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All Coherence Gone

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All Coherence Gone: Sex and The State of the Church of England
Mary-Jane Rubenstein

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*“Tis all in pieces; all Coherence gone;
 All just supply and all Relation”*

—John Donne

As a way of focusing the admittedly huge problem of “sex” in “religious and theological perspective,” I’d like this afternoon to continue to think through what I reflexively call “The Anglican Mess”—not as a gesture of ridicule, nor, really, as one of affection—but in an effort to remain lighthearted about a frankly unbearable situation. For me, “The Anglican Mess” is a way to name, without capitulating to despair, an interlocking complex of increasingly intractable and perhaps unresolvable problems concerning gender, sexuality, race, hierarchy, hermeneutics, ecumenism, nationalism, and post-colonialism. And to be honest, “mess” may be overly polite. The situation, as I hope to demonstrate, is one in which all points of theological, political, and ecclesiastical orientation are either mobile, evanescent, or inverted, and as such, effectively gone. The astronomical equivalent to this scenario would be a sky without stars—the chaotic, frightening void-scape that gives us the word *disaster*. Dis-aster; no stars to guide us safely through the waters, and this, I fear, is what the Anglican Mess really amounts to. So a bit of ground-setting before we steer into the disaster.

The Worldwide Anglican Communion, or WWAC—that’s really the acronym—is a global federation of churches, most of which were planted by the Church of England during the colonial era. And, as you may have heard, things have lately gone a bit whack in the WWAC, with respect to what churchy folks refer to as “human sexuality.” A number of the Communion’s provinces have broken with the Episcopal Church in America and the Anglican Church in Canada over the issues of LGBT clergy and the blessings of same-sex unions; conservative priests and bishops in North America have teamed up with bishops in Nigeria, Uganda, Kenya, and Rwanda to create a more orthodox Anglican church in America with the aim of declaring the Episcopal Church a schism; everyone seems to be fighting over buildings; and the current Archbishop of Nigeria is threatening to break with the Church of *England* over its allegedly accommodationist (but actually just *baffling*) stance toward homosexuality in the priesthood and episcopate.

The flashpoint for this sustained bout of internecine rancor is usually identified with the consecration in 2003 of Gene Robinson, a partnered gay man,

as Bishop of New Hampshire. But, to speak bluntly, things were already awful in 1998, when the bishops of the Communion met at Lambeth Palace to form resolutions on polity, and the two and a half week-conference was almost entirely taken up by toxic battles over homosexuality. It was no accident that this was the first Lambeth Conference in which bishops from the so-called Global South outnumbered their northern counterparts. And it was certainly no accident that this meeting, which has left its participants on all sides of these issues frankly traumatized, was the first one that women attended as bishops.

Now if you were to stop a rank-and-file Episcopalian—whether progressive, conservative, or centrist—and ask her what is going on with sexuality in the Anglican Communion, she would most likely respond in one of two ways. Either she would say, “I have no idea! What *is* the Anglican Communion?” Or, if you had cornered more of an ecclesiology geek, she’d say something like, “well, the center of Christianity has moved to the Global South. There are more Anglicans in Africa, South America, and South Asia than there are in North America and Western Europe and”—here’s the key—“*people in the global south are more conservative than we are.*” It’s at this point that your interlocutor’s political sensibilities become important. If you’re catching her on her way out of the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine in New York, then she will deliver this message with frustration and a degree of superiority. You might even catch some thinly-veiled racism as she explains that the “developing world,” rendered monolithically *and* positioned on a path toward “us,” is *decades* “behind” in terms of gender and sexual justice, not to mention their interpretation of scripture. If, on the other hand, your interlocutor is emerging from a church in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, then the conservatism of the global south will be proclaimed with solemnity and deference—“*they* are in the majority now,” your informant will say; “we westerners have no right to tell them what to think, and what they think is that homosexuality is a cancer to be excised from the body of Christ.” So the tone is different, but you see how the position is the same—both accounts are more or less popularized versions of the thesis Philip Jenkins sets forth in *The Next Christendom*: “they” outnumber “us,” “they” will determine the future of Christianity, and by the way, they are deeply conservative when it comes to questions of gender and sexuality.¹

You can probably tell by the way I’ve set up this line of thinking that I’m going to say there’s something wrong with it. But it’s not exactly *wrong*; it’s just misleading and unhelpful, for two rather enormous and interconnected reasons. First, this line consolidates both the South and the North into univocal theological masses, ignoring the progressive and centrist voices in the southern hemisphere, as well as the arch-conservative and often well-financed voices in the northern hemisphere. Second, it presents these two factions as simply *there, given*, without accounting for the complex processes through which the factions (to the

¹ Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

extent that they do, in fact, operate as such) have been *produced* in shifting, even dizzying relation to one another. There is, in other words, a strange *a priorism* about the Jenkins line of thinking—a suggestion that this is simply the way things *are*. Among other things, this means it is futile to hope that they might become otherwise.

If, then, one seeks to unsettle this *a priorism*, one will have to uncover the concrete historical, social, and political forces that have produced these factions as factions in the first place. And toward that end, I would suggest we have to think along at least five different lines at once. As I elaborate them here, they are particular to the Anglican Communion, but I am certain one could find analogues in other global Christian families as well.

The lines of inquiry are, first, the colonial history of the Communion. When lambasting *or* appealing to the sexual conservatism of, say, the Anglican Church of Nigeria, it is crucial to remember that this church is a colonial product, and operating in relation to a code of sex and gender that the British colonial regime imposed upon the region around the turn of the 20th Century. In the process, the colonial apparatus dismantled and prohibited the very different patterns of familial and sexual organization that had regulated Igbo and Yoruba life until then.² This is not to say such pre-colonial patterns were “better” than the Victorian model—in fact, their nearly total obliteration at the hands of the colonial project means we have no way of judging them at all. But they were *different*—different enough to compel the colonial administration to divide and regularize enormous, interconnected families into small households composed of one man, one woman, and their purportedly biological children. So there is nothing *inherently* conservative or heterosexist or, to be sure, monogamous, about “the African family.”

