

## The Only Poker-Game in Town: Reflections on the Windsor Report

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1. The Lambeth Commission was asked to make a theological and legal discernment of a particular situation, describing that situation in an analytical way that would prepare for a practical decision by the Primates and A.C.C. Their work, we may say, is a service rendered to the *episcopê* of the Anglican churches, aimed towards an act of judgment that would address the offence they have given one another and make space for them to return to fellowship. It is not a service to its *didachê*, or ministry of the word. It needs hardly to be added that the Commission was asked to accomplish its task under very great time-pressure, while the fellowship of the Anglican Communion was continuing to rupture around it.

Precisely because their task was to provide the organs of *episcopate* with what they needed for a practical judgment, the Commission were bound to present their discernment in as objective and cautious a fashion as it would bear. It is strange to discover that some critics of the Report hoped that it would produce a thunderous, barnstorming vindication of their stance, and found it, notwithstanding its international authorship, annoyingly “English” in its style – as severe a criticism, it would seem, as any that could be conceived of in the now heated discourse of the Anglican Communion. This expectation was, of course, quite misplaced. The document had to perform a judicial function, and would have forfeited its credibility had it at any point overstated a position or resorted to the rhetoric of denunciation. Yet its low-key manner allowed a certain clarity of *timbre* in its comments on the behaviour of the primary actors which stands out the more memorably for not being drowned out in a general acoustic boom.

2. It is true, as some critics have said, that the theological foundations of the report are limited to a briefly-sketched recapitulation of a now familiar communion-ecclesiology. (There is, of course, more theology than appears in the foundations: discussions of *adiaphora*, authority, subsidiarity and trust are all conducted in a usefully theological manner.) The Commission might certainly have explored more fully the Christological basis of the church; it might have done more with tradition; it might have had something to say about the Holy Spirit; it could with profit have elaborated its account of sin, repentance and forgiveness. But when? Such things, if they are to be done well by a committee, need prolonged discussion, and the limited time available to the Commission was devoted to listening to the chief actors in the drama. It was, therefore, a wise strategic decision to tap into a well-established tradition of ecclesiological reflection at a fairly downstream point, and to allow much of what upstream to be assumed. The Anglican Communion is not, after all, short on piles of paper dealing with those other topics in a largely consensual way.

Would it have made a difference to their conclusions if they had taken a different path through the theological resources – if, for example, they had stressed the prophetic role of the church breaking new boundaries under the guidance of the Holy Spirit? That question supposes that they were engaged in a *deductive* process. Moral theologians know very well the truth of the adage: deduction is seduction. In practical reason the relation between the general and the particular is not a deduction but a recognition, the Kantian “*Urteil*”, the Thomistic “subsumption”. It is not a

matter of starting with general categories and then, by feeding in factual information, proceeding to derive an interpretation of the concrete situation from them; it is rather a question of making sense of a concrete situation by referring it back to general categories that sufficiently describe it.

The centre of gravity in the Commission's work was precisely their discernment of the situation. That was as it should be, as is clear from the opening words of the Archbishop's Mandate. Their duty was to provide an account of that situation as they discerned it, using theological reference points to make it clear what the implications of the situation were. Other people might have made other discernments and given other accounts, drawing on other theological reference points. But this was the theological repertoire appropriate to the discernment actually made by the Commission charged with making it.

3. It was essential that their discernment of the crisis in the Communion over homosexuality should not prescind from, or prejudge, future reflection on the substantial question of sexual morality. Astonishingly, it appears that some critics expected this Report to pronounce conclusively not only on the tangled ecclesiological situation but on the moral status of gay unions and gay lifestyles, too. The Commission were emphatic (§43) that this lay outside their brief. I can only think that the expectation reflects how little the complexities of that question are generally grasped. As one who has dabbled in them from time to time, I am inclined to say, meaning no disrespect, that if the church wanted wisdom on that topic, it would have not have done well to ask *this* group of people in *these* pressured circumstances to produce it. The church does, of course, want wisdom on it. The Commission adds its voice to a series of authoritative calls (among them the Lambeth bishops in 1998 and the Primates in 2003) for ongoing study. The shape and direction of such study is very difficult to envisage, yet somehow it has to be helped to happen and given the time to mature. In a rather sharp comment (§33) the Commission makes it clear that they think the actions of the Canadian and American churches remarkably unaccompanied by reflective explanation or interpretative commentary.

Nobody reading Resolution 1.10 of Lambeth 1998 – and I am among those who read it sympathetically and appreciatively – could seriously pretend that it was supposed to represent the last word about homosexuality or about the church's pastoral practice in relation to its homosexual members. It simply set responsible bounds within which we could approve one another's pastoral practice in good conscience to Scripture and tradition while continuing to explore together a phenomenon of extreme cultural and anthropological complexity. The difficulty the church faces with such an exploration is that left and right wings, in almost equal measure, seem to think that there is nothing to explore. Either Scripture and Tradition have Settled It Once and For All (though how well our phenomena match those that Scripture and tradition addressed is an open question until we have learned to describe our phenomena better); or else Science has Taught us Better, (though no one can quite remember what the scientific experiments were, or what they were supposed to have demonstrated). Our greatest difficulty is that we all follow faithfully the ironic advice of Hilaire Belloc: *O let us never, never doubt What nobody is sure about!*

