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Anglicans need deep learning not cheap victory

By Savi Hensman
18 Dec 2007

‘Anyone of discretion acts by the light of knowledge,’ wrote the ancient author of Proverbs. Many people of faith highly value study and work diligently to deepen their understanding, in a spirit of humility and compassion. However others are less open, either because they are supremely confident that their own views are superior to any alternatives or because they fear that too much questioning will undermine faith or offend the Almighty. They may indeed undertake some learning, but within tightly restricted boundaries. Some even try to silence or expel dissenters.

Current tensions among Anglicans to some extent reflect these differences of approach. Until quite recently in this denomination, the quest for knowledge tended to be rated highly. Even if there was vigorous disagreement on particular matters, there was some measure of trust that the church, if open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, would be led towards truth and justice. Yet some leaders now not only refuse to consider scholarship which does not conform to their own perspective but also demand the right to prohibit others from acting on the fruits of study.

This is a sharp break with mainstream Anglicanism. ‘It is no part of the purpose of the Scriptures to give information on those themes which are the proper subject matter of scientific enquiry, nor is the Bible a collection of separate oracles, each containing a final declaration of truth. The doctrine of God is the centre of its teaching,’ bishops from different parts of the world agreed at the 1930 Lambeth Conference. ‘We believe that the work of our Lord Jesus Christ is continued by the Holy Spirit, who not only interpreted him to the Apostles, but has in every generation inspired and guided those who seek truth.’ And ‘We recognize in the modern discoveries of science - whereby the boundaries of knowledge are extended, the needs of men are satisfied and their sufferings alleviated - veritable gifts of God, to be used with thankfulness to him, and with that sense of responsibility which such thankfulness must create.’

In 1958, the Lambeth Conference gratefully acknowledged ‘our debt to the host of devoted scholars who, worshipping the God of Truth, have enriched and deepened our understanding of the Bible, not least by facing with intellectual integrity the questions raised by modern knowledge and modern criticism’, and ‘the work of scientists in increasing man's knowledge of the universe, wherein is seen the majesty of God in his creative activity. It therefore calls upon Christian people both to learn reverently from

every new disclosure of truth, and at the same time to bear witness to the biblical message of a God and Saviour apart from whom no gift can be rightly used.’

At that time, scientific knowledge and theological reflection on human sexuality, including close reading of the Old and New Testament, were developing rapidly. Attitudes among Anglicans to contraception had changed radically, and theologians were beginning to question whether the Bible had been correctly interpreted and whether same-sex partnerships were always wrong. The growing visibility of lesbian, gay and bisexual people in many urban centres throughout the world made it harder to ignore their concerns and the issues for faith communities as they prayed, worshipped, cared for those in need and sought to discern God’s will.

In 1978, while heterosexuality was affirmed as the Scriptural norm, the Lambeth Conference explicitly recognised ‘the need for deep and dispassionate study of the question of homosexuality, which would take seriously both the teaching of Scripture and the results of scientific and medical research. The Church, recognising the need for pastoral concern for those who are homosexual, encourages dialogue with them. (We note with satisfaction that such studies are now proceeding in some member Churches of the Anglican Communion.)’ This was affirmed again by Lambeth 1988, which urged that such study and reflection ‘take account of biological, genetic and psychological research being undertaken by other agencies, and the socio-cultural factors that lead to the different attitudes in the provinces of our Communion’.

By the 1998 Lambeth Conference, Anglicans in some dioceses had been engaged in prayerful reflection, serious study and discussion on these matters for twenty to forty years, and in some cases had come to rethink their views. Others refused even to begin. For instance in 1997, a theologically ultra-conservative Statement was adopted at an international conference in Kuala Lumpur, in the province of Southeast Asia. The Archbishop of Southeast Asia, Moses Tay, wrote, ‘Refusal to accept homosexuality as sinful is a diabolical contradiction of the Word of God, and is a blatant attempt to destroy the Gospel of Salvation through Jesus Christ. This is an issue of eternal life and eternal death. It is not a matter of opinion or a subject for study by an appointed commission. It is my conviction that faithful people of God must unite and stand against current proposals to appoint commissions to study the issue or the Kuala Lumpur Statement. Such a wily approach must be resisted at all cost if we are to remain faithful to Scripture and resist the temptation of the devil who tempted Eve to use her intellect against the Word of God in the same way.’