If colonial history is the first axis of exchange we would need to consider, the second would be the transnational network that American conservatives began to establish along *post*-colonial lines in the mid-1990s. By that point, the Episcopal Church had been ordaining and even consecrating women for nearly two decades, and it was beginning openly to ordain openly gay clergy. Realizing they were losing the battle on their own soil, conservative Episcopalians (funded in many cases by non-Episcopal, evangelical think-tanks) began to form alliances with their siblings in the southern hemisphere, who objected to the ordination of women, but who by all accounts had given very little thought to the matter of sexual activity between consenting adults with comparable anatomies. Through a series of impassioned speeches, pledges of solidarity, and financial exchanges documented incomparably by Jim Naughton,³ the American conservatives

² For a lengthier discussion of these matters, please see Mary-Jane Rubenstein, "An Anglican Crisis of Comparison: Intersections of Race, Gender, and Religious Authority, with Particular Reference to the Church of Nigeria," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 72, no. 2 (June 2004).

³ Jim Naughton, "Following the Money: A Special Report," *The Washington Window*

secured assurances of solidarity from, among others, the primates of Uganda, Nigeria, Kenya, and Rwanda. It was those transnational alliances that produced the well-organized conservative bloc at the 1998 Lambeth Conference, which declared homosexual activity “incompatible with scripture” and determined that same-sex unions ought neither to be performed nor blessed by the churches in the Communion.⁴

Third! It would be important to show how opposition to homosexuality has been consolidated in certain post-colonial nations as an act of resistance to neo-colonial practices on the part of the United States, Canada, and Western Europe. One might consider, for example, the Ugandan legislation derisively called the “kill the gays” bill, which threatens a life sentence for genital homosexual activity, up to 5 years’ imprisonment for members of the same sex judged to be on a “date,” and, in some incarnations, the death penalty for “aggravated” or “serial” homosexuality. This legislation gained traction thanks to the work of a white American evangelical Pastor named Scott Lively, of the Abiding Truth Ministry, who along with a few colleagues, was invited to Uganda in 2009 to decry homosexuality as a threat to African families.⁵ Since then, the men have distanced themselves from the legislation, saying they never meant that gay people should be *executed*—but either way, news of the bill began to spread in early 2009 to the leader of gay and lesbian rights organizations in the UK. And here’s where things get complicated. Horrified by the proposed legislation, the UK activists began a letter-writing campaign, reaching out to human rights organizations across Europe and North America, whose members faithfully flooded the physical and virtual mailboxes of Ugandan legislators, demanding that the bill be destroyed immediately. It is even possible that you or I, trying to be good cyber-activists, *signed* one such petition. But here’s the problem. The British organizers who spearheaded the campaign never thought to check in with LGBT activists *in Uganda* who, as it turns out, had known about the proposed legislation since its inception. And they had determined that the best strategy was to remain silent; after all, the bill was only supported by a few people, it was *crazy*, and no one particularly cared about homosexuality in Uganda. It just wasn’t a concern. So the Ugandan activists had hoped the bill might just die from lack of attention.

But then! Suddenly every western liberal with a smart phone had condemned this bill that few Ugandans had even *heard* of, and suddenly, it looked

http://www.umaction.org/Following_the_Money.pdf(May, 2006).

⁴ The Lambeth Conference, "Resolution I.10," *Resolutions of the Lambeth Conference, 1998* <http://www.lambethconference.org/resolutions/1998/1998-1-10.cfm>(1998).

⁵ Michel Martin, "U.S. Evangelical Leaders Blamed for Uganda Anti-Gay Sentiment," *National Public Radio* December 18, 2009; Jeffrey Gettelman, "Americans' Role Seen in Uganda Anti-Gay Push," *The New York Times* January 3, 2010.

like the West was launching some coordinated effort to turn Uganda gay. Okay, that's a bit of an overstatement. The problem was the large-scale international effort to interfere in Ugandan affairs. So thanks to this western outcry, the "kill the gays" bill has become a rallying point for opposition to the kind of neo-colonial interference to which the people of Uganda have been subjected for centuries. This is what Ugandan Speaker of Parliament Rebecca Kadaga meant when, in response to the Prime Minister of Canada's virulent critique of her position on homosexuality, she said, "Uganda is not a colony or protectorate of Canada."⁶ And a similar point can be found in the unrivalled rhetoric of the former Archbishop of Nigeria, the Most Reverend Peter J. Akinola. Asked about his staunch opposition to gay bishops and same-sex blessings in the Anglican Communion, Akinola responded,

In our human existence in this world, there was a time Africans were slaves, but we came out of it. But what again followed? Political slavery, under colonial administration. Somehow, we came out of it. Then economic slavery: World Bank, IMF would tell you what to do with your money and your own resources. Now [with homosexuality] it is spiritual slavery, and we have to resist this. They had us as human slaves, political slaves, and economic slaves. They want to come for spiritual slaves. Now we won't accept it."⁷

The fourth set of factors one would need to work through in order to contextualize and historicize this debate is the threat that both northern and southern Christians perceive in the expansion of its evangelical rival, which is to say, Islam. Two pieces of evidence, from very different sources. The first is the listserv of the Episcopal Church's House of Bishops and Deputies, which I follow for research purposes as a kibitzer. It's a strange little forum—people write about birthdays and funerals, request prayers for the sick and dying, and occasionally engage in heated debates about homosexuality. But something I began to notice a decade ago is that, for the most part, the debate "about homosexuality" doesn't focus on the issue of homosexuality. With a few exceptions—including, infamously, a very outspoken man who rose just before hands were laid on Gene Robinson to detail the physical particularities of anal penetration—apart from him, almost no one is talking about whether it's okay for men to have sex with men or women to have sex with women (in fact, as we will see, no one is really talking about women at all). Rather, the debate tends to play itself out between, on the one hand, people who argue that the church should be inclusive of all

⁶ Muna Mire, "Take Your White Hands off Ugandan Gay Rights," *The Huffington Post* November 19, 2012.

