Revisionism and Schism in the Anglican Communion: Gay Culture Syndrome and the Response of Church of Nigeria

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Abstract

In modern times, sexual ethics has become a matter of personal choice rather than adherence to the stipulations of religious or traditional morality; as a result, some sexual behaviours that once carried heavy negative moral connotations are now viewed and accepted as normal by an increasing segment of world population. The further consequence is the effect on various religious organizations. For example, while Christianity has generally always maintained the belief that the sexual act had to be confined to a marriage between a man and a woman in a heterosexual relationship, the Anglican Church in modern times is faced with the sexual ethics, especially as they relate to homosexuality. The resultant crisis created by the attempted revision of sexual morality in the Church has shaken the unity of the worldwide Anglican Communion to its very roots. The Church of Nigeria is playing a prominent role in upholding the Church's traditional teaching on sexual morality, and is naturally, leading the rest of the orthodox Anglican Provinces in their face-off with revisionists in the Western Churches. However, this study discovered that the disagreement which led to the schism in the Anglican Communion

is in many respects a blessing to the Province of Nigeria. The resultant disruption of Anglican unity served as a wake-up call to the 'sleeping giant,' in that it provoked and subsequently show-cased the potentials of Nigerian Anglicanism as the leading force in Africa and the Global South Provinces. The schism helped Nigeria and the rest of the Global South Provinces to finally shake off the last shackles of colonial doctrinal imperialism, motivating the Provinces involved to be much more self-governing, self-propagating and self-sustaining.

1. Introduction

Religion is one of the main motivator of morality from inception of the human society. In fulfilling this task however, there are areas of tension and conflict, as society though receptive to moral values and religious tenets, does not totally keep to the ethical demands of religion. Groups and individuals within the religious society at times tend to unduly revise and re-appraise beliefs and values in the process of re-aligning the demands of circumstances and emerging realities of life.

One of the notable areas of change in value orientation has been in the area of sexual morality in which there is a high level of liberalism and permissiveness in our modern society. The changes in sexual morality have been largely effected by society's steady progress in the academic, economic, scientific and cultural areas of human life. The change in attitude towards sexuality also evolved from the over-bearing influence of western culture on the rest of the world, Nigeria inclusive. With the rise of the consequent sexual aberrations, traditional African understanding of sexual morality has been rudely crossed by other influences of the modern times. According to Kinoti (2003):

> Elderly people lament daily as they are meeting behavior that shocks them: sexual immorality, affection-less relationships, skepticism about religious matters and many things which hasten the old to their graves. Middle aged people lament about children they fail to control, and the youth complain of lack of example from older members of the society. (p. 13).

The Anglican Communion has remained under pressure, as some Churches in the Communion have allowed age-long orthodox teaching on sexual morality to be seriously affected by the culture of modernity. Some sections of the Church, especially in the western world have permitted homosexual practices including same-sex marriage, and the ordaining and consecration of homosexual priests, and bishops, and even presented homosexual acts as a normal means of experiencing God.

It is, therefore, apparent that the modern sexual revolution in the secular world has impacted harshly on the Anglican Communion. With the liberals providing the lunch-pad for the new moves, and the theologically conservative striving to maintain biblical condemnation of homosexuality, the outcome of the doctrinal divide has threatened the organic unity of Anglicanism as a Christian denomination. The free online Dictionary defines 'revisionism' as advocacy of the revision of an accepted usually long-standing view, theory or doctrine, especially a revision of historical events and movements. In Marxist-Leninist ideology, it is any dangerous departure from the true interpretation of Marx's teaching which could be inimical to the original tenets of Marxism. The online Merriam- Webster's Dictionary also defines 'revisionism' as support of ideas and beliefs that differ from and try to change accepted ideas and beliefs especially in a way that is

seen as wrong or dishonest. It is a policy of revision of modification aimed at creating room for new principles and the term was first used in 1903.

