



Sex, Sense and Non-Sense for Anglicans

The Very Revd Professor Martyn Percy, Dean of Christ Church, Oxford

Vice President of Modern Church

For one group of Christians, at least, sex has become really rather boring: Anglicans. Not for individuals, necessarily. But rather, for the worldwide Anglican Communion. It is weary of the topic, and dog-tired of debating sex and sexuality – continuously wracked by insoluble disagreement and divisive dialogues it cannot seem to resolve.

To be sure, Anglicanism is not the only denomination trying to find a way through the mire and myriad of conversations on sexuality. But as a global church, Anglicans would quite like to change the subject, please. The Anglican Communion knows that its public mission and ministry is perpetually blighted by the issue, and will remain so until it can draw a line under this debate, and finally move on.

The Anglican Primates from around the world gather from 11-16 January 2016 at the behest of the Archbishop of Canterbury. This is, we are told, a last-ditch attempt to stop the Communion either imploding or exploding – a steady, solid, prominent planet in the ecclesial universe, and that might be about to morph into a burning star. Brightly shining, but nonetheless burning – frictionally breaking apart.

Yet other churches have faced the divisive issue of sexuality with a bit more nuance. The Church of Scotland, for example, deemed that same-sex relationships were a 'matter of liberty of conscience, guaranteed by the Church, on matters that do not enter into the substance of faith'. Here, the question of same-sex relationships was left to the liberty of conscience of individuals, congregations and their ministers.

Thus, a few might say that they cannot support same-sex relationships, and never will. But a quieter majority of others might think otherwise, and therefore affirm such relationships. The liberty of conscience applied here is still a matter of beliefs and practice, but not one that ultimately divides members of the church, who are all mutually affirmed as still ascribing to the core substance of Christian faith.

That carefully worded phrase, which was supposed to bring peace to the Church of Scotland, almost succeeded. Almost. The intention in the drafting of the 'liberty of conscience' clause was to accommodate revisionists and traditionalists alike, liberals and conservatives. In many ways, it aped that beloved Anglican ideal – an 'ecclesial DNA' of inclusive dynamic conservatism that characterises the polity of the church.

Unfortunately for the Kirk, however, when the debate on sexuality took place at the General Assembly in 2014, the 'traditionalist' line was reaffirmed as the normative-default position. Although the Kirk subsequently permitted congregations and ministers to opt out if they wanted to affirm civil partnerships. This was done to 'keep the peace of the church', of course – and avoid an unholy row.

That was a pity, because there are two problems with this compromise, and they are ones that the Archbishop of Canterbury, and the Anglican Primates, would do well to avoid next month. First, the concession maintains discrimination and perpetuates an injustice against lesbian, gay and bisexual people, and so runs contrary to the spirit of the 2010 Equality Act in the UK. Second, and despite initial appearances, the two interpretations of 'liberty of conscience' are not in fact symmetrical. They appear to be chiral, so to speak; but there is one crucial difference to note.

And here, an allegory may be helpful. There is a world of difference between going to an ordinary restaurant and requesting a vegetarian option, and going to a vegetarian restaurant and asking for a steak, medium-rare. The first scenario is fine and has sense – no decent restaurant menu is without vegetarian options. But we would rightly regard the second scenario as nonsense. Indeed, potentially rather offensive to vegetarians – and entirely against the spirit of the restaurant.

Yet by making heterosexual relationships the exclusive and traditional default position, the Kirk effectively chose this second scenario. The relatively small numbers of traditionalists and conservatives who reject same-sex unions and gay marriage in churches, are, in effect, dictating the menu for everyone else.

In this allegory gay people are fully part of the mainstream of the population. The majority are usually quite happy to eat vegetarian food; just not all the time. But that same majority would not think of insisting vegetarians occasionally ate meat. That would be non-sense.

Living with Diversity:

One key ecclesial question flows simply from this allegory: how might churches manage to live well with constrained differences and minorities? Moreover, in a way that does not stigmatise minorities, and caters for them in a non-discriminatory way?