⁷ Dickinson Adeyanju, "Homosexual Priests: Nigerian Anglicans Will Not Succumb to Pressure From the West, Says Akinola," *The Guardian* (Nigeria), July 30, 2007.

Christians, including queer ones, and on the other hand, people who counter that LGBT activists in the church are ignoring the plight of their sisters and brothers in the global south. And what is the source of that plight? *Islam*.

So one day about seven years ago, a lay deputy had posted a message in support of Bishop Robinson's episcopacy in New Hampshire. In response, another lay deputy implored his colleagues to remember "Africa," where Christians were under threat of obliteration at the hands of angry Muslims. To encapsulate his position, he asked, "Do you really think that gay bishops are the answer to militant mullahs?"

What he meant, I think, was that a church that affirms gay people not only as tolerable, but as exemplary, elevating them to the status of Bishop, opens itself to moral censure and ridicule at the hands of rival leaders, who will take the opportunity to steal any number of disillusioned sheep. Christian Africa is *just* holding off Islam as it is, the deputy seems to be saying, and our response is to make them even *more* vulnerable? "Do you really think that gay bishops are the answer to militant mullahs?" But notice what *else* this question is doing rhetorically. First, it positions Islamic leaders as aggressive *agents*. They are militant, and they have *acted* in a way that needs to be answered. So they are attacking us, we need a *strong* response, and we send...gay bishops? From *this* perspective, the implication is that the gay bishops themselves are not strong enough, not manly enough, to hold off the militant aggressor. So the Muslim man is hyper-virilized here, while the gay man is rendered weak, passive; *feminine*.

We can see the same chain of associations, and the same panic over a feminized Christianity, at work in a sermon Nicholas Okoh preached in Beckingham, Kent, just two months before he was elected Archbishop of Nigeria. The sermon focused not on homosexuality, but rather on what Okoh called the ongoing "Islamic threat" against sub-saharan nations—especially Uganda, Kenya, and Rwanda.⁸ Islam, he said, was stealing souls from Christ. Of course, this ought not to be *surprising*—Islam expands, as does Christianity, by conversion. Presumably, the Anglican Church in Nigeria has "stolen" thousands of souls from Allah; in fact, its website boasts of its exponential growth over the last two decades. So what's the problem? The problem, Okoh explains, is that Muslims have an unfair advantage, and perhaps unsurprisingly, it's a *sexual* advantage. "They come to Africa," he says—the "they" being Muslims, who are in this phrase not *themselves* African, but foreign intruders—"They come to Africa," Okoh says, "and say, 'Christianity is asking you to marry only one wife. We will give you four!'"

At the risk of making an obvious point, the "you" here is presumed male and heterosexual ("Christianity is asking *you* to marry only one wife")—again, men tend to be the speakers, audience, subjects, *and* objects of these

⁸ Ruth Gledhill, "Muslims are Mass-Producing Children to Take over Africa, Says New Archbishop," *The Times* September 21, 2009.

conversations, and that is precisely the problem. “So,” Okoh continues, “if you have four wives, four children, 16 children, very soon you’ll be a village.” So that’s what’s unfair: Muslims indulge in too much sex with too many people and produce too many children. There’s that hyper-virility again. And it puts *Christians* in the position of being vulnerable, not potent enough to counter the attack. Africa, Okoh concludes, is “surrounded by Islamic domination.” So Muslims are the dominants, the tops, and Christians are the passive recipients of hyper-male aggression; so much so, they might as well be women.

This, then, is the fifth major axis coursing through the Anglican Mess, and it will be the focus of the rest of my thoughts this afternoon. I would like to suggest that if the Anglican Communion is unraveling over the issue of homosexuality, it is because it hasn’t managed to deal with the issue of women.

As you may know, while the Episcopal Church in the United States; the Anglican Church of Canada; the Anglican Church of Australia; and the Anglican Church in Aotearoa, New Zealand, and Polynesia ordain women to the priesthood, the vast majority of the Communion’s 44 branches do not. This, in fact, was an issue over which conservatives threatened schism in the 1980s and 90s, and the “resolution,” if you can call it that, was to agree to disagree. As Lambeth 1998 affirmed, in a resolution entitled not, say, “Women in Holy Orders,” but rather, “The Unity of the Anglican Communion,” people who affirm the priesthood of women and people who deny it are “both loyal Anglicans.”⁹ In countless news articles and follow-up publications, the language has been modified slightly but crucially to say that proponents and opponents are both “equally loyal Anglicans.”¹⁰ Again, in this phrase, see how the issue isn’t the issue. The language doesn’t say that women are equal to men. It says that people who *think* women are equal to men are equal to people who *don’t* think women are equal to men. The concern, and the focus, is for the dominant group and its *views* rather than the minority and their *livelihoods*. So for decades, the Communion has held itself together by resolving not to make too big a deal about the role of women in the church, privileging what it calls “unity” over consensus on this particular issue.

As for the Church of England itself, while British women have been serving as priests for twenty years, they are still not allowed to be consecrated as

⁹ The Lambeth Conference, “Resolution III.2,” *Resolutions of the Lambeth Conference, 1998* <http://www.lambethconference.org/resolutions/1998/1998-3-2.cfm>(1998).

