problem, because not only would it divide the Anglican Communion, but their own church would be split down the middle as well. Unfortunately for them, it is the false teaching aspect that animates the leaders of the Global South provinces more than anything else. It is also what is most important to conservatives in the rest of the Communion, so it cannot be ignored, even if there are always likely to be more votes in favour of institutional (as opposed to theological) harmony. The best hope for the promoters of 'good disagreement' is that the conservatives will be persuaded to accept the co-existence of truth and error in the church, though the chances of that are slim. This 'two integrities' approach has worked with the ordination of women, but only because orthodox Anglicans have either left the church or believe that it is not a matter that touches on any fundamental doctrine. Taking heart from this, some are now suggesting that a similar arrangement can be worked out over homosexual practice, which they argue is also of secondary importance when it comes to the church's beliefs. Their latest mantra is that conservatives should recognise their opponents as 'brothers and sisters in Christ' which is supposed to imply that they are not false teachers, even if what they say is wrong.

It is true that SSM is not mentioned in any Anglican formulary, but that does not mean that it can be relegated to the level of the *adiaphora* (matters indifferent). On the contrary, it must be condemned as false teaching because it goes against one of the most fundamental Biblical truths—the creation of the world by God for the providential benefit of the human race. The Bible tells us that sexual differentiation belongs to the essence of humanity. Men and women were created and intended for each other. Both are necessary for the propagation of the race and marriage (understood as lifelong heterosexual monogamy) is the most important single expression of this. The permitted alternatives to it are celibacy, which the New Testament prefers and even exalts in the case of those who are called to it, and 'family' relationships ('brother-sister,' 'parent-child'), which are appropriate models for all other male-female contacts. Same-sex relationships fall into this third category, making homosexual practice within the church a form of spiritual incest. It must be resisted, just as sexual relations between men and women who are

not married must be resisted, because neither measures up to what God expects from his people.

In Biblical terms, the question of sexual 'orientation' does not arise because it is superfluous. The orientation of all human beings is towards sin, and on that basis the church is inclusive and accepting of everyone. All have sinned and come short of the glory of God! No exception is made for homosexuals—like everyone else, they too must repent of their sins and be born again to a new life in Christ, in which sexual activity is restricted to the bond of (heterosexual) marriage. In this new life, homosexual practice has no place, but then neither does divorce, except in the case of adultery—a point which many conservatives have not sufficiently emphasised. A divorced person who has remarried within the lifetime of his/her former spouse, but who is nevertheless allowed to enter the ordained ministry or teach in a theological college, is just as unacceptable to God as a same-sex married couple, and there should be no discrimination against homosexuals on this score. Evangelicals cannot be lax on heterosexual sin whilst coming down heavily against homosexuality, and those who behave in this way are justly accused of being inconsistent.

The third issue that has been raised in the context of the Primates' meeting is the treatment of homosexual, bisexual and 'transgendered' people by the church. The Primates made it clear that they do not condone any discrimination against people on the basis of sexual orientation, but in the minds of their critics they have not gone far enough. It is a difficult subject, because a distinction has to be drawn between people who fall into one of these categories and those who campaign on their behalf, who may or may not be among them. In the case of bisexuals, the message of the church is clear and should not be problematic—they should opt for the inclination that is pleasing to God and get on with it. Transgendered people are few and far between, but there is an important difference between those who are genuine hermaphrodites (very few) and those who have simply decided that they want to change sex because they feel like doing so. The church must sympathise with the former but not with the latter, who have deliberately gone against the way they were created by God. Hermaphrodites can only be dealt with on a case-by-case basis, but those who have opted for a sex-change should on no account be allowed to marry in a church or be ordained into its ministry, because by deliberately rejecting their own created selves they have turned away from God.

