

# The Episcopalian Preference

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On August 5, 2003, the House of Bishops of the Episcopal Church USA (ECUSA), following initial action by the House of Deputies of ECUSA’s General Convention, gave its consent (by a ratio of roughly 60-40) to the election of the Reverend V. Gene Robinson to become the next Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of New Hampshire. Gene Robinson is an outspoken gay man who has lived openly with his partner for over a decade. He is also the divorced father of two children. At a later point in the same convention, delegates gave permission for the blessing of gay unions in dioceses that may choose to grant clergy license to perform these services.

There are few if any dispassionate observers of these developments. No one looks upon them with the calm of a “view from nowhere.” My own view is that of a person who was born into a family of Episcopalians whose allegiance to that church stretches as far back as anyone can remember. It is the view of a person who was formed as a Christian within the bosom of the Episcopal Church, who served for ten years as a missionary of that church in East Africa, and who has taught several generations of its clergy.

From this standpoint, it seems obvious that ECUSA has by its actions confirmed a decision taken unconsciously some time ago to define its primary identity as a liberal (but liturgical) option within the spectrum of American Protestantism. In doing so, it has at the same time (perhaps again unconsciously) marginalized in its self-understanding the significance of its membership in a worldwide communion of churches that jointly claim to be a part of the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church. In fact, it has placed its membership in the Anglican Communion under threat, and, rather recklessly, brought that communion itself to the verge of a split between the churches of the global South and those of the North. The roots of the crisis can be found in ECUSA’s recent history.

The U.S. Constitution guarantees a right to the “free exercise,” but prohibits the “establishment,” of any religion. These principles provide legal and social space for the birth and growth of a plethora of religious beliefs and practices. In America, “churches” became “denominations,” each of which occupies a particular niche in a religious marketplace. When Episcopalians confronted this reality, in which establishment was beyond reach, they began to fashion a uniquely American identity as a “bridge church,” incorporating the best elements of both Protestantism and Catholicism. This self-presentation

proved both pretentious and fatuous, and in time lost its hold on the Church's imagination. In its place came another identity—one in which the Episcopal Church would provide an enlightened alternative to the moral and theological rigidities of both Roman Catholicism and evangelical Protestantism. Emboldened by this new self-image, Episcopal clergy embraced new learning and new experience. They preached an enlightened religion attuned to the latest trends within liberal culture.

The power of this new self-image over the mind of the Episcopal Church showed its strength as far back as 1966, when the late Bishop James Pike was accused of heresy for declaring that “the Church's classical way of stating what is represented by the doctrine of the Trinity is . . . not essential to the Christian faith.” The Presiding Bishop of ECUSA, despite pressures to the contrary, wished to avoid a heresy trial and so managed to have the matter referred to an ad hoc committee rather than to a panel of judges. The committee concluded that a heresy trial would be widely viewed as a “throwback” to a previous century in which both church and state sought to penalize “unacceptable opinion.” A trial would thus give ECUSA an “oppressive image.” The members of the committee did say, however, that they rejected “the tone and manner” of the Bishop's statements, and that they wished to dissociate themselves from many of his comments. Pike's utterances were, they said, “irresponsible” for one holding episcopal office. The bishops then censured Bishop Pike; but, despite the fact that he did not renounce his heresy, they also did nothing to inhibit him in the exercise of his office. It would appear, then, that the Bishop's fault was a certain degree of irresponsibility and a lack of tact rather than false doctrine.

For a group of bishops who opposed Bishop Pike's censure, ECUSA's willingness even to consider punishment of the Bishop was indefensibly reactionary. In a minority report, they gave voice with stark clarity to the new, explicitly liberal self-image of the Episcopal Church. “We believe it is more important to be a sympathetic and self-conscious part of God's action in the secular world than it is to defend the positions of the past, which is a past that is altered by each new discovery of truth.” Here the doctrine of the Trinity became something to be abandoned by progress. Bishop Pike was viewed not negatively, as a heretic, but positively, as “a casualty of the Christian mission in our day.”