Revisionism in the context of this work refers to the agitation in the Anglican Communion for the revision and modification of the teachings of the church on the traditional non-acceptance of homosexuals in the life and ministry of the church. The revisionists referred to in this research are those who agitate for homosexuals and their variant lifestyles to be fully tolerated in the Anglican Church, and for every sexual orientation to be accepted without discrimination.

2. Background to Revisionist Ideology in the Anglican Communion

In the modern society, both Christians and non-Christians alike are increasingly being exposed to the lure of non-religious and anti-religious ideas that are characteristic of the wider secular world. Consequently, many people would like to continue being religious, but would like God to keep away from the day-to-day choices they make about their lives, especially their sexuality. Some of the main factors that engender revisionism of traditional Christian teaching include:-

2.1. Secularization

Those who try to ignore the significance of religion in the formulation of ethics and morality argue that it is wrong to judge actions by the criterion of whether they please or offend God. Ruggeiro (1992) exemplifies this school of thought by his postulation that:

> Saying the Bible says so suggests that the Bible is a simple book that has a single interpretation, and charging that

> those who insist on practicalizing their beliefs imply no respect for other people's beliefs, thereby leaving little or no room for growth and development. (p. 6).

With this, the modern man thinks he no longer needs to depend on religion to provide justification for morality. Along this line of thought, moral demands are seen as the impositions of commandments of a detached superior being. Larmore (1996) asserts:

> The imperative conception of morality looks at moral rules as being constraints or laws. Quite possibly we can be accustomed to seeing ourselves as subjects to these moral laws without having some notion of their source, some image of a legislator… If we cannot determine its source, we cannot continue believing that there exists such thing as moral law. (p. 45).

With this prevailing perspective, not very few people have pushed God's image of a legislator farther to his being a dictator, and this has encouraged a new biblical interpretation and a new morality driven by the whims and caprices of modern man. This typical secular approach underlines modern man's unwillingness to accept all moral codes, since he views the originator of such codes as an undesirable interference for man in society.

2.2. The Rise of Humanism

Modern man believes that mankind has come of age and believes that it is more advantageous locating the source and utility value of moral norms in the nature of man more than in God. Blamires (1999) points out the formidable hostility that Christendom faces from those developed Western countries once regarded as bulwarks of Christian civilization. He states:

> Looking around us, we … cannot but be aware of how powerful and insidious is the assault on the faith we hold, the faith we have assumed to be the foundation of western culture. Current secularist humanism–a mishmash of relativist notions negating traditional values and absolutes infect the intellectual air we breathe. (p. 9).

The main thrust of the humanists has been a campaign to undermine all human acknowledgements of the transcendent and de-emphasize restraint on the individualistic self, while harping on self-realization and re-discovery which borders on gratification of the sensual desires. The strong influence of humanism on the western world has led to unprecedented permissiveness in sexual matters and this culture is being exported to the rest of the world.

2.3. Influence of Pressure Groups

The success earlier recorded by pressure groups fighting for their rights of acceptance in the wider society is a factor that propels the revision of both scripture and morality. The rise of feminism and the women's liberation movement attacked everything that supports the traditional roles of men and women which include marriage, the family and heterosexuality. Gert (1998) asserts that feminism has a target which supersedes 'equal rights' for both sexes. He states:

> As one set of demands leads to another, the feminists' denial of sexual distinction between man and woman and their call for the obliteration of all sex roles necessarily requires one to alter the biblical concepts of family and God… When marriage is rejected as oppressive, sex is opened to a number of possibilities beginning with promiscuity. (p. 50).

> As a result, feminism ends up not only endorsing but promoting lesbianism, presenting the lesbian as the ultimate feminist and the model for other women, as an embodiment of complete freedom from male domination. The feminist pressure also helped to actualize the ordination of women.

