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978-0-521-85120-6 - Homosexuality and the Crisis of Anglicanism

William L. Sachs

Excerpt

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## CHAPTER I

*A definitive moment*

## AT FIRST GLANCE

In 2003 the well-known culture wars that had challenged North American life for a generation escalated dramatically. On August 5 of that year the triennial General Convention of the Episcopal Church confirmed the election of Gene Robinson, an openly gay man living with a partner, as Bishop of New Hampshire. The Episcopal Convention's action followed approval of the blessing of same-sex unions granted by the Anglican Church of Canada's Diocese of New Westminster in 2002, and the first instance of such blessing in May 2003. By that time the Church of England had come close to consecrating its first openly gay bishop when it was announced in the spring of 2003 that Jeffrey John had been appointed Bishop of Reading. But John's resignation of the appointment shifted the focus of the issue to North America.<sup>1</sup> Though only one diocese of each church was immediately involved, the entire American and Canadian churches became embroiled and, in the eyes of some, responsible for the controversy.

The furor that resulted took global proportions, plunging the Anglican Communion into acrimonious debate. Amid indications that the church would split, the pace of events quickened. With public interest high the agendas of Anglican meetings shifted as the issue of homosexuality claimed center stage. Ominously no hint of resolution was forthcoming. The battle lines among Anglicans had been forming for years and seemed firmly entrenched. Progressive groups in the church which had lobbied for full acceptance of gay people were determined to secure what they viewed as a key step forward and expressed confidence in their vindication. Traditionalist groups that mobilized in anticipation of what they

<sup>1</sup> A lively account of the emergence of the crisis over homosexuality with a focus on events within the Church of England is found in Stephen Bates, *A Church at War: Anglicans and Homosexuality* (I. B. Tauris, 2004). A correspondent for the *Guardian*, Bates does not claim to offer historical or theological analysis. This account and his continuing coverage have become major, journalistic views of the unfolding crisis.

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viewed as the height of apostasy looked beyond protest. Traditionalists made references to “impaired Communion” among Anglicans and hinted that acceptance of homosexuality in the church required drastic measures. A traditionalist impulse to create separate jurisdictions of pure religious life gained momentum after August 2003. Apparently shorn by these irreconcilable factions, the global family of churches linked by common descent from the Church of England, by shared patterns of Christian belief and practice, and by various formal and informal networks was imperiled. Despite a flurry of special meetings of church leaders, the break-up of the Anglican Communion seemed possible. By 2008 when some North American traditionalists claimed affiliation with like-minded Anglicans elsewhere, such “realignment” had begun.

In this book I explain how this conflict arose and how the groups contending over the issue defined their stances. I will locate the source of conflict in an historic tension between local and wider forms of church life. I will argue that uncertainty about the church’s nature surfaces throughout history at times of cultural shift or in novel social contexts. At such times there have been tendencies toward polarization and the emergence of tightly defined ecclesiastical factions pursuing one or another version of Christianity’s essence. Often such conflict has invoked the dilemma posed by a moral issue, which has lately become homosexuality. I will emphasize that in such conflict the triumph of one or another faction does not resolve the underlying crisis because such factions rarely grasp the true issue at stake and do not encompass the breadth of opinion in the church.

The contending positions in the conflict over homosexuality reflect the influence of contextual forces that have shaped Anglican life. The expansion of Anglicanism entailed reliance on local variations, yet such variations have not always proven compatible. The resulting tensions have been couched in moral terms, with one party citing apparent concessions to cultural influences and calling for tightened standards, the other calling for changes in church life that represent constructive engagement with culture. Morality can serve as a measure of decline or advance in church life depending on one’s perceptions. Moral issues such as homosexuality can dramatize divergent ideals and practices and become the basis of activism to correct perceived flaws in the church and the world. But agreement on moral ideals, which can be elusive, cannot resolve the deeper issue, which is the church’s unity amid the uncertainty over its nature arising from local variations. This becomes apparent as contending factions propose new ideals of church unity reflective of their contextual experience. Context means particular physical and cultural settings

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within which all aspects of life, including religion, face certain realities, espouse certain values, and take certain forms. The Christian search for universally applied, faithful forms of belief and practice inevitably collides with aspects of contextual experience, especially when the church's life in one context varies from that in others. Context, we will discover, can also refer to sub-groups within a larger religious identity. Church parties and movements typically cultivate alternative forms of religious life designed to influence the larger body in certain ways. Such groups emerge at times when the identity of the larger religious body seems uncertain or imperiled. This book will consider the manner in which uncertainty over the church's nature arose from the variations of Anglican life and challenged historic forms of unity.