¹⁰ See, for example, the conservative blog at <http://anglicansablaze.blogspot.com/2010/11/bishop-wallace-benn-draws-attention-to.html> and the liberal blog at <http://www.thinkinganglicans.org.uk/archives/003506.html>. Even a Roman Catholic news source replicates the language; see <http://www.thecatholicuniverse.com/index.php/uk-and-ireland-news/1318-world-cup-victors-dedicate-trophy-to-our-lady-of-guadalupe>.

bishops. This has led to any number of situations that a thinking person should find incoherent—like the one in which an American priest-friend of mine found herself a number of years ago when she was asked to officiate her cousin’s wedding in England. Let’s call her Sarah. Sarah submitted all the forms one has to submit before marrying a couple in a parish, diocese, and province other than one’s own, only to receive a written response from the office of the Archbishop of Canterbury, then Rowan Williams. The letter informed Sarah, who had been a priest in good standing for over 10 years, that while the Church of England recognized the priesthood of women, it did not recognize the *episcopacy* of women, and Sarah had been ordained to the priesthood by a woman bishop. So as far as the Church of England was concerned, Sarah was not a priest. By way of consolation, the letter went on to inform her that since she had been ordained to the *diaconate* by a male bishop, she *was* a *deacon* in the eyes of the Church of England, and so could assist in the mass, but could not celebrate it. This is what I mean by the Church’s failure so far to resolve the question of the status of women, and the often ridiculous side-effects of this failure.

That the “gay” issue boils down to a “girl” issue can be seen, I would like to suggest, through a close evaluation of three recent developments in the Church of England itself. They tumbled out on one another’s heels from late November to early February of this year—all during the transition between Rowan Williams, the outgoing Archbishop of Canterbury, and Justin Welby, who was recently confirmed in the office on February 4. The first development, announced on November 20, 2012, was that the General Synod of the Church of England had *rejected* legislation that would have allowed women to become bishops. The second, announced one month later, was that gay men *in* civil partnerships *could* become bishops, provided they were celibate. It was a strange progression—women can’t be bishops but gay men can, as long as they don’t engage in the behavior that causes them to be identified as “gay” in the first place. And just as some people on the left were voicing some reserved appreciation of the matter as a “step in the right direction”—although there was still that pesky problem about women—the British House of Commons approved a bill that would allow same-sex couples to be *married*, not just civil-partnered, and the Church of England responded with an unconditional repudiation of the measure. So those are the three developments: no to women bishops, yes to gay *male* bishops in sexless civil partnerships, and no to same-sex marriage. How, one might wonder, is the church justifying this odd progression of decisions?

On November 20, 2012, the Archbishop of York sat before the delegates of the General Synod of the Church of England. The General Synod is composed of three bodies: the House of Bishops, the House of Clergy, and the House of Laity. Archbishop John Sentamu called the vote on GS 1708D, entitled “Draft Bishops and Priests—*open parenthesis* Consecration and Ordination of Women *close parenthesis* Measure. Note that the women are in parentheses—even in the legislation. The measure reads in part, “it shall be lawful for the General Synod to make provision by Canon for enabling a woman to be consecrated to the office

of bishop if she otherwise satisfies the requirements of Canon Law as to the persons who may be consecrated as bishops.”¹¹ The delegates registered their votes by means of electronic, remote-control-like devices, allowing Archbishop Sentamu to announce the results almost instantaneously. He reported that the House of Bishops had approved the measure by a vote of 44 to 3, with 2 abstentions; the House of Clergy had approved it by a somewhat narrower margin of 148 to 45, and the House of Laity had voted 132 in favor and 74 against, a ratio that fell 6 votes short of the 2/3 majority needed to pass the measure. As Sentamu summarized while many delegates wiped away tears or stared at him in disbelief, “[The measure] was carried in the House of Bishops and Clergy and lost in the House of Laity. The motion, having been lost... will not proceed any farther.”¹²

The outcry both within and beyond the Church of England was immediate and intense. Rowan Williams expressed a “deep personal sadness” at the outcome, Canon Stephen Barney marked the “disbelief and ridicule expressed by many of our secular friends,” and the Bishop of Chelmsford worried, “there’s a risk the national church will become a national embarrassment.”¹³ Moreover, Member of Parliament Ben Bradshaw warned the decision could cause a “major constitutional crisis” under the 2010 Equalities Act, insofar as bishops are automatically granted places in the House of Lords.¹⁴ As the former canon chancellor of St. Paul’s Cathedral explained the crisis in an incensed op-ed piece, “we now have 26 places in the House of Lords deliberately reserved for a male-only club. Before this, it could have been put down to an accident of history. Now it is deliberate.”¹⁵ For this reason, Prime Minister David Cameron has been encouraging the Church to generate and pass a new measure as soon as possible, telling the Synod in true British style to “get on with it.”¹⁶

¹¹ General Synod of the Church of England, "GS 1708D: Draft Bishops and Priests (Consecration and Ordination of Women) Measure," [http://www.churchofengland.org/media/1560963/gs%201708d.pdf\(2012\):1\(2\)](http://www.churchofengland.org/media/1560963/gs%201708d.pdf(2012):1(2)).

¹² Lizzy Davies, "Church of England Votes against Allowing Women Bishops," *The Guardian* November 20, 2012.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ <http://www.tonybaldry.co.uk/2012/10/25/second-church-estates-commissioner-oral-women-bishops-4/>

¹⁵ Giles Fraser, "After the Bishops' Vote, I'm Ashamed to be a Part of the Church of England," *The Guardian* November, 21, 2012.

¹⁶ Patrick Wintour and Lizzy Davies, "David Cameron: Church of England Should 'Get on with It' on Female Bishops," *The Guardian* November 21, 2012.

As members of the Church sought to explain how the measure had managed to fail by such a small margin, many bloggers cited an unprecedented alliance of evangelical churchgoers on the one hand—who object to women priests and bishops based on a particular reading of the Pauline letters—and high anglo-Catholics on the other, who fear the measure will put even greater distance between the Anglican Communion and the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches.¹⁷ Other bloggers suggested that some proponents of women’s episcopacy might have voted against the matter because of section 2, which concerned so-called “flying bishops,” or more formally, the provision of “alternative episcopal oversight.” It is a strategy the Church of England devised in the mid-nineties to pacify people who objected to the ordination of women. Under the legislation that just failed last November, if the measure on the priesthood and episcopacy of women were to pass, then each Bishop would need to work out a way to provide a male priest or bishop to people or parishes who fell under the leadership of a woman, yet did not recognize the authority of that woman, insofar as she is a woman.¹⁸

So if Joe’s congregation calls a woman as parish priest and Joe doesn’t believe women *should* be priests, he can have access without having to leave his home church to communion wafers consecrated by a man, or to baptismal, confessional, marital, and funereal rights administered by a man. (Stay with me here). The same would go for a male-headed parish that found itself under the purview of a woman bishop, if the parish did not affirm that women *could* be bishops. By means of a “scheme” that *that* bishop would have to set forth, each dissenting parish in the diocese of a woman would be overseen by a male bishop from a different diocese.

