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The Windsor Report and the Future of the Anglican Communion

Roger Beckwith

The impatiently awaited report of the Lambeth Commission on Communion, appointed by the Archbishop of Canterbury in response to a request from the Primates' Meeting of October 2003, and chaired by Archbishop Eames of Armagh, was published in October 2004 under the name of the Windsor Report.¹ Instead of holding us a little longer in suspense, and submitting the report first to the Primates' Meeting of February 2005, which it is intended to advise, the authorities have released it to the whole world 'as if it were the final word on this troubling matter' (to quote the Primate of Nigeria). So what it says is now common knowledge. It says very little about homosexuality, which is the issue at the heart of the current crisis, but deals almost wholly with procedure, separating the issue of 'communion' from the truths and errors on which it depends. The American and Canadian Churches are rebuked, not for consecrating an active homosexual to the episcopate or for permitting services of blessing for homosexual unions, but for doing it against the advice of the Lambeth Conference and the Primates' Meeting. The orthodox dissentients in the USA and Canada are rebuked, not for dissenting, but for distancing themselves from their unorthodox bishops and seeking episcopal care from orthodox Anglicans elsewhere in the world. And the orthodox provinces of the Third World are rebuked, not for being orthodox (in which they have, indeed, the support of the Lambeth Conference and the Primates' Meeting), but for feeling so strongly about it that they have excommunicated ECUSA and have crossed provincial boundaries to respond to the dissentients' urgent appeals for help. Everyone is called upon to apologise, to desist, and to show renewed respect for each other and for the moral authority of the 'Instruments of Unity' (the Archbishop of Canterbury and the advisory bodies which he chairs). If they do not, the report's ultimate sanction is that he should no longer invite them to these advisory bodies, or should invite them simply as observers. And that is all. As an example of 'saying Peace, peace, when there is no peace' (Jer. 6:14; 8:11), the Windsor Report could scarcely be bettered.

Of course, the Commission did not want to add fuel to the fire already raging,

and it wanted to give the American and Canadian Churches every opportunity to retrace their steps; but to speak as if the orthodox dissentients within those Churches, and their orthodox supporters elsewhere, were equally guilty with the innovators or more so, was bound to offend and was entirely unjust. Even if the orthodox primates had acted irregularly (which in terms of Anglican ecclesiology, properly understood, they had not), this would be a small offence compared with the introduction of heresy. The ordinary procedures of Anglicanism were made for ordinary times, but it also has extraordinary procedures, designed for times like the present.

A Glance at History

To understand this, it is necessary to glance back at history. The Anglican Communion has never been a totally unified body. Its earliest important manifestation, in the first Lambeth Conference of 1867, was preoccupied with controversy over the biblical criticism espoused by Bishop Colenso of Natal; the existence in South Africa of two Anglican Churches, not one, is a consequence of that problem; and the controversies surrounding the emergence of Liberal Christianity and Anglo-Catholicism among Anglicans continued thereafter to be reflected in many parts of the Anglican world. Some dioceses became traditionally Anglo-Catholic, others traditionally Evangelical, or traditionally Liberal, and provinces or groups of provinces often included dioceses of various shades of churchmanship, in various proportions.

During the nineteenth century, the right of each of these schools of thought to exist (though not, of course, with all their eccentricities) was recognised by the English ecclesiastical courts, in the Gorham (1850), Essays and Reviews (1864) and Lincoln (1890) judgements; and, partly for this reason, a willingness to live and let live became normal in the Anglican Churches worldwide. They continued to regard the teaching of the Bible as basic, and to use at least two of the three historic Creeds, and at the 1888 Lambeth Conference these requirements were embodied in the Lambeth Quadrilateral. The historic formularies of Anglicanism, the Thirty-nine Articles and the Book of Common Prayer, continued until the mid-twentieth century to be widely accepted; though the unease of Liberals with the firm biblicism of the Articles, and of Anglo-Catholics with their criticisms of Rome, led to their being sidelined in some provinces; while enthusiasm for liturgical revision led to the Prayer Book being first locally revised, and later relegated to comparative obscurity, in the same

way as the Articles; though they remain formal standards of Anglican doctrine and worship. Until recently, however, the tolerant attitude towards traditional differences of churchmanship persisted, at least at the provincial level.

For many years the Anglican Communion existed without a formal constitution. Respect for the office of the Archbishop of Canterbury and the advice of the Lambeth Conference seemed sufficient, though it was recognised that neither had more than moral authority. At the 1930 Lambeth Conference, however, it was decided that the Communion needed to address seriously the question of its constitution, and it adopted a perceptive report which declared that the Anglican Communion was organised on the same principles as Eastern Orthodoxy, as a fellowship of self-governing Churches in communion with one another, but without a centralised authority like the Church of Rome. The report explicitly recognised that—

This freedom naturally and necessarily carries with it the risk of divergence to the point even of disruption. In case any such risk should actually arise, it is clear that the Lambeth Conference as such could not take any disciplinary action. Formal action would belong to the several Churches of the Anglican Communion individually; but the advice of the Lambeth Conference, sought before action is taken by the constituent Churches, would carry very great moral weight. And we believe in the Holy Spirit. We trust in His power working in every part of His Church as the effective bond to hold us together.