The Anglican crisis over homosexuality was not surprising. In North America, the British Isles, and westernized sites in the Anglican world, homosexuality had been a topic of energetic discussion. Though most church leaders had cautioned against the steps taken in North America in 2003, the prospect of gay people gaining acceptance among Anglicans in the global North had been anticipated.<sup>2</sup> It had appeared for a few years that the issue of homosexuality could surface and force a definitive moment in the church's life. The actions of 2003 in Canada and in the United States may have delighted some and dismayed others, but such steps surprised few.

Most observers agreed that this issue represented the Anglican Communion's severest test. Anglicans have prided themselves on their capacity to overcome differences and to forge unity. As one of the largest, most dispersed of all religious groups, Anglicans cannot be defined by the legacy of the British Empire alone. The majority of Anglicans reside in developing nations and do not speak English as their first language. Like counterparts in the global North they emphasize local control over the church while they prize the religious legacy they inherited from their British and American predecessors. Until homosexuality took center stage Anglicans were confident they could adapt appreciatively to local circumstances while maintaining consistency with other branches of their

<sup>2</sup> Following current convention I use the term "global North" to refer to what is also called the "western world." This term includes nations in North America, the British Isles, and Western Europe. It also includes industrialized and modernized nations south of the equator such as Australia and New Zealand. The "global South" includes nations often lumped together as the "developing world." While "global South" suggests that these nations lie below the equator, some prominent ones, including India, Pakistan, and Nigeria, do not. The terms "global South" and "global North" are useful because they rely upon geographic distinction rather than implications of hierarchy suggested by such terms as "first world" and "third world." I am indebted to Mignon Tucker for raising this point and for close reading of drafts of this book as they emerged. She has helped to ensure this book is accessible to a wide audience.

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Communion. But the issue of homosexuality threatened Anglican unity. It became a severe test of Anglicanism's capacity to embrace varieties of religious outlook and expression in consistent ways. The church that prided itself on unity amid diversity faced the threat of division. The crisis over homosexuality became a crossroads for the Anglican world.

Such a crisis had considerable social precedent. For two decades there had been a culture war in the global North. Given the uncertainty over social norms that fueled it, James Davison Hunter called it a "struggle to define America." It involved competing understandings of public good and galvanized political battles over a core set of social issues, namely, abortion, public schools, family life, the role of religion in public life, and homosexuality. It was clear that American politics reflected sharply defined polarities on these issues, often known as Liberalism and Conservatism, but which Hunter terms Progressivism and Orthodoxy.<sup>3</sup> The culture war over issues of family life and morality created repercussions beyond North America. Hunter's sense of a struggle to define cultural values had its counterparts elsewhere, with profound implications for religious life generally and for the Anglican Communion in particular. There were echoes of progressive sentiment in some places, notably the British Isles, Europe, and parts of the South Pacific. But in the global South there were counterparts of the groups Hunter labels Orthodox in the United States. Such groups assailed signs of what they saw as moral decline in their own cultural settings. With great vigor, persons of the Orthodox mind cited the global North as the source of their culture's moral woes. The United States in particular symbolized a disturbing mix of affluence, indolence, and moral waywardness. Alarm at the influence of the global North prompted activism to ward it off and to guard indigenous cultural values.

Religious organizations became entwined in moral activism. Just as the Religious Right arose in North America, concerns about public life fueled traditionalist movements elsewhere. Such groups cited aspects of culture in the global North they found abhorrent and threatening to their way of life. Thanks to rapid communication and news coverage, initiatives to affirm homosexuality in one part of the world elicited reactions elsewhere. Traditionalist sentiment in North America found more than ideological echoes from the global South. Traditionalists showed a proclivity for creating networks with like-minded groups within their vicinities and elsewhere,

<sup>3</sup> Hunter defines these polarities as Progressivism and Orthodoxy, which I identify with the Anglican factions I call Progressivism and Traditionalism. Anglican conservatives claim the mantle of orthodoxy, but I use Traditionalist to underscore their claim to be the true embodiment of Christian tradition. See James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars* (Basic Books, 1992).