Throughout this struggle, all sides sought to present ECUSA as an enlightened denominational option on the American religious scene. In this struggle can also be seen the birth of the notion that episcopal office is to be used as a “prophetic” lever to pry people loose from the incrustations of the past. This notion of episcopal office appeared in even more pronounced form during the battle over the ordination of women during the 1970s.

Now, I should be clear that I am a staunch, even fierce, supporter of the ordination of women. However, the way in which the practice was introduced into ECUSA has (sadly) served both to weaken its structures of order and authority and to further strengthen its self-identity as an “enlightened” denominational alternative.

In 1974, after the General Convention had twice refused to approve the ordination of women to the priesthood, three retired bishops ordained eleven women deacons as priests. The reason given by the

bishops was that their act was an “obedient” and “prophetic” protest against oppression and an act of solidarity with the oppressed. Once more there was an attempt to bring the offending bishops to trial, but once again the attempt was foiled. The matter was referred at various times and in various ways both to the House of Bishops and to a special committee. The bishops decried the action and went on at a later date to censure the bishops involved. The special committee found that the offending bishops were in fact guilty of canonical offenses, and that their acts involved “teaching publicly a doctrine contrary to that held by the Church.” Further, the committee posed in clear terms a fundamental question of “whether this Church’s understanding of the nature of the Church and the authority of the episcopate permits individual bishops, appealing solely to their consciences, to usurp the proper functions and other duly constituted authorities in this Church.” Another advisory committee put the matter even more pointedly by declaring that “a bishop is not free to appropriate the sacramental structure of the Church to his own views.”

Despite these admonitions, warnings, and actions, however, in October 1975 Bishop George Barrett ordained four more women deacons to the priesthood. The women involved stated that they took their action because waiting for the General Convention to give approval to women’s ordination would affirm in principle the concept that discrimination against women to the priesthood may be practiced in the Church until the majority changes its mind and votes. Once more a leading cultural trend, this time women’s rights, showed itself as the dominant force within ECUSA’s common life. Once more, a majority of ECUSA bishops decried what had been done, but acceded to its legitimacy by failing to take effective disciplinary action.

Looking back over the history that stretched from the “Pike affair” to the struggle over the ordination of women, one can see by the end of the process certain things firmly in place—ECUSA’s espousal of enlightened culture and progressive cultural trends, the use of episcopal office to further “prophetic causes,” and the inability of the governing structures and authorities of ECUSA to restrain independent action on the part of its bishops. All these factors revealed themselves plainly when, in 1977, just two years after Bishop Barrett’s blatant defiance of his fellow bishops, Bishop Paul Moore of the Episcopal Diocese of New York ordained a professed and practicing lesbian to the priesthood. In response, the House of Bishops did no more than express “disapproval” of Bishop Moore’s action. The next General Convention, which met in 1979, passed a resolution that asserted that “it is not appropriate for this Church to ordain a practicing homosexual or any person who is engaged in heterosexual relations outside marriage.”

On the surface, it appeared as if the General Convention had legislated against the practice initiated by Bishop Moore. But appearances can be deceiving. The resolution that labeled these practices “inappropriate” began with the phrase, “We recommend.” Twenty dissenting bishops immediately signed a letter saying that they took the action of the General Convention to be “recommendatory and not prescriptive.” These twenty bishops also announced that in the name of “apostolic leadership” and “prophetic witness” they would not implement the resolution in their dioceses.

It is unlikely that the General Convention resolution was intended to do no more than recommend against a practice, but over time political forces within ECUSA have in fact managed to establish the

resolution as “recommendary” rather than “prescriptive.” In 1989, 1990, and 1991 the Episcopal dioceses of Newark and Washington, D.C., ordained open and practicing homosexuals to the priesthood. The justification for these ordinations was “new experience” and “new learning” that serves to “contextualize” the negative biblical witness. The ordination of sexually active homosexual persons then became a “justice issue” that had to be furthered by a “prophetic” episcopate. In the face of these claims, it is perhaps not surprising that charges of heresy later brought against Bishop Walter Righter of Newark were turned down on the grounds that the Bishop’s action was not contrary to the “core doctrine” of the Episcopal Church.