Is this a recipe for diversity of practice that inexorably leads to irreparable disunity? Not really. The Church of England already knows how to live with this kind of reality. Some of the more catholic-inclined clergy and congregations already exercise their liberty of conscience on women priests and women bishops. They've opted out, and reasonable (some would say overly generous) provision is made for them. Some of the more evangelically-inclined clergy and congregations don't always hold services that technically conform to stricter interpretations of canon law on robing or liturgy; they also exercise a liberty of conscience.

In neither case are these clergy or congregations cast out. They are catered for; or even permitted to self-cater. And although both these groups might claim to hold more firmly to the truth than others, no-one is asked to dine elsewhere, so to speak. No established church can afford to de-nationalise itself on an issue that is now treated as a matter of equality and justice by the state. Civil partnerships and same-sex marriages, and those entering into these unions, enjoy the full protection of the law, and majority affirmation by the population as a whole. For any national church to turn its face away from those who are full and equal citizens, and have their unions and marriages recognised as such, effectively augments a process of de-nationalisation and privatisation. It is a route-march towards a tribal church.

The church becomes, in effect, a sad and unwelcoming restaurant with a rationed menu, where the diners who tried to order a meat dish were made to feel terribly guilty. Or more likely, quietly asked by the sullen owner, or embarrassed waiter, to take their custom elsewhere. The diners duly leave.

In effect, this is the adopted position of the Church of England by the current Archbishop. But a national church must cater for the whole palate of the population. That is what a broad church does.

So, what about the rest of the Anglican Communion? Here, it might be time for some home truths. In 41 of the 53 countries within the British Commonwealth, homosexual conduct is still regarded as a serious crime. This categorisation and legal stigmatisation of homosexuality was largely 'made in England' in the nineteenth century, and imposed on cultures and emerging countries and that had not been, hitherto, homophobic. This is one of England's less wholesome exports. The Archbishop of Canterbury could begin the Primates' meeting by accepting responsibility for the part the Church of England has played in perpetrating this discrimination and the subsequent injustices – and publicly repenting of them.

There is also widespread myth in the Anglican Communion, that the dioceses and congregations of the global south now form the majority, and are the only ones growing numerically. Moreover, this myth has some leverage. It prompts reactionary post-colonial guilt in Anglican churches, and those in the USA, Canada and New Zealand. So when it comes to divisive debates, more moral ground is ceded to African churches, amongst others, than might be judicious.

But a new study by the Spanish Anglican academic, Daniel Munoz, suggests that in the geography of worldwide Anglicanism, the evidence claimed for the number of Anglicans is questionable. The Church of England counts 25 million members; in Nigeria, the figure is 18 million. But in both cases, actual numbers attending every Sunday are a small fraction of this. The claimed numbers are unreliable – perhaps deliberately exaggerated to acquire leverage in debates.

The actual asserted 'core membership' of Anglicans in many African countries may be no more dependable than it is for the Church of England. In contrast, figures for the USA and Canada may be more robust. So the received wisdom – that the future lies with the majority, growing, surging churches of the global

south – may not be as trustworthy as some assume. The Church of England has plenty of recent cause to be suspicious of spurious statistics that are used to shape policy and polity. Conservative Christianity is not the only brand of faith capable of withstanding the onslaught of modernity.

The Communion might therefore want to think harder about poise, proportionality and perspective in relation to its moral reasoning, geographies, membership and guilt-tinged post-colonial identities. The Primates cannot simply align themselves with those proffering inflated claims to represent the largest, growing churches. The right treatment of homosexual people is not a conditional concern to put to a vote of argumentative Archbishops. Remember, this is a fundamental issue of truth and justice.

Nor should post-colonial guilt be allowed to be converted into spiritual capital that then becomes a tool of oppression. And who, exactly, are the oppressed? Not the surging, strident churches of the global south. Those needing protection and care are still lesbian, gay and bisexual Christians; or women in violent, abusive relationships. The reconciliation required is between, note, *inequalities of power*. Conservatives are not oppressed or criminalised for their opposition to lesbian, gay and bisexual people – ever, anywhere.

