

Ad Cleram
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Sex Acts at Windsor

Since last Saturday's gathering in Halifax, the Windsor Report has been often in my mind. Though I did not stay for the afternoon session, the morning raised enough questions to occupy one's mind for some time. Since, in response to the Windsor Report, the American church has decided to withdraw its delegation from the Anglican Consultative Council, the stakes are really being raised pretty high, and we need, as Canadian Anglicans, to consider more seriously not only what our response should be to the Primates' request to withdraw from the ACC, but also what our response, in general, should be to the proposals and claims made by the Windsor Report. This is especially the case since the confusion surrounding these issues is deeply troubling to many people in our parishes.

This past week, during a pastoral visit, one woman testified that she was finding it harder and harder to take part in our services, knowing that her own mind was so much in conflict with the mind of the Communion as this is coming to be expressed by people like the Archbishop of Canterbury and Peter Akinola of Nigeria. She became an Anglican because of the freedom that it permitted her to think outside the lines, and she felt welcomed by the church because, though not strictly orthodox, in some respects, she felt that her voice was heard within Anglicanism as she had come to understand it. And now, it seems, there is a tendency to redefine Anglicanism in confessional ways, and so silencing non-traditional voices.

Of course, within Anglicanism it is not altogether clear who is and who is not a traditional Anglican. Is John A T Robinson's *Honest to God*¹ a part of our tradition? Or Ernest Harrison's *A Church Without God?* Anthony Freeman's book *God in Us*² led to his dismissal by the Bishop of Chichester, but the others did not lead to loss of orders for their writers. Indeed, there is a long tradition of liberalism within Anglicanism. Are these voices all to be stilled by the concern for right thinking over the place of gay and lesbian relationships within the church? And if they are, is our church not becoming something that it has not been for a long time, a church with a single voice, or at least a very narrow range of voices?

In his book, *The Religion of Today and Tomorrow*, written in the 1920s, Kirsopp Lake suggests that the church will shrink from left to right. He bases his analysis on a division between what he calls Experimentalists, Institutionalists and Fundamentalists. Lake's Experimentalists are roughly equivalent to the modern liberal in the church. Institutionalists are the keepers of the institution. They tend to temporise with their own beliefs in favour of institutional stability and continuity. Rowan Williams, I suggest, is a classic institutionalist, in Lake's sense. This is what he says about the Institutionalists:

At his worst he is an ecclesiastical huckster, and he is never a prophet, but he often builds stately tombs to the prophets of the past, endeavours to perpetuate their teaching, and

¹John A.T. Robinson, *Honest to God* (London: S.C.M. Press Ltd., 1963).

²Anthony Freeman, *God In Us: A Case for Christian Humanism* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1993).

... venerates their memory; at his best he is a statesman who understands the minds of men and a priest who has looked deep into their souls.³

This seems to me to characterise some aspects of Williams' person and practice very well. It is worth hearing what Lake has to say about the other two categories. The Fundamentalist, in Lake's words, "knowing little history and less science, ... is [often] filled with intellectual pride and spiritual ignorance; in his arguments gross caricature and unmeasured abuse take the place of reason and logic."⁴ He points out the positive as well, saying that the Fundamentalist (aside from 'a few ecclesiastical politicians') "is sincere and honest, and has a refreshing conviction that the questions which he discusses are intensely important."⁵

About the Experimentalist he is blunt to the point of offence.

The Experimentalist ... is not so often ignorant, and the more he knows the less likely he is to be confident of his opinions. He sometimes overlooks the importance of the past; is impatient of an ancient theology which he does not understand; forgets that his own experiments are not the only ones which can be made; and does not perceive that if we are to grow in knowledge as well as in grace the need of stating the results of experiments is as great as the necessity of undertaking them. At his worst he is a sentimentalist, slack in conduct and inaccurate in thought; at his best he is a prophet.⁶