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an expansion of the culture wars that heightened its stakes. Progressive voices built their own version. The Anglican conflict over homosexuality exemplified the influence of far-flung linkages. Spurred by the emergence of their culture war, the Anglican world became rife with issue-driven networks. As a result Anglicans illustrated how conflict could spread globally.

It would not seem difficult to describe the forces arrayed against one another in this Anglican culture war, or how they assumed ecclesiastical prominence. Anglican traditionalist and progressive forces held easily understood positions. One side, citing the Bible and Christian tradition, called for strict adherence to the historic moral order it found there. Homosexuality is clearly and specifically condemned by various biblical passages and these passages brook no modification.<sup>4</sup> The other side declared that Christianity offers the ultimate platform for an unfolding realization of social justice. Called to be society's conscience and guide, the church advances the hope of justice by becoming inclusive of all persons, including those who are gay and lesbian, even in the highest religious offices. The message of Christianity is that all people are loved as they are, and should be welcomed into the church.<sup>5</sup>

Although the differences between progressives and traditionalists were apparent, there were surprising similarities between their positions. Both sides perceived a grave threat to the integrity of the Christian faith and presumed that activism for the correct view was necessary. Both sides cited what they view as decisive aspects of Christian tradition and Anglican identity to defend the beliefs and practices they intended to enshrine. Both sides made profound claims for the nature of the church and its leadership. Both sides sought to expand their audiences and presumed the urgency of certain kinds of religious influence for public life. For both the stakes were high. The ground they contested is the core of Christian belief and its proper expression. The crisis over homosexuality concerned the most intimate of human realities, sexuality, and the proper application of Christian sources to moral issues at a time of shifting social realities. Moreover the ramifications of the situation were extensive. The outcome of the crisis could influence Christian teaching on sexuality, as well as the role of Christian belief in determining public values. The crisis over homosexuality will impact not only the shape of Anglicanism, but relations between Anglicans and other religions, and between religion and culture.

<sup>4</sup> Peter C. Moore, "Homosexuality and the Great Commandment," American Anglican Council website.

<sup>5</sup> L. William Countryman and M. R. Ritley, *Gifted By Otherness: Gay and Lesbian Christians in the Church* (Morehouse, 2001).

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## BENEATH THE SURFACE

Although a conflict over homosexuality was not astonishing, on closer examination much about the Anglican crisis over homosexuality proved surprising. There was more intricacy to this conflict than culture wars categories could contain. For instance the extent of public interest in all aspects of the controversy was surprising. Not only have major media outlets given extensive coverage to the situation, the volume of information available about it on the Internet surpasses what is usually devoted to religious life. Of course there are websites representing the varieties of traditionalist and progressive groups. There are also websites offering purported objective commentary and insight. There is even a large volume of information about Gene Robinson, ranging from news coverage of his activities to biographical data, including analysis of his astrological chart. No less surprising is the extent of media coverage of Anglican efforts to address the situation, of traditionalist steps that portend fracture of the Communion, and of efforts to avoid a split. Church conventions and conferences attracted coverage by major news outlets. The Episcopal and Canadian churches' steps toward acceptance of homosexuality in the church have proven as fascinating to a wider public as they have troubling or encouraging to Anglicans.

The crisis over homosexuality in the Episcopal and Canadian churches was not the first instance of issues concerning sexuality and clergy drawing widespread public interest. Since the 1980s there has been energetic discussion of instances of sexual misconduct in all religious organizations in North America. A flood of books posed descriptions of the situation, citing both historical precedent and the steps to be taken in addressing the problem in congregations and wider religious organizations. Public interest also fastened on revelations of sexual misconduct by Roman Catholic clergy, especially against children. A growing literature detailed not only the scandal itself, but the efforts to cover it up by leading Catholic figures. Observers of the Catholic Church noted the scandal reflected malaise in Catholicism's sense of identity and mission.<sup>6</sup>

Public interest in the Anglican crisis over homosexuality reflected broad concerns about religion and sexuality. The moral probity of religious leaders

<sup>6</sup> See Peter Steinfels, *A People Adrift: The Crisis of the Roman Catholic Church in America* (Simon & Schuster, 2003). For a comprehensive, popular account of the Catholic scandal, see David France, *Our Fathers: The Secret Life of the Catholic Church in an Age of Scandal* (Broadway, 2005). An elaborate literature deals with instances and issues of clergy misconduct among Protestants. The ground-breaking book in this area has been Marie Fortune, *Is Nothing Sacred?* (Harper & Row, 1989).