After the Righter trial, the way was open for bishops to ordain sexually active homosexual persons if they so chose. It was clear that no disciplinary consequences would follow. It was at this point that the policy of a bishop or diocese to ordain or not to ordain, to bless or not to bless, came to be known within Episcopal circles as the “local option.” It was asserted, quite rightly, that “local option” is the de facto practice of ECUSA. The election of Gene Robinson to succeed the present Bishop of New Hampshire was thus only the most radical assertion of a policy that has been firmly in place with respect to ordinations and blessings since the time of the Righter trial. Not only was it now permissible within ECUSA for clergy and bishops to be openly gay, not only was it permissible to bless gay unions, it was also the case that these novelties were hailed by their supporters as evidence that God is “doing a new thing.” The cultural recognition and integration of gay and lesbian people into the American mainstream was interpreted as an act of God. The Episcopal Church, according to this view, was taking a lead in calling attention to God’s work in history and giving prophetic support to divine providence.

It is possible that people from outside ECUSA who oppose these measures will at this point simply throw up their hands and say that this is what we would expect from Episcopalians, who have always been a little long on style and short on substance. A reaction of this sort might provide some self-satisfaction, but it would miss the significance for the rest of the churches in America of what has happened in the Episcopal Church. The Robinson election in fact serves to highlight challenges that all American churches currently face, be they Catholic, Orthodox, “mainstream” Protestant, Evangelical, or Charismatic. I speak of the subversion of Christian belief and practice by the logic of autonomous individualism, and the churches’ transformation into simulacra. Make no mistake: what has happened in ECUSA is not a problem limited to a once (overly) proud denomination. Rather, it provides an exemplary case study of the subversion and transformation that, in one way or another, threatens all American denominations today.

Alasdair MacIntyre’s account of the tradition of liberalism in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* provides a useful description of its career in American life. The economic and political cultures of the United States plainly descend from this tradition, and it is clearly this tradition that currently brings its force to bear on all traditional forms of Christian belief and practice. MacIntyre notes that the tradition of liberalism cannot allow for a single notion of the good to dominate “the public square,” since liberal society must remain morally and theologically neutral. What one can express in public are not notions of good, but rather *preferences*. Of course, some way must be found to order preferences both in respect to individual life and to social policy. No rational way can be found to achieve this goal, however, because there is no common notion of the good to which public appeal can be made. Hence, one establishes

preferences in the public arena primarily by bargaining. Everything in private as well as public life becomes a “trade-off.” Social life becomes a sort of free trade zone for preferences.

The dominance in America of a liberal social economy gives us ample reason to regard the Robinson election and the acceptance of gay blessings as more than an Episcopalian anomaly. Within a liberal social economy, the notion of moral agency gives particular significance to issues of sexual preference and sexual satisfaction, since such a society’s members think of themselves not as inhabitants of a pre-established moral order but as *individuals* who are utterly unique, as *selves* that have particular personal histories and needs, and as persons who have rights that allow them to express their individuality and pursue their personal well-being. For moral agents who think of themselves as *individuals*, *selves*, and *persons*, sexuality becomes, along with money, both a marker of identity and a primary way of expressing the preferences that define identity.

It is precisely this sexualized notion of moral agency and personal identity that makes the Robinson election so predictable. Here is a unique *individual*, who is a *self* with a particular history, and a *person* with a right to express his preferences and put his talents to work in the social world he inhabits. To deny him that right on the basis of sexual preference is to deny his personal identity. This notion of moral agency also makes understandable why the issues of abortion and euthanasia take their place alongside self-chosen sexual expression as centers of moral controversy both within the churches and without. At the heart of each of these arguments lies the characterization of moral agents as *individuals*, *selves*, and *persons* who have the right to pursue their own preferences, whatever they may be.