This, then, was a possible explanation for the measure’s defeat at General Synod. Maybe people found the idea of a second-class episcopacy for women—an episcopacy that would be recognized or not-recognized depending on the whims of individual parishes and people—so offensive that, even though they had spent their adult lives lobbying for women’s full inclusion in the Church, they could not support the measure under these conditions. And indeed, two months after the vote, twelve lay delegates wrote a joint letter to the *Times* of London saying that while they supported the episcopacy of women, they had voted against the measure because of the issue of flying bishops.¹⁹ But here is the surprise. They

¹⁷ Distraught over this alliance, Giles Fraser writes that “what happened in General Synod is that a dogmatic minority of biblical literalists and an even smaller minority of Roman Catholic wannabes...have been appeased in the name of some twisted version of inclusion” (Fraser, “After the Bishops’ Vote, I’m Ashamed to be a Part of the Church of England.”)

¹⁸ See England, “GS 1708D: Draft Bishops and Priests (Consecration and Ordination of Women) Measure,” 2(1).

¹⁹ Mary Judkins Tom Sutcliffe, Phillip Rice, John Davies, Anne Bloor, Priscilla

had not objected to the measure because they objected to the idea of alternative oversight; they had voted against it because the provisions for alternative oversight weren't strong *enough*.

People of this opinion objected to the provisions, first, because they left it to each bishop—including hypothetical women bishops—to determine a scheme for oversight, rather than simply instating one that would hold for everyone. Second, they objected that while the provisions protected dissenters from the authority of *women* priests and bishops, they did not protect dissenters from the authority of the men who might ordain and consecrate such women.²⁰ And so, the authors of the letter explain, while they *wanted* to vote yes on the measure, they voted no “out of a sense of overriding concern for the Church of England’s minorities.”²¹ Bafflingly, the term “minorities” here refers not to the women who have been denied full membership in the church—not to mention LGBT people or underrepresented ethnic or racial groups—rather, “minorities” here refers to people who object to the authority of women in church. The measure, the authors explain, failed to provide oversight “in the way that the minorities needed.”²² Again—see how the focus has shifted away from the people whose full inclusion the measure concerns, which is to say women priests and bishops.

The letter goes on to say that the primary task of the church is for the “majority” to find a way to “live together with fellow Anglicans who cannot accept women priests and bishops.”²³ Now in using the word “Anglican,” the authors appeal to the fellowship of the whole global Communion. But of course, the majority of the Communion does *not* accept women priests and bishops. So in a staggering act of strategic double-talk, the letter is both claiming protected minority status for people who object to the ordination of women *and* calling upon the solidarity of the global majority across the seas. And in the meantime, once again, the women priests *themselves* are almost entirely absent from consideration; the focus is strictly on the rights and privileges of those who support or object to them.

As the General Synod reaffirmed in a post-mortem resolution, the Church’s central task now is to find ways for the Church to affirm that both factions are equally right and equally faithful—in short, that those who affirm

Hungerford, Keith Malcouronne, Christopher Corbet, "Women Bishops and the Laity Vote," *Times Letters*(February 11, 2013).

²⁰ Fraser, "After the Bishops' Vote, I'm Ashamed to be a Part of the Church of England."

²¹ Tom Sutcliffe, "Women Bishops and the Laity Vote."

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

women's equality to men are equal to those who deny it.²⁴ NOT that women are equal to men, or that Christ is equally present in the witness of women as he is in the witness of men, but that people who think this way and people who don't are *themselves* equal. Keep an eye on this equality business. Onto the next big development.

One month after General Synod, the House of Bishops circulated a document that, among other things, expressed its intention to resolve the issue of women bishops, calling "the present situation unsustainable to all, whatever their convictions."²⁵ And in the same statement, buried in the seventh paragraph, the House also mentioned it had decided not to bar gay male candidates from the episcopacy—even gay male candidates in legally recognized civil partnerships—so long as they were celibate.²⁶ Now it is not clear how far-reaching this decision actually is. It could, in fact, be a kind of *ad hoc* determination in the face of a specific candidate for the episcopacy—namely, The Reverend Canon Dr. Jeffrey John, who was asked to stand down from his candidacy for the Bishopric of Reading in 2003, even though he had assured Rowan Williams and the entire Communion that he and his long-term partner had not been physically intimate for decades. When civil partnerships became legal in 2005, the couple entered into one, assuring their superiors they were still not engaging in sexual activity. After Canon John was inexplicably passed over as Bishop of Southwark (Suthik) in 2010, he threatened to sue the Church for discrimination, and although he has not done so, it could be that the House of Bishops was simply trying to hold off a specific legal battle by declaring that gay celibate men in civil partnerships were not automatically barred from the episcopacy.²⁷ In other words, there may not be a lot of "celibate gay men in civil partnerships" out there.

²⁴ General Synod of the Church of England, "GS MISC 1042: Women in the Episcopate: A New Way Forward," no. <http://churchofengland.org/media/1665705/gs%20misc%201042%20-%20wie%20update.pdf> (2013): para. 29.

²⁵ House of Bishops, "Summary of Decisions," <http://www.churchofengland.org/media-centre/news/2012/12/house-of-bishops-summary-of-decisions-published.aspx> (December 20, 2012).