Revisionism of sexual morals also received a boost from the successes of the civil rights movement in America and elsewhere. Lewis (1999) attributes the rise of the homosexual movement in the Episcopal Church in America to the abolition of racism. He states that "The huge success of the civil rights movement in turn gave rise to agitation from other groups in the society and the Church who saw themselves as oppressed minorities" (p. 6). Homosexuals and their sympathizers rode on the tide of the concessions made to the civil rights and women's liberation movements to pressurize for acceptance and change in attitude towards them, and this agitation consequently affected the churches in the Western world.

2.4. Progress in Education and Scientific Research

The ever increasing and widespread education and research in various academic fields of learning have encouraged more and more people to think for themselves and define their own values in sexual as well as other areas of ethics. The resultant disruption of gender distinctions has also been motivated by discoveries in science experimentation, the postulations of which effect changes in culture and worldviews. Pointing out the contribution of scientific development to sexual morality, Vertefuille (1988) states:

> When science developed the birth control pill, it revolutionalized society's attitude and behavior towards sex. The woman liberated from the fear of pregnancy, was able to postpone marriage and family in favour of pursuing her career. The man released from marriage, became a sexual nomad, aggressively seeking new territories of conquest. (p. 12).

In effect, this significant scientific discovery has enabled people to effectively enjoy sex outside the marriage institution to which traditional and religious morality have limited it, and not very few people have questioned the relevance of religious sexual morality to modern society. For many educated modern thinkers who see morals in terms of individual needs and preferences, the only external authority that can be listened to is not God but the scientific expert, who prescribes what is, not what ought to be. Referring to the modern changes in sexual morality and the roles of researchers, Smedes (1985) states:

> This means that sex technicians, the people who have discovered the most promising erogenous zones of the human body as well as the most effective erotic techniques are the only real authorities. Where there are no moral imperatives but only strong tastes, judgment about what is good or bad in sexual conduct are eroded. (p. 352).

Smedes concludes that the wide studies of human sexuality from the psychological, sociological and neurological approaches, from Freud to Havelock, Ellis to Masters and Johnson have placed sex on the laboratory table and encouraged a lot of people to accept and engage in crazy sexual acts.

3. Gay Culture Controversy and the Road to Schism in the Anglican Communion

Disagreement on issues of human sexuality has been a very thorny one in Christianity and more so in the Anglican Church. While the social climate at the grassroots level varies, the authority structure of the Church has demonstrated a high degree of unease in handling the disagreement on homosexuality.

Every ten years, Anglican Provinces represented by their bishops meet at the Lambeth Conference, chaired by traditional head of the Communion, the Archbishop of Canterbury. The Lambeth Conference is by far the most important instrument of unity between the provinces that make up the Anglican Church and is the forum where policies and resolutions guiding the Church are made. At the 1978 Conference, there was a step from tabooing homosexuality to encouraging dialogue with homosexual persons, while the 1988 Lambeth Conference discussion on Human Rights for those of homosexual orientation recognized the significance of modern studies about homosexuality. This gradual infiltration of homosexualism into the Church circles is clearly synonymous with the general progress to acceptability of homosexuals in the secular society.

During the 1998 Lambeth Conference, although many other matters featured on the agenda, the issue of homosexuality appeared to have been the most sensitive. Summarily stated, the sexual aberrations that were allowed in some sections of the Anglican Church which created serious controversy include:

- The total acceptance of LGBTs (Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals and Transsexuals) in Church life and lay pastoral ministry.
- The approval of the rites (liturgy) for homosexual marriages and the actual solemnization of such same-sex unions in the church.

- The ordination of homosexual men and women into the diaconate and the priesthood.
- The election, approval and consecration of homosexuals as bishops in the Churches involved.

Slocum (1999) points out that:

> A feature of the debate which took many British and American participants by surprise was the lively contribution made by African bishops who numbered 224, surpassing other continental groups (180 from North America and 140 from the United Kingdom). (p. 260).

It is generally believed that the 1998 Lambeth Conference which was the last before the schism in the Anglican Communion, marked a new era for the Church, for it was there that the bishops of the global South discovered the strength of their collective voice. Mauney (1999) states that:

> The western Church leaders who were of the liberal opinion that the Church's teachings on sexual morality should be adapted to fit the needs of the world were firmly confronted by African and Asian prelates who upheld the traditional teachings of the Church as eternal and thus relevant to every age. (p. 261).