For some Christians, the issue will continue to be non-negotiable. Conservative Christians argue that relationships between the sexes are prescribed and proscribed in the Bible. God has willed heterosexual union as a natural given, and any deviation from this is to be regarded as an illness, other form of disorder (i.e., fall), or a wilful act of disobedience (i.e., a sin).

But if equal rights for lesbian, gay and bisexual people seeking to have their faithful and life-long relationships recognised and blessed is seen as matter of justice and equality, then we have a different Christian perspective to contemplate. At the heart of this is a debate over what is ‘natural’ and ‘normal’, and therefore part of God’s created order.

Sinful and intentionally disobedient humans are not hard to imagine. Yet as any zoologist will confirm – and this is awkward for some Christians to face up to – same-sex unions and acts do seem to be, in fact, quite normal and natural, and commonly occur across the mammalian genus. What exactly are we to say about same-sex acts between apes, or llamas? As Oliver Reed’s opening

line as the character Proximo in *Gladiator* has it: ‘those giraffes you sold me were queer’. Maybe. But were those giraffes sinful, fallen, or just plain dumb animals? Or, perhaps, normal – but a minority?

Facing the Future:

On the surface, a businessman-turned-Archbishop, with skills in negotiation, may seem like an ideal person to resolve this for the church. But we should be wary, and probe deeper. Negotiating and achieving results in business is often based upon intrinsic and extrinsic inequalities in power relations. The new company seeking to buy the larger, older, but now weaker competitor may be in a much stronger position than others. In business, risk, aggression and decisiveness are often rewarded – handsomely.

But these are not necessarily the characteristics one wants to the fore in ecclesial contexts. Especially now. Moreover, the Archbishop, can do little to re-narrate his background – as a privileged white male; Etonian, upper-class; and related to titled people, who has little experience of powerlessness. Indeed, in terms of powerlessness, it is hard to see how he can enter into it, let alone comprehend it. His negotiations as a businessman in sensitive areas of Nigeria, whilst winning plaudits in the media, are not the same as the work of reconciliation, and arguably not the right ‘fit’ for the church, where first-hand experiences of powerlessness are often important for shaping episcopal ministry. Indeed, any ordained ministry.

What the Archbishop must not do, I think, is use the Primates Conference to affirm dissonant voices from the global south, in order to uphold an oppressive conservative coalition that is determined to denigrate those of a more liberal persuasion. It may be important for the Archbishop to remember that the Scottish, Welsh and Irish Anglican churches have all been far more positive and open-minded on the issue of same-sex marriage and civil partnerships. Meanwhile, the Church of England – alone in Britain – has continued to travel in the opposite direction. This puts the Church of England in an alliance with developing nations, but is out of kilter with the rest of the UK.

The Archbishop knows full well that this is a problem, and here he is caught between a rock and hard place. A theologically conservative church is not an attractive proposition to the emerging generation. The Church of England’s

stance on sexuality is deeply alienating and quite incomprehensible for most young people in the UK. It confirms their view of religion as being backward-looking and bigoted. ++Welby knows that he won't make much headway on evangelism and mission with a church that saddles him with an inherently homophobic polity. A non-inclusive church is an evangelistic dead-duck.

The recent employment tribunal finding for Jeremy Pemberton – a priest who has married his male partner – gave the Church of England the worst kind of Pyrrhic victory. The Tribunal ruled that the Church of England was allowed to discriminate against Pemberton, because the church had exempted itself from the Government's equality legislation of 2010.

To add to the problems, the Church of England has recently decided that it can also lawfully discriminate against those being considered for future high office in the church. So a selection panel may now take into account the content and manner of any statements previously made by *any* candidate on same-sex relations. The Church of England is, in other words, not only enshrining, but also perpetuating its own discrimination.

To be sure, the church can be quite slow when it comes to a change of mind. It can take a century or more. United, it can fiercely resist change for 25 years. It can row about that change internally for another 25 years. Then quietly drop any resistance to change for another 25 years. And then spend another 25 years trying to convince the world that the change now being embraced and promoted was what the church really thought all along. Whilst this may be depressing news for many, the pace of change is now noticeably quicker in churches – partly due to advances in media and communication.