Of course, it is in the party of the Experimentalists that Lake includes himself. Regarding the shift from left to right, from Experimentalism to Fundamentalism, Lake is particularly helpful. He sees Fundamentalism's advantage in "energy, determination, organisation, and a clearly intelligible position."⁷ These features are particularly evident in the Anglican Communion today. But the key lies in the way that Institutionalists will respond to divisions within the church. Very often Institutionalists have a reputation for liberalism. Recall Rowan Williams' reputation at the time of his appointment to Canterbury, and the strong Fundamentalist protest against that appointment. However, as Lake points out, liberalism (or Experimentalism) is not a collection of opinions, however unorthodox; it is, rather, "a receptive and tolerant frame of mind towards all opinions which can be logically defended."⁸ Institutionalists, far from displaying this state of mind, seem, he says, to have studied the story of Jonah very deeply, "and hasten to throw overboard those who are attacked, or at least to leave them undefended on the ground that they have been irritating in their manner, or insufficiently 'spiritual' in their speech, or are wrong on some minor detail."⁹ And then comes the key insight regarding the way that Institutionalists respond to change in the church:

³Kirsopp Lake, *The Religion of Yesterday and To-Morrow* (Boston & New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1925), 70.

⁴Lake, op. cit., 69.

⁵Lake, op. cit., 69.

⁶Lake, op. cit., 70.

⁷Lake, op. cit., 159.

⁸Lake, op. cit., 162.

⁹Lake, op. cit., 162.

They do not side with the Fundamentalists, but they are careful to abstain from any overt act of support to an Experimentalist. One by one Experimentalists are picked off by individual attacks, and the moral of the situation is not lost on younger men.¹⁰

This is a very trenchant observation, especially in the light of the part that Rowan Williams has played in the crisis within the Anglican Communion. In his writings, though clearly they constitute a kind of liberalism wrapped around an orthodox core, Williams has toyed with liberal ideas, and was not blind to the breadth of thought within Anglican theology. However, as a leader he has played another role altogether, holding his own views in abeyance, and siding with whichever side seems to be the strongest at the time. It is a clever political position to hold, but it also moves clearly in the direction mapped out rather presciently by Kirsopp Lake so long ago.

Liberalism, modernism, progressivism, experimentalism — call it what you will — as a theological position, always has a significant intrinsic weakness. It is always liable to be undermined by the scriptures and the tradition based on them. It is like having a permanent fifth column within the church. Since we inevitably speak the language of reverence for scripture and tradition, it is almost impossible to frame a lasting point of view which stands outside them. Scripture and tradition, exalted by the liturgical reverence paid to them, will always be admonitory presences to those who dare to venture beyond their limits, and will always be fallback positions in times of stress and crisis. And so, inevitably, as Kirsopp Lake makes clear, whatever play has been enabled within the tradition to wander around the fixed point that tradition provides, in times of stress and crisis the majority will retreat to the fastnesses of hallowed beliefs and expressions of belief. In such a situation liberal theologians and believers will simply fall away.

At the gathering in Halifax on Saturday, 9th April 2005, Gary Thorne quoted from a member of the Primate's Theological Commission. He prefaced the quotation with the claim that everyone, both those who oppose, as well as those who favour, the blessing of same sex couples, would agree with what it says. The only difference, he suggested, is that those who favour the blessing of same sex couples would say that this is what must be permitted to happen, while those who oppose the blessing of same sex couples say that this is something that must never be allowed to happen. Here is the quote:

What would be meant by the blessing of "same-sex unions" which include erotic relations? For the Church to bless these would be for the Church to give thanks to God for them to declare that in themselves these are pictures or icons of God's love, that they display in a certain mode the salvation story, and that they are glorified or taken up into God's own actions and being. It would be to declare that they have a significant and fruitful part in creation, and that they are symbols of the in-breaking and coming rule of God, in which the Church now shares and in which we will eventually participate fully. It would be to "speak a good word" (Greek, eulogein, "bless," or literally, "speak well") about this sort of relationship, declaring it to be a condition in which the way of the cross and the way of new life come together. It would thus claim that the relationship is conducive of repentance, healing, growth and glorification for the two men or the two women involved. Precisely here, the Church would be saying, you can see the love of God in human form, and the glory of humanity. Here would be a sacrament, or at least

¹⁰Lake, op. cit., 163.

something like the Roman "sacramental" ("sacred signs which bear a resemblance to the sacraments . . . [and in which] various occasions in life are rendered holy") an occasion where God meets us.