This leaves those who are homosexual in the true sense of the word. Once again, there is a spectrum of degrees, and we must not assume that everyone can be ‘cured’ of same-sex attraction or be reprogrammed into a heterosexual lifestyle, even if some can be (and are). We know very little about what causes homosexuality. For some it may be a choice, but for many it is not, and it is the involuntary aspect of it that elicits the sympathy of many outsiders. We cannot say that homosexual orientation is the result of the fall any more than other human disorders are. When Jesus was confronted with the man who was born blind, he specifically stated that this handicap was not due to anybody’s sin, but was given so that the glory of God might be revealed. What that means is that God has chosen us in our weaknesses and has transformed us by his grace. We do not have to like the limitations that have been placed on us—the Apostle Paul prayed three times that the thorn in his flesh might be removed. But God told him that he must live with it and triumph over it, a lesson that applies to us all. Homosexuality is no different in this respect from alcoholism, gluttony or sloth. Those who struggle with it must be helped to overcome it, not allowed to indulge in it on the ground that there is nothing they can do to change it. All of us have a thorn in the side that we have to deal with, and all of us have the promise of God that his grace is sufficient for us in our fight against it.

Whatever their particular circumstances may be, homosexuals are called to consecrate their sexuality to God and to follow his commands just as heterosexuals are. Here the church can do more to encourage heterosexual married people to be considerate and sympathetic to those who are not like themselves, which might mean encouraging them to dwell less on the importance of sexual intercourse in their own lives. Observation suggests that this is more likely to be a challenge for men than for women, but it also suggests that the goal is far from unattainable. Sexuality is not something to be ashamed of, but neither is it meant to be flaunted on every possible occasion, and those heterosexuals who are inclined to do that should be rebuked by their pastors. There is much more to life than sex, which (if the truth be told) plays little part in the everyday activities of most people and is more likely to be a hindrance than a help to human interaction if it occupies centre stage in our relationships.

Has the church actively discriminated against homosexuals? This is one of the most frequent claims made by campaigners on their behalf, who demand apologies and a change of behaviour from those whom they consider to be guilty of this. It is obviously impossible to investigate every single case, especially as very few are ever specified in detail. But

as far as the Church of England is concerned, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that homosexuals have been a cosseted minority, at least in the ordained ministry. There have been scores of gay clergymen over the years, and hardly any have suffered because of it. There have even been paedophile bishops, whom the church has done more than enough to support, even at the expense of its own reputation. At the present time there is a clergyman in General Synod who has contracted a same-sex marriage in open defiance of the bishops but who has not been disciplined (as he ought to be). Should an apology for mistreatment be offered to someone like that?

This brings us to the world of the campaigners, to which that particular gentleman proudly belongs. They are the false teachers who are disturbing the peace of the church and scandalising the faithful, whether they are active homosexuals themselves or not. The technique of the campaigners is to invert the normal meaning of words, and then use them as weapons to attack their opponents. 'Gay' is an obvious example of this, but so are 'inclusive' and 'accepting,' as if those who disagree with their analysis are automatically bigots. The most recent manifestation of this phenomenon in England is something called Synod Evangelicals for Good Disagreement, a pressure group whose aim is to open the door to the legitimising of homosexual practice in the church, including the acceptance of SSM. The name is totally fatuous. For a start, not all its members are in General Synod, though that is a minor detail. More importantly, not a single one of them is an Evangelical, at least not in any sense that would be recognised by the Church of England Evangelical Council or the Evangelical Alliance. As for 'good disagreement,' words fail us. Good disagreement is only possible when the differences of opinion are of secondary importance, which in this case they most certainly are not. What began as an expression coined by the archbishop of Canterbury in a sincere attempt to keep non-essential matters in their place, has now been hijacked by the pro-homosexual campaigners to promote the introduction of licensed sin!

This abuse of words is a large part of the problem and the real reason why the so-called 'shared conversations' are a farce. People who do not speak the same language cannot converse, and if they pretend otherwise, disaster is sure to follow. Our bishops need to stand up for what is right and remember that the Anglican Communion, the Roman Catholic Church, the Eastern Orthodox Churches and Evangelical bodies around the world are of one mind on this. There is no need for them to be cowed by Fleet Street columnists and parliamentary backbenchers who

threaten disestablishment if they do not bow down to the Lie. The Church of England may be 'by law established' but if it cannot express the truth and abide by it, it will discover that even all the king's horses and all the king's men cannot put Humpty Dumpty *tout gai de reguennes*.

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