Some recent studies carried out by Gallup in the USA highlight the extent of the social and moral changes, and cultural shifts on sexuality. For example, in 1977 56% of Americans thought that homosexual people should have equal rights in the workplace; the figure for 2004 was 89%. Support for gay clergy moved in the same period from 27% to 56%. Some 60% of Americans in the 18-29 age-bracket now support same-sex marriage, compared to only 25% of those who are over the age of 65.

Statistical surveys of churchgoers repeatedly show that there is growing toleration for same-sex unions in congregations and amongst clergy, across the ecclesial and theological spectra. All of which, suggests a church that will adapt and evolve in relation to its changing cultural context. (See D. Myers & L. Scanzoni, *What God Has Joined Together?* San Francisco, Harper, 2005, pp. 140ff). The world only spins in one direction. It doesn't stand still. And it doesn't spin backwards.

Discernment and Difference in a Global Communion:

So, can the Bible help the churches resolve their differences on the matter of human sexuality? To some extent, perhaps. But not as easily as some suppose. It is important to remember that as the churches divided over the issue of slavery, the remarriage of divorcees and the role of women – all on the basis of sound or literal interpretations of scripture – so the churches are here again on the issue of sexuality. Some Christians claimed that the Bible is pro-slavery, against the remarriage of divorcees and not especially happy about women in leadership roles – at least in the church. Many more Christians have dissented, and have worked over the centuries for a different interpretative framework, cast in a different, more generous light.

Though some say this is mere liberalism, and not *Mere Christianity*, the Bible has to be read intelligently, and with compassion on matters of sexuality. 'Same-sex attraction', for example, is not a phrase that appears in scripture. It is all too easy for conservatives to claim that they alone uphold to the 'traditional' biblical teaching on homosexuality. Those same conservatives forget, perhaps, that the concept of 'homosexuality' is a modern one. Indeed the 'normal range' of sexual behaviour we now take for granted was something the Early Church knew little of.

The Primates need to grasp that lesbian, gay and bisexual Christians are now an inescapable part of the Anglican Communion. In many countries across the world, they enjoy full and equal citizenship under the law. So, the Primates need to turn their critical attention to those countries in which they have influence, where this is not yet so. Lesbian, gay and bisexual Christians will not suffer discrimination in heaven. In the Kingdom of God, as faithful Christians, all enjoy a full and equal citizenship.

Exploring what ‘liberty of conscience’ means for the global Anglican Communion will therefore be a fruitful pathway for the Primates to explore as they meet next month. Liberty of conscience recognises that there will be some disagreement on some practices. But that such diversity is not part of the substance of faith that ultimately unites Anglicans. Anglicans have always varied in their practices – they continue to manage this on women priests and bishops. But they remain as one on the creeds, doctrine and the essentials of faith. They always have.

So, over the coming weeks, Archbishop Justin has a real opportunity to succeed where Pope Francis has recently failed in his Synod. This gathering of Archbishops ought to be an easy win for Justin Welby – an open goal for the taking. Simply put, no matter what his fellow Archbishops think about the right way to talk about homosexuality, there is no case for oppressing lesbian, gay and bisexual people under criminal law. In any country, anywhere.

As the head of the Anglican Communion, and with 41 Commonwealth countries still criminalising homosexuality, the Archbishop could take a simple moral lead, call his fellow Primates to repent, and in so doing remind them that people of different sexualities should neither be oppressed or criminalised. Nor should they be unwelcome in our churches. As fellow believers, they should be received as such in Anglican churches across the globe.

The church needs to get past its judgmental and nonsensical mantra, ‘love the sinner, hate the sin’. This simply won’t do. To be sure, the Archbishop of Canterbury has some difficult choices ahead. The task is to appease conservative voices in the developing south of the Communion, yet at the same time not lose a whole generation of young people to the Church of England. He has to find a way forward – of squaring the circle, so to speak – such that progressive, traditional, conservative and liberal voices all have some sense that this beloved Communion can remain united, as one.

In all this, there are some pitfalls to avoid. One is for the Church of England, led by the Archbishop, and out of some sense of misplaced post-colonial guilt, to align with a majority of African stances on sexuality, and against the rest of the British Isles and North America. But Africa, note, does not speak with one

voice on same-sex relations. South Africa, for example, already models inclusiveness and toleration at a constitutional level that is highly advanced.