I do not want to comment on this statement in great detail, but I do want to make one or two remarks about it. The first is this. There is a tendency to spiritualise the relation between a man and a woman in marriage, making the marriage relationship an icon of the relationship of Christ and his church. The first one to use marriage in this symbolic way was Hosea, who felt called by God to take Gomer as a wife, knowing that she would be unfaithful. It was a prophetic action. Hosea's relationship with his wife symbolised, prophetically, the relationship of God and Israel. It would be hazardous to extend this symbolism to explain marriage itself. The writer to the Ephesians, of course, as is well known, tells husbands that they should love their wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her (Eph 5.25), and this does indeed place marriage within the compass of the church's understanding of God's redemptive acts in Christ. Indeed, the writer to the Ephesians goes on to say, about a man leaving his father and mother and cleaving to his wife: "This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the church." (Eph 5.32) Whether this is enough to develop an entire theological understanding of marriage is doubtful, but even if it is, the question inevitably arises: Isn't this asking too much of marriage?

Historically, I think it is. Which came first, the church's negative appraisal of sexual intercourse, or the church's exaltation of marriage? The truth is that the two played into each other. If marriage is so high, then sexuality sullies marriage. And if sexual intercourse is so low, sinful and bestial, then can marriage be so high? The only way to redeem marriage, according to Augustine, and the majority Christian moral tradition, is to confine sexual intercourse to the procreation of children. The only morally legitimate reason to have sexual intercourse with one's husband or wife is to fulfil the command to increase and multiply. A secondary exculpating reason for the submitting partner is to permit intercourse in order to avoid adultery. Thus husband or wife may submit (without enjoying or responding) to the sexual approach of the other in order to prevent the other seeking sexual satisfaction elsewhere. Thus sexual intercourse, even within marriage, has been traditionally restricted to these two purposes: procreation and the prevention of sin. As such, and in itself, sexual intercourse also had, within the majority Christian tradition, largely the nature of sin.

Interestingly and alarmingly, within the Christian moral tradition until very recently there has been no sense of sexual intercourse as a part of the loving and tender emotional relationship between two people, an aspect of relationship that contributes to, strengthens and enriches relationship. Christian moralists traditionally saw only two aspects of sexual relationship: procreation and prevention of sin. The fundamental reason for this level of moral blindness lay in the exalted spiritualisation of marriage expressed in the quote from a member of the Primate's Theological Commission. This in itself, I suggest, is a good reason to view this claim with considerable scepticism.

Before turning to the Windsor Report, it is worthwhile exploring this problem a little further, for Windsor itself emanates from this problematic moral tradition. Sex acts for Christians have almost inevitably involved emotions of shame and guilt, and it is important for us to notice the heavy emotional weight which underlies the Christian moral assessment of sex acts. Since the church has tended to exalt marriage by placing it within the highest possible spiritual context, relating it to Christ's sacrifice and God's redemptive work in and through that sacrifice, it is hard to avoid this ponderously heavy emotional

significance with which sexuality and sexual relationship becomes weighted. Placing sex *acts* within this context inevitably overwhelms them. The result, inevitably — since this spiritual exaltation is possible only within theology and not within the particular bodily relationships of married persons — is a deep emotional crisis in our understanding of sexual relationship, and a serious moral ambiguity in our understanding of marriage. Wife becomes an icon of both Virgin Mary and Whore. Husband is to love wife chastely as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her; but husband as ordinary, physical, sexual man (to say nothing at all about wife as ordinary, physical, sexual woman) seeks sexual relationship and satisfaction from his wife. These things, self-giving and self-seeking, do not sit easily with each other, and it is little wonder that Christians have been terribly confused about what to do with sex.

Which leads us to the Windsor Report. The Windsor Report pretends, at least, to know what the Anglican Church teaches about sex so far as homosexual persons are concerned. The only answer is: Don't do it! Homosexual acts — notice the traditional emphasis upon sex *acts* — are, according to Lambeth 1998, Resolution 1.10, 'incompatible with scripture.' It's fine to have a sexual orientation that leads you to be sexually attracted to persons of your own sex — the report takes as read Lambeth 1998's position that gay and lesbian people are welcomed by the church, and have a right to the compassion and pastoral care of the church — but you may not act on it. Presumably homosexual persons may have Platonic relationships with those to whom they are sexually attracted, but any sexual expression within those relationships is morally out of the question. Lambeth 1998 actually promised to listen to the experiences of homosexual persons, and condemns unreasonable fear or hatred of homosexuals, but it is difficult to see how the church can claim to listen to the experiences of those whose relationships are, from the start, denied any moral standing. It is not surprising to find that very few gay and lesbian persons feel that the church is actually listening.