The Conference clearly hoped that such an emergency would never arise, and for many years it did not. But now it has.²

Recent Developments

The first big change came in the 1970s and 1980s, when a number of provinces (notably Canada in 1975 and the USA in 1976) decided, against considerable opposition, to introduce women priests, and later women bishops. Though they were not at first to be introduced into all dioceses, many Anglo-Catholics and Evangelicals felt compromised by a change in the official practice of their Church which was certainly untraditional and arguably unbiblical. So opposition has continued ever since, and a number of small, separate Anglican bodies has resulted. Moreover, after about ten years Canada and the USA abolished their conscience clauses, and tried to introduce women priests into every diocese, thus

deepening the existing alienation. The 1978 and 1988 Lambeth Conferences decided to treat the introduction of women priests and bishops as tolerable, though recognising that communion between the provinces would be adversely affected by it, and the latter Conference appointed the first Eames Commission to advise further on the matter. The Eames Commission, when it reported, proposed that the decision to introduce women priests and bishops into a province should be regarded as only provisional, until such time as the decision was generally 'received' elsewhere, if indeed it was. Reception was 'an ongoing, open process', which could not be forced, and which might result in the innovation being rejected, not accepted; reception could, indeed, continue indefinitely, and with it the uncertainty that it implied. The 1998 Lambeth Conference, in Resolution III 4, accepted and endorsed the work of the Eames Commission, and in a separate resolution, III 2, on 'The Unity of the Anglican Communion', underlined its findings, condemned the forcing of consciences, and recommended the provision of alternative episcopal oversight for dissentients. This, of course, is good, but better still would have been delay by the Canadian and American Churches before acting, until such time as a higher level of agreement had been reached that action was wise. What looks wise when it chimes in with the spirit of the age can look very different in a different context.³

By the time of the 1998 Lambeth Conference, the American and Canadian Churches were already pressing further ahead with their radical agenda, and wanted the Conference to agree to treat the ordination of practicing homosexuals, and the blessing of their unions, with the same toleration as the ordination of women priests and bishops. On the principle that all discrimination is oppressive, they saw themselves as simply removing another improper barrier. As others saw it, however, this was to move on from permitting what was doubtfully biblical to permitting what was blatantly unbiblical, and was completely contrary to Christian morality. The advocates of the change made a sharp distinction between committed homosexual relationships and promiscuous ones, which they acknowledged to be wrong. But, quite apart from the fact that fully committed relationships seem fairly uncommon in the homosexual community, if an act is immoral, to commit it regularly with one person rather than with different people at different times, is the same in principle, and remains immoral. There was therefore a passionate debate at the Conference, in which the Third World bishops (who had first made their voices heard at the 1988 Conference) played a leading part, and in Resolution I.10 the North American plans were defeated by a very large majority.

ECUSA, which had got used to being the trend-setter in the Anglican Communion, and had also got used to being its paymaster and financing its activities, did not take kindly to this reverse. It started attaching strings to its financial support for Third World dioceses, and it resolved to press ahead regardless with its plans to make homosexuality a respectable Christian lifestyle. When the Primates' Meeting assembled in the year 2000, and again, twice over, in the year 2003, it had to issue a protest against the rejection by the Americans of Resolution I.10 of Lambeth 1998, and their determination to consecrate a practising homosexual (who is also a divorced husband and father) as Bishop of New Hampshire. In addition, it had to issue a protest against the authorising of a service for the blessing of homosexual unions in the Canadian diocese of New Westminster. The Americans and Canadians treated the Primates' Meeting with the same disregard as they had the Lambeth Conference, the Americans going ahead with the consecration of the homosexual Bishop of New Hampshire at the end of 2003, and the Canadians 'affirming the integrity and sanctity of committed adult same sex relationships' at their General Synod in 2004. They apparently thought that, if they exercised their provincial autonomy in this way, their decisions would be put up for ultimate 'reception' by Anglicans in general, just as their decisions on women priests and bishops had been. The difference was, that on the previous occasion they had been acting with the consent of the consultative bodies of the Anglican Communion, but on this occasion they were acting against the same bodies' declared opposition. It is for this reason that the Windsor Report denies the applicability of reception to the present situation (p. 46, sect. 69; cp. also p. 120).