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became the subject of public interest because of a few, well-publicized instances of misconduct. In this sense the Anglican situation was not unique. But while there were common features with other controversies concerning sexuality and religious leaders, it became clear that there were significant distinctions as well. Homosexuality cannot be equated with sexual misconduct by clergy against either adults or children. The Anglican situation concerned both an instance of an openly gay man being elected as a bishop, and initiative taken to establish same-sex relations as normative in the church. These instances do not represent misconduct per se, but they raised questions about the patterns of life expected of clergy and the sorts of relations the church should, or should not, endorse. From the public perspective, it was not surprising that homosexuality raised these issues and became the basis of conflict among Anglicans. The Anglican situation mirrored wider uncertainty about the church's moral nature and the moral standards expected of its leaders.

As one considers the Anglican situation, its intricacies surface and require thoughtful attention. As inevitable as a culture war over homosexuality seems in the circumstances of the early twenty-first century, it is not clear how this conflict arose nor why it took the course it has taken. Mere description of the poised religious and cultural forces cannot explain why the conflict emerged, nor why it galvanized such heated convictions and highly motivated advocates, nor why the Anglican Communion found itself in the vortex. Clearly moral issues, especially those concerning sexuality, have historic importance for religious life and have acquired fresh public currency. But the circumstances that produced divisions over homosexuality, and which became central for Anglicans and for a wider public remain unclear. As the issue unfolded it was uncertain what this conflict portended not only for the Anglican world but for the way religion and culture relate as well as for relations between the global North and global South. To assess the crisis over homosexuality this book must probe the reality beneath these issues.

Much about the Anglican crisis over homosexuality has proven surprising. When the issues it has touched and the constituencies it has massed are considered a variety of questions surface. For instance, although the contending sides seem clearly defined, and have built significant backing, the extent of their followings is not clear. Influential groups and leaders across the Anglican world expressed more interest in reconciliation than in the triumph of a particular viewpoint, and efforts to define a new consensus about the church's belief and mission emerged. Signs of this trend arose from efforts by Anglican leaders to resolve the dispute.

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But the determination to seek resolution found sources beyond Anglican leadership circles.

By 2004 it was clear that over 60 percent of the members of Episcopal congregations identified with neither progressives nor traditionalists in the conflict over homosexuality. Most local lay leaders expressed anxiety about the prospect that the Episcopal Church might divide. Most valued differences of opinion about homosexuality in their congregations and sought local ways of addressing those differences without division. These signs indicated that grassroots Episcopalians were seeking reconciling consensus by balancing respect for tradition with the differences encountered in their local contexts. It was unclear what such consensus represented, nor whether it would hold. But few leaders hinted their congregations would leave the Episcopal Church to align with a conservative diocese elsewhere in the Anglican Communion.<sup>7</sup> The predominant sentiment in the Episcopal Church favored consensus over conflict. A challenge deeper than homosexuality faced the church. Yet the fact that a broad swath of members would be anxious about the state of the church without siding with the contending factions intensifies the questions about this crisis. For instance sentiment in favor of a new focus on mission in the church likely prevailed, especially at the grassroots, and suggested the outline of a broad new consensus about appropriate forms of belief and practice among Episcopalians. Even more, the search for reconciling consensus among Anglicans reflected a search for reconciling clarity in religious and public policy circles.<sup>8</sup> Above all, the fact of such a preference for consensus meant that it was not clear why the issue of homosexuality emerged so powerfully among Anglicans. While assessing the warring factions, it is necessary to consider the majority of Anglicans whose position resisted easy classification, and who pursued moral consensus.

The reality of the search for certainty about the proper dimensions of the church's life and leadership among Anglicans intensifies the questions raised by this crisis. How were groups which represent minority, activist sentiments able to dictate the shape of crisis? Did this conflict assume large proportions because of factors uniquely blended among Anglicans?

<sup>7</sup> William L. Sachs, "The Episcopal Middle," *The Christian Century*, August 10, 2004. A number of scholars have questioned the adequacy of a culture wars framework for understanding contemporary conflict over social values. A recent instance is Morris P. Fiorina with Samuel J. Abrams and Jeremy C. Pope, *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America* (Pearson Education, 2005). These scholars hold that the outline of a culture war reflects the rise of participatory democracy and cynicism about reliance on government. Pointedly the authors note that suspicion of homosexuality is gradually declining in American opinion polls.