In the culture wars that rage over abortion, euthanasia, and sexuality, defenders of more traditional Christian teaching and practice often miss the fact that they must confront American culture on a deeper level than any of these specific issues. If they are to be effective, they must take on the very way in which Americans think of themselves as moral agents. The “socio-logic” that stands behind ECUSA’s recent action beckons thinking to a deeper level than the sad history of this church’s search for a distinctive place on the spectrum of American denominationalism. It tempts Christians to adopt a vision of moral and social life that runs counter to the very foundations of Christian thought and practice. And it raises the question of whether we inhabit a moral universe governed by an order we are called upon to understand and to which we are required to conform, or whether that universe is a mere product of preference-pursuing *individuals*, *selves*, and *persons* who create a social world suited to their self-defined goals through an elaborate process of moral bargaining.

While it is important to recognize the influence of these social forces, it is also important that we not explain the recent actions of ECUSA solely in terms of them. Christians throughout the ages have faced social forces that threaten to compromise the truth they have been given to live and proclaim, but they have not always succumbed to them. To think well about what is happening in ECUSA one must ask why the sirens of modernity have sung so sweetly in its ears.

It is my belief that a religious rather than a historical or sociological answer must be given to this question. As the English theologian P. T. Forsythe once wrote, “If within us we have nothing above us

we soon succumb to what is around us.” The history recounted above suggests that the internal life of ECUSA may well lack a transcendent point of reference—one that can serve as a counter-balance to the social forces that play upon it. A certain emptiness at the center is suggested also by an analysis of the theology that currently dominates ECUSA’s pulpits. The standard sermon in outline runs something like this: “God is love; God’s love is inclusive; God acts in justice to see that everyone is included; we therefore ought to be co-actors and co-creators with God to make the world over in accordance with inclusivity.”

Here is *the* theological projection of a society built upon preference—one in which the inclusion of preference within common life is the be-all and end-all of the social system. ECUSA’s God has become the image of this society. Gone is the notion of divine judgment (save upon those who may wish to exclude someone), gone is the notion of radical conversion, gone is the notion of a way of life that requires dying to self and rising to newness of life in conformity with God’s will. In place of the complex God revealed in Christ Jesus, a God of both judgment and mercy, a God whose law is meant to govern human life, we now have a God who is love and inclusion without remainder. The projected God of the liberal tradition is, in the end, no more than an affirmer of preferences. This view of God is, furthermore, acted upon by an increasing number of ECUSA’s clergy, who now regularly invite non-baptized people to share in the Holy Eucharist. It’s just a matter of hospitality—of welcoming difference. An inclusive God, it would seem, requires an inclusive sacramental system as well.

Jews have always held that idolatry is the greatest of all sins. In the end, the actions of ECUSA must be traced to idolatry, to the creation of a God made in our own image. It is this observation that brings me to my final remark. As I write, the chief bishops of the various provinces of the Anglican Communion are preparing to go to England to meet with the Archbishop of Canterbury. The purpose of this meeting is to discuss what ought to be the response of the Anglican Communion to ECUSA’s action. A majority of the bishops of the global South believe that some form of discipline must be imposed upon ECUSA if the Anglican Communion is to maintain its claim to apostolicity and catholicity. Contrary to the assertions of many liberal Episcopal clergy and bishops, the concern of the bishops from the global South does not stem from the fact that they have not as yet lived through the Enlightenment. It stems rather from a perception that a form of idolatry has infected ECUSA and that this infection has led to forms of gross disobedience that compromise not only Anglican but Christian identity.

Only time will tell whether ECUSA’s Presiding Bishop will manage to convince these more orthodox bishops that an international “local option” is the enlightened way for the Anglican Communion as a whole. The attempt will certainly be made. It is entirely likely, however, that the bishops of the global South will say to ECUSA that membership in the Anglican Communion requires conformity to the faith and practice of a worldwide fellowship of churches—even if that conformity runs against the grain of the culture in which Christians happen to find themselves. ECUSA will then have to decide if it wants to remain in its American denominational niche or if it wants to emphasize instead its identity as a church that is indeed part of a global communion.

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