While caution is indeed important in approaching new developments and discoveries (and rediscoveries), and theories should be tested rigorously, those who ignore or suppress the fruits of study in fact put huge confidence not in divine truth but in their own intellects, assuming it is impossible that they might be wrong. Yet no human is intellectually infallible. It is all too easy to end up ‘teaching human precepts as doctrines’ (Mark 7.7).

In contrast, careful investigation and meaningful dialogue, in the context of mercy towards fellow-creatures and humility before God, can help sift out what is of value from what is poorly argued or based on incorrect data, and enable the church to be open to the workings of the Holy Spirit. And if indeed people are in the right, they are more likely to convince others if they engage with the arguments rather than simply insisting that they themselves are correct.

In addition, by the late 1990s, in some communities, the credibility of the church was at stake. Many theologians had by then come to believe that same-sex relationships were not always contrary to God's will. Old and New Testament scholars, church historians, academics of many denominations had contributed to the debate. This resonated with the experience of many Anglicans seeking to live out their faith and witness to the good news in the context of parish life. Other theologians were unconvinced but could at least demonstrate that they had thought seriously about the issues. However certain church leaders, who made a point of not studying deeply, and then made sweeping claims which contradicted the experience of many lesbians and gays and their families and friends, were less than plausible when they claimed to be champions of truth and morality.

Some senior clergy, for instance, loudly insisted that everyone was naturally heterosexual and same-sex attraction was the result of wilful wickedness. This was out of keeping with the reality with which many people within and outside the church were familiar. These leaders' approach to the Bible too left many Christians uneasy, as if it were merely a prop for their own views rather than a rich spiritual resource which might disturb and challenge them as well as others.

There were indeed provinces where, quite understandably, detailed work on human sexuality had been delayed because of other pressing concerns such as civil war, yet where there was openness to new knowledge. Elsewhere, certain leaders did not even pretend to be willing to consider seriously perspectives other than their own.

'This is the voice of God talking. Yes, I am violent against sin. Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed,' shouted the Bishop of Enugu, Nigeria, trying to exorcise the general secretary of the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement outside the conference hall at Lambeth. (The Bishop was probably unaware of the detailed work by various scholars examining what the sin of Sodom actually was.) Yet one of the founding principles of Anglicanism had been that no man could claim the authority to speak with the voice of God.

After a heated debate largely dominated by those dismissive of the value of study and dialogue, the 1998 Lambeth Conference adopted a resolution which took a relatively conservative position on sexuality but again affirmed the need for a listening process. This was upheld in the flawed but influential Windsor Report a few years later, when divisions had deepened.

Yet so deep is the aversion of some bishops to the notion of deep and dispassionate study and genuine dialogue that this is usually treated as an optional extra. For example, calls to discipline leaders who do not abide by the 1998 resolution on sexuality or the Windsor Report almost invariably refer to those who have moved too far in accepting partnered gays and lesbians. It is as if the sections of these documents which advocate investigating matters carefully and listening to different experiences and perspectives had not been written. Perhaps ‘insistence upon the duty of thinking and learning as essential elements in the Christian life’ (Lambeth 1930) has become so outrageous a demand as to be unthinkable. And now those who have not bothered to examine the issues in any depth, and who have in some cases persecuted people in their own provinces who have tried to promote in-depth study and meaningful dialogue, are demanding that their own power be extended to other parts of the world.