Equally, the Archbishop might be tempted to try and avoid the subject of same-sex relations altogether when the Primates gather, and simply try and develop organisational and pastoral solutions to profound theological differences. This would be a shame, but it would fit the pattern and paradigm of Archbishop Welby's executive-managerial style of leadership. This is one that places process far above content, leaving awkward theological disputes to one side, and simply seeks a managerial and organisational solution.

Indeed, one organisational model hinted at from Lambeth Palace is for the Anglican Communion to become more like the Orthodox churches – one where the member patriarchies may not get on with each other (e.g., Russian and Greek), but all agree on a kind of titular head. So Anglicans in North America may not see eye-to-eye with Nigerian Anglicans, and may never settle their differences. Indeed, they could individuate further. But they would nonetheless remain in communion with each other *through* the Archbishop of Canterbury, who would be a focus of unity in the Sees (and seas) of diversity.

But to try and strive for such a model would be to ignore the complexity of Orthodoxy, and its tentative unity. For example, most outsiders will not be able to tell the difference between the Romanian Orthodox Episcopate of America – a Diocese of the Orthodox Church in America (headquarters in Jackson, Michigan) and the Romanian Orthodox Archdiocese of America and Canada (headquarters in Chicago, Illinois). These two expressions of Romanian Orthodoxy are quite separate churches, overseen by different archbishops. But they cover and compete over similar territory, whilst basically sharing a common faith. The Archbishop needs to understand that there is a theology of Communion: a delicate relationship between geography, catholicity, ontology, theology, authority and pastoral oversight. Pushing the Anglican Communion to a more dispersed 'Orthodox' paradigm would cause irreparable damage to Anglicanism, licencing schismatic-churches in all but name.

Anglicans in Sydney, for example, are content for a layman (note, not a person – I do mean a lay 'man' here) to celebrate Holy Communion, because they don't have much time for women; and no time at all for women priests. If

there are to be more relaxed approaches to territorial oversight, what is there to stop Sydney Anglicans planting a congregation in London? Or conservative evangelicals opting out, and coming under the control of the Archbishop of Sydney? Or, for that matter, a more liberal bishop from North America, overseeing an Anglican LGBT mega-church in Manchester? Bishops need to exercise a degree of local control in the areas they preside over. This is important for pastoral care, teaching and authority. A bishop trying to exercise such control from another continent (a model that could potentially emerge from the Primates' Meeting) would be ill-equipped to offer the oversight that most local congregations require.

Giving churches and individuals who disagree with each other even greater degrees of separateness, with even more room to individuate, merely presents Anglicans with an organisational paradigm that licences schism. Such a move would privilege organisational process, but would avoid the deeper issue of theological content: that shared vocation of finding a theological way forward – together.

To turn the Communion into a cheap replica of Orthodoxy – were such a feat even possible – would be to sell the very soul of Anglicanism. We need wisdom from the Archbishop that will help Anglicans find new unity; not more space to express greater individualisms.

Here, the Archbishop could make a thoughtful and opening conciliatory personal gesture, and that would sound the right note for the gathering. Welby's invitation to Archbishop Foley Beach of the Anglican Church in North America (ACNA) to attend the Primates' meeting seems to some to be a brave, even entrepreneurial move towards some sort of rapprochement. Archbishop Foley will apparently attend the meeting in Canterbury, for a limited period.

But Archbishop Foley heads a breakaway Anglican church in the USA and Canada. ACNA is not in communion with Canterbury, or the official Episcopal churches of the USA and Canada. Yet ++Welby invited Archbishop Foley without consulting either the Presiding Bishop of the USA, or the Archbishop of Canada. In much the same way, indeed, that ++Welby also invited the Revd Dr Tory Baucum to be one of Canterbury Cathedral's Six Preachers – without consulting America or Canada. Baucum is Rector of Truro Church in Fairfax,

Virginia – and part of ACNA. Yet this initiative from ++Welby, in 2014, was badged as helping to promote ‘reconciliation and unity’.