The response of the Third World provinces to these scandalous events has in many cases been to excommunicate ECUSA.⁴ In doing this, there is no question that they have been following both the spirit and the letter of the constitution of the Anglican Communion agreed at Lambeth 1930. It is provinces that have been acting, and they have been following up a decision of the Lambeth Conference in 1998. Nevertheless, they have been rebuked for their actions by the authors of the Windsor Report (p. 28, sect. 29:1), who seem to have a very limited understanding of Anglican ecclesiology.⁵ The Third World provinces were absolutely within their rights in doing this, and, faced with misunderstanding and misrepresentation in their missionary task at home, they may well have had a *duty* to act as promptly as possible, whether or not the Windsor Report had yet seen the light. Having excommunicated ECUSA, Resolution 72 of Lambeth 1988, about respecting diocesan boundaries, became for the time being irrelevant,⁶ and

they rightly considered themselves free to respond to the urgent requests for help from orthodox parishes within ECUSA. For this too they have been rebuked by the Windsor Report – repeatedly so (pp. 28f, 66, 73, 75, sects. 29:3, 123, 149, 155), and have even been rather impertinently called upon ‘to affirm their desire to remain in the Communion’ (sect. 155), as if it were they who were endangering its unity, and as if membership of the Communion were at the disposal of the authors of the Report. They have not, however, been deterred by these rebukes, one is glad to see, but in the conference of Anglican bishops held in Lagos at the end of October 2004, they reaffirmed their actions, resolved to become financially independent of the West, and gave recognition to the Network of Confessing Dioceses and Parishes in the USA (also called the Network of Anglican Communion Dioceses and Parishes), led by Bishop Robert Duncan, as their only partners in mission in that country.⁷ Orthodox Anglicans in the USA who have hesitated to join the Network would be wise now to do so, whether their main concern is homosexuality or women priests and bishops, as the Network looks likely to replace ECUSA as the recognised Anglican Church in their country.

Excommunication, though unfamiliar to Anglicans, is a healthy discipline, because it treats serious errors with suitable seriousness, and is much more likely to lead to repentance than the ambiguities of politeness. The experience of the Eastern Orthodox, to whom it is a good deal more familiar, is that it can prove a salutary corrective, and that it does not destroy the Church. The Anglican Communion has been accustomed to act like a gentleman’s club (a club to which ladies have recently been admitted), and the Windsor Report is shocked by the ungentlemanly conduct of the Americans and Canadians. But its remedy is polite remonstrance, the setting up of yet another consultative body – a Council of Advice for the Archbishop of Canterbury (p. 59f, sects. 111, 112), and a proposed voluntary Covenant between the Churches of the Anglican Communion, which would have ‘no binding authority’ (p. 62, sect. 118), and which would only harmonize policy in the Communion if all thirty-four Churches, including the Americans and Canadians, eventually agreed to sign it.⁸ What the Report offers, as the Archbishop of Sydney has pointed out in his excellent article on it, ‘is going to take so long to work out that the problem will have been resolved long before it comes into place’.⁹ By contrast, the sharp shock of excommunication could bring the revisionists to their senses, even though there is no sign of it at the time of writing. It was in any case the right action to take, and, one way or another, it will purify the body of the Church.

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ENDNOTES

1. London: Anglican Communion Office, £4.95 (ISBN 6-00000005-7).
2. For a fuller account of the decision of the 1930 Lambeth Conference and the parallel with Orthodoxy, see the writer's article 'The Limits of Anglican Diversity' (*Churchman* 117/4, Winter 2003). Among the Orthodox, irreconcilable differences between the autocephalous Churches tend to result in temporary excommunication, and even the Oecumenical Patriarch can be excommunicated and sometimes has been! The parallel speaks for itself.
3. The relaxed idea of reception favoured by the Eames Report has encouraged Anglicans to think that, on difficult and controversial questions, they can act first and decide afterwards, instead of the other way round. For a very thoughtful and informative discussion, highlighting the dangers of this procedure, see Peter Toon, *Reforming Forwards? The process of reception and the consecration of women as bishops* (London: Latimer Trust, 2004).
4. They have sometimes spoken of 'impaired communion', but what they evidently mean by this is excommunication. The Windsor Report raises a quibble about this 'imprecise' use of language (p. 37, sect. 50); but even the 'impaired communion' that has resulted from the ordination of women priests and bishops involves division at the Lord's Table, and in this case the impaired communion has not just been practised but imposed.
5. The nearest they get to a true understanding is on p. 48 (sect. 75), where they compare the autonomy of Anglican provinces to autocephaly in the Orthodox Church. Also, on p. 49 (sect. 81), they note that the diocese and the parish also have a measure of autonomy. This will become important where provinces are too disagreed to act together.
6. The same applies to Canon 8 of Nicaea, to which the Windsor Report appeals (p. 29, sect. 29:3), but which concerns bishops in communion with one another, not out of communion.
7. See the report in the *Church of England Newspaper* for 5 November 2004. See also the noble statement from the Archbishop of Uganda, dated 27 September 2004 and released on the web, where he declines further financial grants from ECUSA with immediate effect.
8. A draft of the Covenant occupies Appendix Two (pp. 81-88). It is a long and somewhat complicated document, running to 27 articles. It looks to the 'Instruments of Unity' to identify and resolve issues of common concern, and prohibits intervention by representatives of one member Church in the internal affairs of another.
9. In the *Church Times* for 29 October 2004.