After the Windsor Report, many clerical and lay leaders in North America were willing to postpone further steps towards full inclusion, painful though this was; but hardliners scornfully rejected such concessions. They wanted nothing less than submission to them. This was too much for many Anglicans who wished to ‘seek and serve Christ’ in all people, ‘loving your neighbour as yourself’ (in the words of the baptismal liturgy used in some parts of the church). There seemed little point in continuing to wait if genuine dialogue was not happening.

Some of those eager to move forward had not studied the issues in much depth. However there were also numerous people who, at first, had taken the line that only heterosexual relationships leading to marriage should be supported, but who had come – after much study, thought and prayer – to change their minds. Yet they were accused of acting hastily and being guided simply by social mores. In other denominations, too, there were tensions between those who felt that love of God and faithfulness to their tradition involved willingness to delve deeply into difficult matters such as human sexuality and others who felt that the inheritance they were called on to preserve meant unquestioning adherence to certain beliefs on family life.

Thought-provoking theological work on the theology of sexuality and the family, in the context of faith in the Trinity and pursuit of the kingdom of heaven, continues to be done. Many Christians are no more aware of this than of the writings of theologians such as Derrick Sherwin Bailey in the 1950s, Helmut Thielicke in the 1960s or John J McNeill in the 1970s. From their point of view, it is outrageous that what they have taken for granted on such an emotive issue as human sexuality should be questioned, and doing so would open the floodgates.

The controversy which has arisen over this particular issue reveals wider differences. It is hard today to imagine that the 1968 Lambeth Conference (not unlike other Christian gatherings around the same time) could, ‘having considered and welcomed

- (a) the increasing extent of human knowledge,**
- (b) the prospect of human control of the natural environment,**
- (c) the searching enquiries of the theologians, calls the Church to a faith in the living**

God which is adventurous, expectant, calm, and confident, and to faith in the standards of Christ, who was, and is, and is to come, as the criterion of what is to be welcomed and what is to be resisted in contemporary society.'

The importance of thoughtful and prayerful study, in which different perspectives are weighed up before conclusions are reached, is greater than ever before, not only for scholars and bishops but also for laypeople and parish clergy in communities across the world. Poverty and preventable disease continue to cause terrible suffering, while ecological disaster, militarism, violent nationalism and religious hatred threaten the very survival of humankind. How can the hungry be fed, the homeless sheltered, the sick healed, death-dealing divisions be overcome? How are the extremes of misogyny, ethnic supremacism, homophobia, child abuse and disdain for those who are poor, disabled or unemployed connected with milder forms of prejudice and snobbery, and how can destructive forces most effectively tackled? Is bullying in the family, playground, workplace and organisation best dealt with by giving in to the demands of those who misuse power and, if not, how can such behaviour be firmly yet lovingly confronted?

Some may be tempted to shy away from thinking too deeply about such matters, trusting in politicians or church leaders to tell them what to think. There is also a trend in some church circles towards emphasising the authority of bishops, and 'unity' based on dominance. Yet 'ordinary' Christians cannot shrug off their responsibility to strive to follow Christ and love others as God loves them, which includes seeking to understand and address the issues profoundly affecting families, neighbourhoods, humankind and life on earth. Many in Anglican and ecumenical circles are taking seriously the need to learn from Scripture, tradition and reason and listen to the poor and excluded as well as the rich and respectable.

Hard work will be needed if the gulf which has opened up is to be bridged. Moves towards increasing the power of senior clergy, and their unaccountability to those they supposedly serve, will not help. Why should laypeople used to taking responsibility in other areas of life, and having to argue their case if they are to persuade others to take their views on board, passively accept the pronouncements of bishops who have not done their homework, especially if this undermines local mission and ministry?

Even in countries where top church leaders emphatically reject the value of listening and learning, many clergy and laypeople are far more realistic about human diversity than those in the hierarchy, and are eager to learn more about the complex universe which God has created. Indeed, developing and sharing knowledge may be an even more urgent task than in other, more secure and prosperous, countries. In time, pressure from below may prove most effective in fostering greater openness. Until then, unity is likely to be strained.

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