Now, you could read ++Welby’s gesture as innovative and brave. But it is also *offensive* to those who fought to keep these Anglican provinces together. Far from being reconciling, it is, *de facto*, alienating to the majority. One wonders how ++Welby might respond if the North American Archbishops invited the Free Church of England (originating from 1844) to the January gathering? Or perhaps members of the Ordinariate (established in 2009)? Could these rifts not be addressed as well? The Archbishop of Canterbury has a track record in announcing apparently bold, eye-catching initiatives. For example, announcing in July 2013 that he intended the Church of England to ‘compete’ *Wonga*, the payday lender, ‘out of business’, and replace the company with church-based credit-unions. But little reflection was offered on the future for *Wonga’s* several hundred employees, or their hundreds of thousands of customers.

So the Archbishop of Canterbury could begin proceedings in January by offering an apology to American and Canadian Anglicans for his intemperate gestures towards ACNA, and his lack of consultation, which has undermined them. He should further apologise for dealing in territories and spheres of authority that are simply not his to meddle with.

Conclusion:

So, how will the January 2016 meeting pan out for the Primates? I hope and pray there will be much poise, prayer, patience, perspective – and poetry. Yes, poetry. One of the key problems the church currently faces is our lack of poets, and those prophetic theologians who often accompany them. Our lexis on the ‘issues of human sexuality’ debate is far too shallow; the words and phrases to hand simply lack requisite depth.

It was the spiritual writer Bill Vanstone who once remarked that the Church of England is like a swimming pool – all the noise comes from the shallow end. On any issue of gravity, the commotion tends to come from shrill reactionary voices that crave attention. Fathomless profundity goes unheard; depth-words that need to be received and discerned are drowned out by all the noisy splashing and shouting.

There will undoubtedly be valiant attempts to construct some much-needed rapprochement for the Anglican Communion at the Primates' gathering. At the forefront – or at least facilitating – is Canon David Porter, the Archbishop of Canterbury's appointee for reconciliation. Porter is an Irish Presbyterian by background, and an Evangelical-Anabaptist by conviction. But he will have his work cut out to fashion some theological unity, in what is essentially an Anglican-catholic problem of polity.

Much has been made of Porter's credentials, and of the Archbishop of Canterbury's knack of fashioning results when a stalemate looked a more likely result. To be sure, process-led approaches to ecclesial problems can be helpful. But pastoral and pragmatic solutions don't tend to resolve deep theological divisions, any more than vitamin pills can cure a patient of serious disease. The divisive theological issues across the Anglican Communion will require deep work, no matter what short-term organisational structures are put in place to somehow hold together a range of competing convictions.

It is possible that the Commonwealth, rather than the Orthodox Church, might serve as a better model for the future of global Anglicanism. But the Archbishop of Canterbury will need to understand that the governance of the church – provinces and dioceses – is a *theological* matter, not just a debate about how to organise territories.

If diversity of belief and practice in the church could be so easily managed, we might have expected the New Testament to say so. It doesn't. It is the vanity of our age to suppose the Church is just like an organisation in which diversity can be smoothed over; the faithful warily kettled into some false compliance manufactured by its leaders; difficulties managed and controlled; and the Church pasteurised so as to become a body of utterly consistent clarity. All for the benefit of some imagined public relations exercise.

So what's to be done with all this? I think that we badly need our poets right now – people who understand how simple words can take Anglicans to new spaces and places as a Communion. Poems are just words, of course. But words so woven that they express a truth more compactly and subtly than if the words were left to their own devices.

Poetry takes a seemingly simple word, term or expression – like ‘sex’, ‘gay’, ‘issues in sexuality’, or even ‘church’ – and turns this into a quite different language. Poems are tongues of desire; of longing, lament and laughter. Poetry transforms ordinary words into new shapes and ideas that enhance our existences. It creates something new out of seemingly nothing. It finds wisdom and words of resolution where texts and tongues have failed before.

Just like an ecclesiastical Communion, a poem is greater than the sum of its parts. So as the Anglican Primates gather, may God grant them – and the church that I love and long to see so swell and intensify – exactly what it needs right now: the true non-sense of poetry.

MWP, December 2015