In summing up the influence of the 1998 Lambeth on the controversy over sexual morality in the Anglican Church, Iheagwam (2010) intimates that:

> Although the Conference recognized the existence of persons who experience themselves as having a homosexual orientation and who crave pastoral care and moral direction of the Church, Resolution 1.10 on Human Sexuality paragraph 'A' restates that the Conference "in view of the teaching of Scripture, upholds faithfulness in

> marriage between a man and a woman in lifelong union and believes that abstinence is right for those who are not called to marry. (p. 90).

With the resolution endorsed and passed by the majority, Lambeth Conference 1998 thus officially upheld the traditional teaching of the church on heterosexual normativity within the bounds of matrimony, while rejecting homosexuality as incompatible with Scripture, and merely defining homosexuals as people who need to be listened to, with a view to meeting their pastoral needs as members of the Church.

3.1. The Anglican Church as a Broken Communion

The Anglican Communion's lack of central cohesion in matters of authority is a potential source of problems in the church. When Anglicans make decisions at the worldwide level, they are often expressed and understood in permissive rather than obligatory terms. This principle is also true of the decisions made by provinces of the Anglican Communion to some extent as they apply to dioceses.

The structures that allow the Anglican Communion to come together have no legislative authority over autonomous provinces; thus the Anglican Consultative Council, the Lambeth Conference and the Primates' Meetings can only advise and suggest but not compel or enforce. Recognizing the prevalence of diversity of opinions and cultural differences, provinces are allowed unilateral actions on certain issues. This administrative structure has obviously proved to contain a big loophole. Western Anglican Churches in the past are known to contradict decisions taken at the highest meetings, especially with regard to the ordination of women, and later, of homosexuals, and their generally permissive attitude to issues about the gay culture in the church. These

unilateral actions are not done without negative reaction from the rest of the Communion. Amagada (2010) intimates that "this simmering theological rift broke wide open in 2003 when the Episcopal (Anglican) Church in America consecrated its first openly gay bishop, Gene Robinson for the Diocese of New Hampshire" (p . 37). This crowning act of aberration came when the uproar caused by the Diocese of Westminster in Canada's formulation and approval of the rites for the wedding of same sex couples in the church in 2002 had hardly died down.

Thus, the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Church of Canada leading the revisionism of the western churches contravened the decisions and recommendations of the central body and failed to act on repeated pleas from the conservative parts of the church to put a stop to their agenda. These acts of deliberate defiance by the two churches led to the bitter disagreement that engendered the present disunity in the Anglican Communion. Following these infamous acts of doctrinal deviation, many parts of the Anglican Church in Africa, Asia and the rest of the conservative Anglican world declared a state of impaired Communion, and broke relations with the churches in Canada and USA.

3.2. The Response of the Church of Nigeria

The Anglican Church in Nigeria is one of the fastest growing provinces in the Anglican Communion and this growth is being nurtured by loyalty to orthodox biblical faith. When the General Convention of the Episcopal Church in America endorsed the election of Gene Robinson, an openly gay man as the Bishop of New Hampshire in 2003 following the Diocese of Westminster in Canada approving same-sex marriage rites (liturgy), the Church of Nigeria was among the first Provinces in the Anglican Communion

to sever relationship with the erring dioceses, and to promptly declare a broken communion with the Episcopal Church of United States of America (ECUSA) and Canada. Other aspects of the response of the Church of Nigeria are stated as follows:

3.3. Amendment of the Constitution and Canons

One of the most outstanding responses of the Church of Nigeria to the extremities of the liberals in the western Churches was the amendment of its constitution to expunge any reference to communion with the See of Canterbury – an association historically integral to Anglican identity. The master-stroke here is the brake in Communion with Provinces in Communion with the See of Canterbury, and this self-redefinition of the Church set it free from colonial structures and got it ready to lead the confrontation against western theological aberrations.