As I say, the Windsor Report *pretends* to know what the Anglican Church teaches about sex so far as homosexual persons are concerned. However, the truth is that the Anglican Church long ago departed from the Christian moral tradition in matters of sex and sexuality. At Lambeth 1930 the Anglican Communion at long last acknowledged that there is a role for artificial means of birth control in the sexual relationships of married persons.¹¹ Although Lambeth 1930 did not, Pope Pius XI recognised that Lambeth 1930 represented a major departure from tradition, and wrote his encyclical *Casti Connubii* (*Chaste Marriage*) largely as a deliberate riposte to the Anglican position. Paul VI's *Humanae Vitae* and John Paul II's intransigence on this issue, were a continuation of that tradition, and the contemporary Roman Catholic Church has the Anglican Communion to thank for the centrality that the issue of birth control has come to play in its understanding of morality. What Pius XI noticed is that at Lambeth 1930, for the first time, Christians had explicitly and officially said that *sexual intercourse is one of the goods of marriage*. This is a revolutionary development of the Christian moral tradition, and needs to be recognised for what it is.

Basically, to use the language of traditional Christian sexual morality, Lambeth 1930 acknowledged that sexual intercourse is, *in itself*, fecund, that is, lifegiving, productive of new life. Notice, it does not need to

¹¹Resolution II.15. "... in those cases where there is such a clearly-felt moral obligation to limit or avoid parenthood, and where there is a morally sound reason for avoiding complete abstinence, the Conference agrees that other methods may be used, provided this is done in the light of the same Christian principles." Lambeth Conference, *The Lambeth Conference 1930: Encyclical Letter from the Bishops with Resolutions and Reports* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1930), 43–44.

result in the procreation of children. It is, *in itself*, as an expression of love and tenderness and an experience of mutual pleasure and satisfaction, something that produces new life. Of course, this position assumes that the intercourse is also an expression of the appropriate vulnerability of the partners to each other, an act of mutuality and not an act of dominance or submission. It is understood to be mutually life giving and rewarding, as well as productive of deeper and more intimate relationship. But it does not need to issue in the procreation of children. This last point is a marked departure from the Christian moral tradition, and, if accepted, a development of it.

The Roman Catholic position is well known: this can in no way be countenanced by tradition, and is not as such a development of it. Sexual acts, without the possibility of procreation, are contrary to natural law, the biblical understanding of sexuality, and the continuous witness of the magisterium.

The Windsor Report knows nothing of all this, and that is perhaps its greatest weakness. For, in recognising sexual relationship as in itself productive of new life, Lambeth 1930 opened the possibility of seeing the scope of sexual relationship to be widened. In older conceptions of sexual morality, Christians believed that sexual relationship was fraught with so much moral peril that it needed to be fenced in by restrictions and qualifications, carefully confined to the one context where, it was believed, sex could be regulated and controlled. However, once we acknowledge that not every sexual act within marriage is a good, we have opened up the possibility that not every sexual act outside of marriage is an evil. As Ernest Harrison says in *A Church Without God*, "Under the conditions of the law of love marriage is no longer the test of the rightness or wrongness of sexual intercourse. Sexual intercourse in marriage is not, for that reason alone, moral and acceptable. Sometimes it is immoral. Sexual intercourse outside marriage is not necessarily wrong. Sometimes it is right."¹² While Harrison refers to Joseph Fletcher's idea of a law of love,¹³ the basis for this development lies in Lambeth 1930's development of or departure from the Christian moral tradition.

It is quite clear that, once we remove the goodness or otherwise of acts of sexual intercourse, and make their goodness or badness dependent upon the quality of relationship, we have opened up the possibility of acknowledging that sexual relationships other than those within the context of a marriage of a man and a woman *may* come within the bounds of appropriate moral behaviour. And it is clear that, unless we are prepared to go back to the bad old days before 1930, when the only morally justifying feature of sexual intercourse was held to be that it took place within the bonds of marriage between a man and a woman without any obstacle to the procreation of life, we must necessarily find other moral grounds for the legitimization of sexual acts. The fact that sexual relationships have, since 1930, become much more casual, until there seem, for many people, to be few moral restrictions on sexual encounters points, not to the error of Lambeth 1930, but to the failure of the church to recognise the profound change in sexual morality that this decision heralded, and to provide moral guidance for this entirely new situation.