²⁶ The paragraph reads, "the House considered an interim report from the group chaired by Sir Joseph Pilling on the Church of England's approach to human sexuality. Pending the conclusion of the group's work next year the House does not intend to issue a further pastoral statement on civil partnerships. It confirmed that the requirements in the 2005 statement concerning the eligibility for ordination of those in civil partnerships whose relationships are consistent with the teaching of the Church of England apply equally in relation to the episcopate." *Ibid.*, para. 7.

²⁷ "Gay Cleric Jeffrey John May Take Legal Action against Church of England," *BBC News* January 16, 2012.

But all of this begs the question: what, exactly, is a celibate gay man? What does it mean to *be* gay without *doing* gay? To be sure, this is not a new distinction to the Anglican Communion; the Lambeth resolution from 1998 that condemns homosexual *practice* also condemns hatred of gay *people*. We've heard this before—it's the "love the sinner, hate the sin" line, sung in an Anglican key—but as Janet Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini maintain in their co-authored monograph *Love the Sin*, as Judith Butler before them and Michel Foucault before her and Friedrich Nietzsche before him all insisted with varying emphases, it is practice that *produces* the subject as such, and then masquerades as the effect of the thing it actually causes.²⁸ There is no neutral subject who then acts; the acting produces the subject as such. So as Nietzsche writes in the *Genealogy of Morals*, it makes very little sense to ask lightning not to flash or a bird of prey not to eat smaller animals. Lightning is its flash; birds of prey *are* their preying.²⁹ Similarly, the sexual subject is performatively and continually produced through various practices—and these include discursive, cathectic, and sexual practices. There is, in other words, no essentially gay or straight or bi or trans subject who then decides whether or not to act upon her essence; the essence is, as Nietzsche would say, a "fiction" produced as if it lay back behind its expression. This is all old news in gender and queer theory circles, so I won't take too much time on it now. But in terms of ecclesiology and polity, I would submit that the churches—not only the Anglican Communion, but perhaps more problematically, the Roman Catholic Church—all lack a proper theology of *celibacy*.

Celibacy is often represented as something like repressed heterosexuality, or now, in the Church of England, repressed homosexuality. But what would it mean to take celibacy seriously as a specific and positive calling, actively shaped through specific devotional practices, rather than just a well-buried form of some other pre-fabricated sexual identity? Well, for one thing, it would mean abandoning the categorically confused locution, "celibate gay man"—and, while we're at it, "celibate heterosexual," as well. After all, as far as the Church has taught, celibacy as a rare and particular calling entails detaching not only from sexual behavior but also from romantic and even preferential attachments, so that the celibate can cultivate a Christlike love of the whole world. According to this rubric, at least, it doesn't matter that Jeffrey John isn't having *sex* with his partner; he *has a partner*—a particular person upon whom he focuses his psycho-

²⁸ Janet Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini, *Love the Sin: Sexual Regulation and the Limits of Religious Tolerance* (New York: Beacon Press, 2004); Judith Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove, Michele Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993); Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1990); Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1989).

²⁹ Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*: Second Essay.

spiritual energies and through whom he sees God's love at work in the world—so he's not celibate, according to these traditions' own articulations of celibacy.

But back to the particular matter at hand, the Church of England's strange distinction between being gay and doing gay has been subject to a trenchant critique by none other than the leaders of the most conservative churches in the Anglican Global South. Shortly after the House of Bishops released its statement opening the episcopacy to so-called celibate gay men in civil partnerships, the Archbishops of Kenya, Uganda, and Nigeria each issued formal threats of broken communion. Their letters were followed by a joint letter signed by the primates of Egypt, Mauritius, Myanmar, Burundi, Congo, Nigeria, Southeast Asia, Kenya, and Chile, who expressed "grief and betrayal" at the news, as well as serious "confusion" over the distinction the Church of England was trying to maintain. As Archbishop Stanley Ntagali of Nigeria wrote, allowing celibate gay men to be bishops is "really no different from allowing gay bishops."³⁰ Also, they asked, how would the "celibacy" proviso be enforced? Who would check up on these bishops and make sure they weren't having sex with their life-partners?

Finally, and now we see some of these threads come back together, the joint statement says that the House of Bishops' decision "jeopardizes the relationship between us Anglicans living in the Global South and followers of other faiths, and gives opportunities to exploit such departure of moral standards that this type of decision may provide."³¹ This cryptically worded concern finds a hyperbolic decoding in a recent article written by a conservative Church of England journalist, who explains that "by allowing partnered gay clergy to become bishops, the church of England was jeopardizing the lives of Anglicans in majority Muslim countries, who would become targets of rage from extremists." There again is the threat of Islam, now rendered *murderous*, and the effect, remarkably, is that those (mainly white) northerners who have stood up for a *sexual* minority are now complicitous with the murder of their black and brown brothers and sisters in the Global South.

The journalist's translation continues: these southern Anglicans "would become targets of rage from extremists who would not appreciate the distinction being drawn by the House of Bishops between sexually active gay bishops and bishops who had entered a legal relationship defined by sexual activity [that is, a civil partnership], but who would nonetheless refrain from sexual activity."³²

³⁰ Cited in George Conger, "Church of Nigeria Threatens to Break with Canterbury over Gay British Bishops," *Anglican Ink* January 10, 2013.

³¹ Primates of the Global South, "Statement from the Primates of the Global South of the Anglican Communion," *Global South Anglican Online* http://www.globalsouthanglican.org/index.php/blog/comments/12_jan_2013_statement_from_the_primates_of_the_global_south_of_the_anglican(January 12, 2013).

³² George Conger, "Global South Urges Church of England to Pull Back on Gay Bishops," *Anglican Ink* <http://anglicanink.com/article/global-south-urges-church->

And while I vehemently disagree with the motivation of this critique, not to mention the defaming instrumentalizing of Islam, I have to agree with the critique itself; it's a ridiculous distinction.

The category of celibate gayness is, in short, yet another of those funny Church of England compromises—a way to include gay men without really including them, just as that Synod's measure would have made women bishops without *really* making them bishops. After all, if whole parishes can choose to opt out of your jurisdiction, how much jurisdiction do you really have? The whole thing amounts to a cathedral of cards which, I would submit, has come crashing down in the recent high winds of same-sex marriage. So this is the third development.