<sup>8</sup> For example, see the research and writing of social scientist Alan Wolfe, especially his *One Nation, After All* (Penguin, 1999) and *Moral Freedom* (Norton, 2001) to which we will return.

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Had the church's global spread combined with its particular manner of uniting tradition, local initiative, and experience of the sacred to create a fertile setting for disputing the nature of Christian morality and belief? Even more, how did conflict over homosexuality reflect differing ideals of the Christian life? For Anglicans, the pivotal role of the bishop casts this clash in a particularly compelling and public light. The prevailing practice of selecting bishops locally set the stage for tensions over what qualities bishops generally must embody. The election of a gay bishop in one diocese, and the blessing of same-sex unions in other dioceses, revealed a deeper question to which Anglicans are particularly vulnerable: the proper relation of local church forms to one another, and the proper definition and consistent application of standards of belief and practice based upon church life in a variety of cultural contexts.

While the conflict over homosexuality had contemporary contours its sources lay beyond Anglicanism and the present moment. The roots of the conflict lay in the history of Christianity. Even the way the contending forces arrayed suggests prior conflicts. Questions of morality and of sexual behavior, and even about homosexuality, were not new. Part of what was at stake in the crisis over homosexuality was an historic issue of the moral character of leaders in the church. At various times in Christian history questions of who is fit to lead have prompted reconsideration of inherited practices and precepts and renewed calls for adherence to Scripture and tradition. The contending forces on the issue of homosexuality had counterparts throughout Christian history. The issue of who is fit to lead the church resurfaces because at certain times questions about the basis of religious leadership become urgent. Concerns about the moral fitness of the church's leaders bespeak uncertainty about the church itself.

The question of who is fit to lead becomes a focus of contention over key aspects of Christian belief and practice. In such conflicts differing ideals of basic Christian affirmation, organization, and intention stand in clear relief. Contrasting ways of reading and applying the Bible, both the Old and New Testaments, reflect the depth of the divide. Not unique to the conflict over homosexuality, tension over such basic issues has surfaced at various points in Christian history. Christians living in times and places of cultural change may be prone to such tensions. Even when Christians found local ways of accommodating such tensions, little hint of resolving the conflict beyond the local level appeared. The conflict over who is fit to lead the church may be exacerbated if it appears that local values and historic approaches to church leadership prove irreconcilable with each other. This may also be the case for Anglicans. The flashpoint is the question of

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homosexuality as a normative lifestyle, especially for church leaders. But the issue of who is morally suited to lead the church points to a deeper uncertainty. Confusion over the moral norms of the church reflects ideals derived from differing local contexts that prove incompatible when tested against a complex issue. Homosexuality is the latest instance of conflict that began in ideals reflecting more contextual church life than prospects for future unity. Uncertainties arise at times of cultural shift when inherited beliefs and faith practices must be applied to unprecedented social realities. The novel realities that confront inherited patterns reflect contextual shifts which strain assumptions and tempt further local accommodations that challenge wider unity.

At such times, contending viewpoints coalesce into movements of considerable religious and social import. These opposing forces resemble those commonly associated with the culture wars, and are reflected in the opposing views found in the Anglican conflict. We will discover that one such outlook contends for the church's affirmative adaptation to altered cultural circumstances. This outlook assesses the culture of the global North in generally positive terms and believes that Christian tradition must be reinterpreted in light of cultural shifts. To this view the church's mission is to welcome all people and so to expand the breadth of its membership and its leadership base. This view, which I call progressive, believes the church is true to its nature when it ministers by affirming the world. The church's task is to draw people toward their genuine selves, and to integrate them into redemptive forms of faith community. Against this outlook there is an alternative that is generally suspicious of cultural shifts in the global North, fearing that novel cultural trends present threats rather than opportunities for church life. This outlook, which I label traditionalist, concedes that the church may require adjustment to novel circumstances but holds that the content of Christian tradition has been fixed. The church must maintain high boundaries to distinguish its belief and practice from worldly influences. It acts faithfully when it does not allow itself to be defined by the world. The church must recognize the reality of evil, and press for redemption and changed lives. These opposed convictions represent historic tendencies at times of change that have found fresh expression among Anglicans.

This is not to say that tension over homosexuality among Anglicans was a chimera. Homosexuality became a genuine issue with the capacity to divide. But the intensity of the crisis revealed that homosexuality became a powerful issue because it subsumed other issues. At times when inherited assumptions about the church's nature and leadership are contested,