

Is Anglicanism anti-gay? A reflection on Anglicans and how they should respond to proposed new legislation in Equatorial Africa.

There is now a new Archbishop of Canterbury, appointed early in 2013 but still something of an enigma. Thus far, he has concentrated his firepower on the financial section, which is at once a safe bet (bankers are no-one's friends at the moment) and an area about which he knows quite a lot.

Justin Welby also knows a great deal about Nigeria, which he is reputed to have visited more than ninety times and where twice he has been in peril of his life. He also knows other parts of Africa, including Uganda and both the Nigerian and Ugandan Archbishops were in Canterbury for his enthronement in March last year. It is said that Welby is also in the process of making personal visits to all the Archbishops of the Anglican Communion.

With these two particular provinces of the Anglican Communion representing a huge swath of African, indeed world Anglican membership, Justin Welby must now be fully aware that 2014 may see some of the most draconian anti-gay and frankly homophobic laws enacted in what are nevertheless strongly Christian countries with a large Islamic (especially in Nigeria) presence as well. As such it is disturbing to learn that at least three Ugandan bishops including the Archbishop have enthusiastically endorsed governmental action.¹ The new laws in Uganda are now on the cusp of becoming formalised if the President, who may or may not listen to the growing international outcry, signs them.²

There is a history of similar opinion in the two equatorial African countries and as long ago as 2007 a Nigerian Anglican bishop declared that homosexuals and lesbians undertaking sexual relationships 'are not fit to live'.³ Such views can of course be found all over conservative Africa but they have anecdotally been reinforced by visiting American Evangelical preachers who seem to have exported North American cultural wars, such as have split the American Episcopal Church, to Africa.

There have consequently been calls for the Archbishop of Canterbury to speak out against what is happening in Africa. Thus far Justin Welby has remained silent and apparently unmoved on the matter. Perhaps his advisors have argued that this is the best policy as any comments by him would only inflame the situation? However, it will

¹ See: <http://www.monitor.co.ug/News/National/Anti-gays-Bill--repentance-top-Xmas-sermons/-/688334/2126136/-/10rwlzf/-/index.html> (accessed December 2013)

² See: www.wisconsinjournal.com/breaking-news/united-nations-urges-ugandan-president-to-not-sign-anti-gay-bill.html (accessed December 2013)

³ See: <http://akinolarepent.wordpress.com/2007/09/05/nigerian-bishop-gays-not-fit-to-live/> (accessed December 2013)

be difficult to maintain this position for long, especially as new ferocious penalties are intended for 'offenders', which includes the sinister, imprisonment for not informing on gay tenants, promoting homosexuality (which could include HIV counselling) and 'crimes of homosexuality' committed abroad even in countries where homosexual acts are not illegal. The new anti-homosexuality law in Uganda would make the country rank as one of the most homophobic in the world.

There is however another strand to the clarion calls for opposition to what is happening in Uganda in particular and Nigeria in general, in that both of their Anglican provinces have been in the van of supporting the schismatic break away 'Anglican' movements in the American Episcopal Church. The largest of these is the Anglican Church of North America (ACNA) under the oversight of 'Archbishop' Robert Duncan of the 'Anglican' Diocese of Pittsburgh.

It is not necessary to expound the details the background complexities of this movement other than to note that the catalyst for the current breakaway under Duncan was the election and consecration of the then Bishop of New Hampshire, Gene Robinson. Robinson was openly gay with a partner. His subsequent ratification in August 2003 by the General Convention of the Episcopal Church led Robert Duncan and nineteen other bishops to proceed towards schism supported by the then Archbishop of Nigeria and others in the 'Global South' alignment of conservative Anglican provinces. The tensions between liberal and conservative opinion in the United States had spilled over into a global, especially equatorial African environment.

It is this background and the prospective anti-gay laws of Uganda and now enacted ones of Nigeria that have subtly changed the perspective of the debate. Arguably the Archbishop of Canterbury should indeed speak out, as titular head of the Anglican Communion, against what is happening. More so, however, it is now essential for the likes of Robert Duncan and other conservative groupings to clarify where they stand and to make clear whether they support the prospective Ugandan and now existing Nigerian legislation.

As the breakaway 'Anglican' movement in the United States very existence is predicated on an anti-gay stance, is it also supportive of such ferocious anti-gay environment in the countries and churches, which it has so assiduously, courted? If the answer is in the affirmative, then it is arguable that these schismatic groupings in the United States and wherever else they exist are profoundly and ironically un-Anglican.

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