As you may know, while civil partnerships between same-sex couples have been legal in the UK since 2005, the British House of Commons passed a bill on February 5, 2013, that will allow same-sex couples to *marry*. On the day before the bill was passed, Justin Welby was confirmed as Archbishop of Canterbury, and took the opportunity to voice his unconditional opposition to the bill. (Remember, this was just six weeks after the House of Bishops affirmed civil partnerships as appropriate for same-sex partners. So civil partnerships, yes; gay marriage, NO.) Archbishop Welby opposed the measure even though the bill made ample provision for the exemption of the Church of England and other religious institutions from having to officiate or condone such ceremonies. If these provisions sound familiar, it is because they are structurally analogous to the provision for conservatives in the Women Bishops' bill, except rather than being confined to one or two sections, they absolutely suffuse the legislation. Taken together, all the scattered measures compose what has come to be called a “quadruple lock” to protect the churches from any sort of obligation to perform or even recognize same-sex marriages, unless their own canon law allows or compels them to do so.³³

One might think the Church of England would find this an agreeable compromise; after all, the strategy is the Church's own: increase the scope of

england-pull-back-gay-bishops(January 12, 2013).

³³ The four measures are: 1) “Ensure that no religious organization or individual minister can be compelled to marry same-sex couples or to permit this to happen on their premises”; 2) “Provide an opt-in system for religious organization[s] who wish to conduct marriage for same-sex couples;” 3) “Amend the Equalities Act 2010 to reflect that no discrimination claims can be brought against religious organizations or individual ministers for refusing to marry a same-sex couple”; 4) “Ensure that legislation will not affect the canon law of the Church of England or the Church in Wales. As a result, if either church wanted to conduct a same-sex marriage, it would require a change to primary legislation at a later date and a change to canon law” (cited in Patrick Wintour, “Gay Marriage Plans Offer ‘Quadruple Lock’ for Opposed Religious Groups,” *The Guardian* December 11, 2012.)

“who counts” in the church or the state, while making provisions for the exemption of those who disagree—people who in this case amount to the Church itself. And yet, the Church of England rejected the measure, quadruple lock notwithstanding. It did so, in fact, in an uncharacteristic burst of clarity, beginning its formal response to the Marriage Bill by saying, “The Church of England cannot support the bill.”³⁴

The reason, the document explains, is that while the quadruple lock would protect clergy from having to perform same-sex marriages or to host them on religious premises, the lock would not necessarily protect teachers and chaplains from having to say that same-sex relationships are just as valid as opposite-sex relationships. What is fascinating here is that the church is now doubting the effectiveness of the very sort of alternative provision strategy it commends within its own ranks to opponents of women’s ordination and consecration. Now that it is the *object* of such provisions, the Church suddenly seems to realize it isn’t a brilliant strategy. In particular, the authors explain, “we doubt the ability of the government to make the legislation watertight against challenge in the European courts [of human rights].”³⁵

In its its “Frequently Asked Questions” section, the document goes on to imagine a hypothetical case that the European Court of Human Rights could bring against the Church of England under articles 12 (freedom to marry) and 14 (freedom from discrimination). It could be, the authors of the document fear, that the “quadruple lock” will *itself* eventually be ruled a violation of the Human Rights Convention. They are right, of course; there is no such guarantee. At the same time, one is left asking, how did the Church of England get itself into the position of trying explicitly to circumvent human rights legislation?

The authors of the document seem to have two responses to this question. The first is to try to ignore it; indeed, some key passages of the document refer simply to “the European courts,” rather than “the European Court of Human Rights.” It is unsavory business, these passages seem to acknowledge, to set one’s position against something with “human rights” in the title. But when they do acknowledge their opposition to human rights (this is the second response), these representatives of the Church of England begin to suggest that the Convention has got its understanding of human rights wrong. As they explain it, “the Church of England holds, as a matter of doctrine and in accordance with the teachings of Christ, that marriage is a union of one man with one woman.”³⁶ Now this does not mean, they continue, that the Church is saying only heterosexual people have

³⁴ The Church of England, "Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Bill," <http://www.churchofengland.org/media/1657614/ssmarriagebillbriefing.pdf>(February, 2013).

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

the right to affirm their commitment to one another. After all, the Church has upheld the validity of civil partnerships as “a framework within which same sex couples can celebrate and embody the crucial social virtues of mutuality and fidelity. However,” the authors continue, “the uniqueness of marriage is that it embodies the *underlying, objective, distinctness of man and woman.*”³⁷

Because men and women are objectively different, the argument goes, heterosexual and homosexual relationships are also objectively different. Hence the British Parliament’s *and* the European Convention’s misunderstanding of human rights; as the authors maintain, “to apply uniformity of treatment to objectively different sorts of relationships...is an unwise way of promoting LGBT equality.”³⁸ Equality, in other words, is not uniformity; in the language of this document, in fact, uniformity is “unwisely” administered equality. To treat people equally does not mean to treat them the same; after all, they point out, “this is not how we talk about some other aspects of equality. Not every aspect of gender equality, or equality for disabled people, is embraced by *denying difference.*”³⁹

What the authors have in mind here, I think, is that legislation like America’s Title IX, which ensures that women have *equal* access to educational programs, does not thereby force women to play on the *same* high school lacrosse teams as men. Or that building codes ensuring access to people in wheelchairs do not...actually, I’m not sure what they’re suggesting at all. The idea behind disability legislation is that people with physical impediments to walking up stairs or fitting in bathroom stalls need to have reliable access to buildings and restrooms. Presumably, a similar case could be made for same-sex marriage; it grants reliable access to a particular social institution. Of course, the association here of homosexuality with disability calls for more attention than I’m able to give it at the moment, but the bottom line for the Church of England is that the passing of the same-sex marriage bill amounts to “a denial of difference.”