If anyone thinks that a prolonged exploration would simply hand a victory to revisionists, let me recall that in 1997 a group of British theologians (“traditionalists”

as the press would call them) put some questions, chiefly about theological anthropology, to advocates of the gay cause in the churches – hoping for a reply that would bring to clear expression gay thinking about the gay position and so provide something to discuss. I was among the authors of the so-called “St. Andrew’s Day Statement” – and to the best of my knowledge the questions I and my colleagues then asked have not received the first shred of an answer. The Christian gay movement is not, by and large, a self-theorising movement. For that reason the distinctive experience it wants to attest is often inarticulately expressed, and easily swamped by a well-meaning liberal social agenda of championing all minorities in sight, an agenda which is precisely uninterested in what makes the gay experience different. All this poses a problem for the church, since it means that any possibly helpful pastoral initiative risks signing up, unwittingly perhaps, to a dogmatic revolution. In a world where nothing is clearly explained, all cheques are blank.

4. At one point in his evidence to the Commission, the Presiding Bishop of ECUSA reflected ruefully on the difficulty of functioning in an internet-dominated environment, in which whatever is done excites instant reaction from the other side of the world where the context is not understood. The Commission itself, perhaps, has cause for such rueful reflections, since its work appears to have been subjected to a great deal of internet-reading, *i.e.* browse-reading without the facility to look back and compare passages separated by several pages. The reader who can glance more or less simultaneously at §§ 134 and 155:

the Episcopal Church (USA) be invited to express its regret that the proper constraints of the bonds of affection were breached....

We call upon those bishops who believe it is their conscientious duty to intervene in provinces, dioceses and parishes other than their own to express regret for the consequences of their actions.

will not be impressed by the claim that the Commission treats the actions of the Episcopal Church and those of the intervening bishops as morally equivalent. They are not described in equivalent terms with respect to their subjective motives (breach of affection is not the same as conscientious duty) and therefore they are not presented as equivalently regrettable (what *was done* is to be regretted in the one case, what *ensued* is to be regretted in the other).

5. This bears on the more substantive and interesting criticism that the verb “regret” is altogether too weak to convey a fully Christian repentance. Some critics, of course, wanted the Commission to demand repentance for believing homosexuality to be acceptable, which, as we have seen, they regarded as beyond their brief. Yet laying that aside, it is still clear that the actions of ECUSA which the Commission finds it in its brief to criticise are intended to be repented of.

The choice of the verb “regret” is easily understood when the subject is an *institution*, not an individual. The Episcopal Church (USA) does not have a conscience, though its members do. It cannot feel compunction, though its members may. It does not have a face to blush with shame. It does not have limbs to tremble before the wrath of God. All the *subjective* experiences that can and may go with “repentance” are inappropriate to an institutional body. An institution, we may say, repents simply by

regretting – *i.e.* by repudiating its own past actions. Yet this act of institutional regret is to be regarded as an aspect of the whole Christian baptismal duty to reject sin and turn to Christ. That is made unambiguously clear in §134, where it is said in explanation for the Commission’s requiring this act of regret is that “the imperatives of communion” are “the repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation enjoined on us by Christ”.

It has been said that this expression of regret will be too easy for the Episcopal Church to make, *ergo* the Commission got it wrong. It has also been said that it is impossible for the Episcopal Church to make, *ergo* the Commission got it wrong. Well, we shall see. But bonds of affection are bonds of charity, and the “proper constraints of the bonds of affection” are the restraints of love which should warn us from actions that will hurt Christ’s body. To admit that *these* “constraints... were breached” in the election and consecration of a bishop for New Hampshire is to admit quite simply that the Episcopal Church failed to act out of charity – than which no more serious admission can be made. The English language will not tolerate the paraphrase: “We did it, and there was a row. What a pity!” An admission made strictly in the terms that the Commission requests would be seriously worth having; and it would contribute decisively to the healing of the body of Christ – on which depends the very possibility of tackling the underlying issues constructively.

Everybody will find frustrating moments in the Windsor Report. Some have felt that it was gullible in accepting the arrangements for alternative oversight offered within ECUSA, a point on which I cannot form a view. For myself, I am sorry that it did not take up the suggestion that the consecration of Gene Robinson was defective, given the obvious lack of intention on the part of the consecrating bishops to make a Bishop of New Hampshire acceptable to the universal church – though I enjoyed the gingerly reference to “the present occupant of the See”.) I was irritated by its pussyfooting attitude to the phrase “the authority of Scripture”, problematic only to those who don’t understand how the word “authority” is normally used. Yet all in all, as an experienced, if reluctant, reader of church reports, I think the Anglican Communion has bought itself an up-market article in Windsor - as good as it was going to find anywhere, and perhaps a little better. In coherence of argument, lucidity of prose and balance of judgment it scores high. And – perhaps the most important thing – its recommendations for strengthening the Instruments of Unity and securing the situation by a covenant in church law, are bold and imaginative. To crown it all, what we had no reason to expect, it is unanimous.

But whether or not my favourable judgment is shared, it is, as they like to say, the only poker-game in town. If we want to have an Anglican Communion of any kind (and what we will have if we don’t have that, is not at all clear to me), we had better go along with its recommendations.

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