It should occasion no surprise at all that, soon after Lambeth 1930 had dropped this bombshell into the Christian moral landscape, the whole regulation and ordering of human sexual relationship began to undergo a dramatic change. The Second World War, and the moral destabilising of society that this

¹²Ernest Harrison, *A Church Without God* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1966), p. 124.

¹³Joseph Fletcher, *Situation Ethics: The New Morality* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1966), *passim*.

represented for most of the nations involved, plus the development of really effective birth control methods, led to the so-called sexual revolution of the sixties of the twentieth century. Sexual relationship for men had always been relatively free from serious practical consequences. Let the women worry about that! And it was much more chancy for women. But with the development of effective means of birth control, women began to experiment with their sexuality as freely as men had customarily experimented with theirs; and sexual intercourse tended to drift free, in the minds of many (morally at least), from committed relationship (of which the only model available was marriage). And, despite the growing dangers involved in casual sexual encounters, the level of sexual relationship between uncommitted partners has increased significantly since then, and the age when young people became sexually active has steadily dropped. Young people today talk about 'friends with benefits,' and even that evidently suggests a level of commitment too great for many young people today, many teens opting for even less commitment in sexual relationship than friendship.

In response to this, the church, claiming to speak for morality itself, continues to talk in terms of 'monogamous heterosexual relationship,' and encourages a policy of 'just say no.' And while 'just say no' raises the age of the onset of sexual activity by two or three years, the church has apparently nothing to contribute to the contemporary discussion of sexual ethics. A sign of this is to be seen in the continuing controversy *within the church* (and, significantly, scarcely at all outside it) regarding the relationships of gay and lesbian persons. For if, as Lambeth 1930 implied, the morality of sexual intercourse is not necessarily linked to the procreation of children, then, it seems, the possibility of morally acceptable sexual relationships outside of marriage, and outside of the male-female bond, is hard to deny.

On all of this, of course, the Windsor Report is deafeningly silent. It speaks to an age long past, at least in European cultures. It is significant, I think, that the greatest opposition to the acceptance of homosexual relationship is to be found amongst those churches that interface most closely with Muslim cultures. It is further significant that both Islam and Roman Catholicism are the greatest opponents in the contemporary world of abortion and artificial means of birth control, both of them obstacles to maintaining control over their female populations. It is no surprise to find that both traditions are unrepentantly patriarchal in structure and belief. It should also come as no surprise that African and Asian churches that have opposed the moral acceptance of homosexual relationship are also patriarchal in structure, and tend to favour authoritarian forms of Christian believing. It is therefore unsurprising as well that the Windsor Report should commend authoritarian forms of governance to the church. Also unsurprising is the Windsor Report's continued use of the language of sex acts, rather than of sexual relationship. What is crucial and normative to the traditional Christian assessment of sexuality and sexual relationships is its almost unqualified use of the language of sex acts. It is the sex act itself, the act of sexual intercourse, which, as we have seen, is traditionally taken as morally suspect. Sexual relationship does not even enter into serious consideration until such time as sex acts could be separated from procreation. And then we are faced with a new situation with which the church has still to come to terms, and to include in its moral deliberations. Until it does so, any talk about sexual ethics in the modern context will be wasted time, and no possibility of reconciliation of voices within the church will be possible.

Unfortunately, within the Anglican Communion, it seems, we do not have very much time. The process of shrinkage from left to right is already well underway, and unless there is something that can stop the momentum of this process, there will not be within Anglicanism a diversity of voices which will enable the discussion which is now so crucially needed. If indeed the African and other churches of the so-called "Global South" are successful in eliminating the liberal voice of European Christianity from the discussion

of Anglican sexual morality, the liberal voice within Christianity itself may be irreparably diminished, and the possibility of moral development in the area of sexual ethics will be seriously threatened. This would be an sad day for a moderate Christian witness in a world where this witness is arguably needed, not only for the good of the church, but for the good of humankind. I am not particularly optimistic about the chances that this voice will continue to be heard. Lake's Experimentalists, as he says, will simply drop away, and the church will shrink from left to right. The only audible Christian voice will then be, I am afraid, shrill and unattractive. It is becoming so even now.

Eric S. MacDonald

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