Note the feminist language—specifically that of Luce Irigaray—ironically marshaled to assert the superiority of heterosexual relationships over homosexual ones. To say that gay people can get married is, they argue, to *deny the difference* between gay relationships and straight ones—a difference grounded in, once more, the “underlying, objective” distinction between men and women, which same-sex relationships themselves allegedly deny. But once again, the focus here is not on the people *in* same-sex relationships; it is on the people who have *voted* on the matter of same-sex relationships. According to the Church of England, the legislature is “redefining marriage” by extending it to same-sex

³⁷ Ibid., emphasis added.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid., emphasis added.

couples, “denying difference” by declaring “that heterosexual and homosexual relationships are socially identical.”⁴⁰

Now *this* is a strange move to make. To say that gay marriage makes homosexual relationships not just equal to heterosexual relationships but *socially identical* to them is to presume that all heterosexual relationships are already socially identical to one another. But this simply isn’t the case. There are arranged marriages, there are marriages between people of vastly different ages, there are interracial marriages, marriages understood as property exchange, marriages for the purpose of procuring a visa, marriages of convenience, romantic marriages, marriages with and without children, patriarchal marriages, loveless marriages, lifelong marriages, serial marriages...all these marriages occupy different social positions. Granted, such positions often overlap, but they are not identical; rather, they are formed by the racial, cultural, social, economic, and otherwise embodied statuses of their constituents.

It is not clear, in other words, that the axis of sexual difference (understood as the purportedly unassailable distinction between men and women) is the only or most important axis of difference when it comes to the issue of marriage. In fact, I would submit that a pair of white heterosexual academics and a pair of white homosexual academics have far more in common with one another in terms of social positioning than a pair of white heterosexual academics and a pair of brown heterosexual refugees, looking for work in an overdeveloped nation. Both couples may be straight and married, but they are hardly socially identical. And so just as it’s possible to hold all these differences of race and ability and economic status and colonial history together under the term “marriage,” one could argue it’s possible to do the same for sexual difference. This doesn’t make different kinds of marriages “identical”; it just offers them equal protection under the law.

But insofar as the Church of England rejects this argument, it is implicitly insisting that the difference between men and women is a more primary difference than all other differences (race, ethnicity, age, class, ability, etc.; and this, incidentally, invalidates the earlier comparison to disability legislation). For the Church of England, the difference between male and female, unlike any other difference, is non-negotiable. So here, too, one would want to ask if a working class woman in Kansas is really more similar to an upper class woman in Kenya than she is to a working class *man* in Kentucky—that is, if sexual difference can really be said to be anterior to or even intelligible independently of racial, geographical, and economic difference. This point has been made at length by scholars of intersectionality, but one easy way to drive the matter home would be to travel to a place where people don’t look, speak, or act like you and see how your gender changes before your eyes. You will be socially interpolated as a

⁴⁰ Ibid.

different sort of gender in Swaziland or Moscow or Calcutta than you are in Princeton, New Jersey.

Presumably, many of the authors of the Church of England's recent communiqué are familiar with theories of intersectionality; presumably, some of them have read Judith Butler and maybe even Kimberlé Crenshaw or bell hooks. But they need *something* to ground their opposition to same-sex marriage—we will remember the outcry from some bishops of the global south over the episcopacy of gay men in civil partnerships—so it is perhaps the fear of an all-out war in the Communion that has prompted the Church of England to draw such an uncharacteristic line in the sand over gay marriage. No, they're saying. Not, "well, under certain circumstances," or, "so long as the marriage isn't consummated"; just *no*.

And in the absence of any decent theological argument against it, the bishops capitulate to an increasingly outdated biological one. After all, if you listen to what the Pauline letters seem to say about the abomination of sex between men [and maybe women], then you'd also have to listen to what they most *definitely* say about women preaching in church.⁴¹ And remember, the leaders of the Church of England are nearly unanimous on this: women should be priests and bishops, just like men. What, then, of the underlying, objective distinction between men and women?

In the wake of the failure of the legislation on women bishops, one leader of the British evangelical group Reform, who happens to *be* a woman, explained her opposition to women's ordination by saying, "as I read the Bible, I am convicted that men and women are equal and different."⁴² Now this isn't anything new; it's the line that allows the leaders of the Church of England to say that advocates for LGBT equality should be happy with civil partnership rather than marriage: like women and men, heterosexual and homosexual couples are equal...just different. Except in this context, the logic of complementarity is being marshaled to oppose the ordination and consecration of women. God has appointed men and women to different tasks, the logic goes, in accordance with their different anatomical structures; and so women ought not to preside over the mass.

So here's the punchline: the Church's appeal to what it calls "complementarity"—that is, the idea that men and women, although equal, are incontrovertibly different from one another—ultimately reveals the incoherence of the Church's policies on sex and gender. In fact, the evangelicals who oppose the ordination of women are being far more logically consistent than their mainstream rivals. If it is the case that men and women are inherently and

⁴¹ See, for example, 1 Timothy 2:12.

⁴² Davies, "Church of England Votes against Allowing Women Bishops." See also Lizzy Davies, "Almost Half the Lay Members Who Voted against Female Bishops were Women," *The Guardian* November 26, 2012.

objectively different, and that their equality consists precisely in their non-identity, then it makes no sense to hold that gay people can't get married like straight people but that women can be ordained and consecrated like men. Either sexual difference *is* primary and non-negotiable, in which case the church should approve neither same-sex marriage nor women's ordination, or it is neither primary nor non-negotiable, in which case the church should endorse them both.

So, I would argue, it is not surprising at all that the vote on women failed after all these years of advocacy and service. It was voted down according to that old binary code of sex and gender that the church hasn't changed since marshaling it in service of the burgeoning colonial project. If the Communion is indeed on the brink of collapse, it is because its mother-church is clinging to a strange and indefensible definition of women as complementary to men, a helpful supplement, whose place in the church continues to be subject to the whims and good nature of the men who are actually in charge.

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