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Blame Africa? The Anglicans and their Troubles

Monday, July 28, 2008



The Lambeth Conference of Anglican bishops is meeting in Britain, even as the worldwide Anglican communion is about to tear itself asunder over issues of homosexuality, gender, and biblical authority. Over 200 conservative bishops are boycotting the conference, and the global media are trying to figure out how to report the meeting.

One of the most creative and revealing attempts at an explanation comes now from *The Economist*. The London-based periodical reports that the main threat to Anglican cohesion is a group of African bishops who refuse to go along with the flow when it comes to normalizing homosexuality, electing openly-homosexual bishops, and the like.

Here is how *The Economist* explains the dynamic:

The simplest way of describing the cracks running down the middle of the 80m-strong Anglican family is to say that the traditionalists, reflecting the conservative social mores of Africa, are at odds with liberals from the rich world, especially over the issue of homosexuality. To explain the Africans' conservatism, many point out that they are on the front line of a contest with Islam; and that missionary work in Africa was carried out by evangelicals who reflect a rather fundamentalist strain of British Christianity.

The emergence of the “Global South” as a conservative force within Anglicanism is a genuine reality, and a big part of the picture of what is happening in Anglicanism as the debates over the shape of Christianity unfold. But to suggest that those within the communion who oppose the liberal agenda reflect “the conservative social mores of Africa” is ludicrous.

The conservatives are not found only in Africa. The Church of England is in turmoil over a significant number of priests who will not accept women as bishops or priests. The American church, the Episcopal Church U.S., faces unprecedented defections over many of the same issues — but homosexuality is front and center. The majority of churches (and the bishop) of one diocese in California announced that they are leaving the church. Churches in Virginia have left the Episcopal fold, and just won the first round in a legal battle over taking their church properties with them.

The American church is losing members by the thousands and churches by the dozens, and the church includes a fair number of bishops who do not support the ordination of active homosexuals as priests and bishops, or the blessing of same-sex unions. Conservatives, though outnumbered in far too many cases, exist within all the major North American and European churches of the Anglican Communion.

The African bishops leading the charge for orthodoxy are indeed fighting a courageous battle. They are fighting for the soul of the Anglican Communion and for the integrity of the church and the Gospel. They refuse to bend the knee to modern idolatries and they understand the transforming power of the Gospel and the bedrock of biblical authority far better than those who oppose them.

But when *The Economist* blames the African bishops for threatening “to break up the worldwide Anglican church” and goes on to root all opposition to the liberal trends of the American, Canadian, and British churches in “the conservative social mores of Africa,” all sense of proportion has been lost. This approach is an effort to sideline the opposition — to make the traditionalists look quaint, exotic, backward, and strange.

The Christianity of the revisionists in North America and Europe is the aberration — not the historic faith of the church wherever it is found. Thankfully, that historic faith does have a strong representation in Africa. But blaming Africa for the Anglican troubles is a stunning exercise in missing the point.

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