3.4. All African Anglican Bishops' Conference

Riding on the tide of the theological confusion created by the acts of deviation from the Western Church, Nigeria's then Primate, Peter Akinola who was also the Chairman of the Conference of Anglican Provinces in Africa summoned a meeting of all the Anglican bishops in Africa for the very first time. Iheagwam (2010) states that:

> This maiden conference was held in Lagos from 26th October – 1st November, 2004, with the theme, "Africa Comes of Age: An Anglican Self-Evaluation". This conference provided the needed platform for the participants to restate their disapproval of the ordination and/or consecration of homosexuals in parts of the Anglican Church. (p. 94).

The role of the Church of Nigeria in hosting this maiden conference was outstanding in other aspects. Amagada (2010) States that "the Church of Nigeria sponsored many African bishops who hitherto depended on Western foreign aid for any such international involvement" (p. 19). The resounding success of the Conference aptly highlighted Church of Nigeria's poise as the leader of the Global South of worldwide Anglicanism.

3.5. Boycott of 2008 Lambeth Conference

Following the acceptance of sexual aberrations in some parts of the Anglican Church in 2003, the 2008 Lambeth Conference became an endangered meeting. According to a Conference of Anglican Provinces in Africa (CAPA) Statement (2006), thirteen Global South Primates comprising eight from Africa, led by Archbishop Akinola of Nigeria in the meeting in Kigali, denounced the actions of the Episcopal Church as a "direct repudiation of the clear teachings of the Holy Scriptures, historic faith and order of the church".

They also expressed regret about the Church of England's passive reaction to the British government's passing of the Civil Partnership Act in favour of same-sex marriages. This clearly casts doubt as to whether the mother church of the Communion is committed to upholding the historic Christian norm. In view of the fact that the Archbishop of Canterbury has failed to discipline the erring Churches in America and Canada, and failed to oppose the compromising position of the Church of England, the Primates of the Global South and Conference of Anglican Provinces in Africa (CAPA) decided not to attend any Lambeth Conference to which violators of Lambeth Resolutions were also invited either as participants or observers.

3.6. The Formation of GAFCON

GAFCON stands for Global Anglican Future Conference, and its formation was the direct outcome of the decision by the orthodox Anglican Provinces to boycott the 2008 Lambeth Conference. Orthodox Anglicans in every Province have to find ways of associating and moving forward in the context of a confused Communion.

Earlier on, during an Episcopal Synod of the Church of Nigeria in June 2006, the House of Bishops agreed to a proposal that an alternative to the Lambeth Conference 2008 be put in place if eventually there was no repentance from erring churches and restoration of unity in the Communion. Following wider consultations with church leaders of the conservative Global South under Nigeria's leadership, the name, date and venue of the Conference were determined and scheduled, and stake-holder provinces started preparations to be part of the Conference, to run parallel with the historic Lambeth Conference. The Global Anglican Future Conference was held in Jerusalem from 22-29 June 2008, under the chairmanship of Archbishop Peter Akinola of Nigeria and this Conference has since progressed with the successful hosting of GAFCON 2 meeting in Nairobi, Kenya in October, 2013.

3.7. The Formation of CANA

The Convocation of Anglicans in North America (CANA) was one of the outcomes of the schism in the Anglican Communion created by the actions of revisionists. Dimobika (2014) states that one of the points of the Communiqué of the Global South Meeting in Kigali under the leadership of Nigeria's Primate Peter Akinola was a reaction that would later result to the creation of a convocation of Churches in the USA.

Many Nigerian Anglicans in the USA and in Canada found it increasingly difficult to identify with the homosexual culture in the church and were tempted to worship in other Christian denominations following the deviations. Consequently they called out for help from the home front as many other expatriates did. According to the Church of Nigeria Today (Sunday Bulletin, 2006):

> The Church of Nigeria recognizing the urgent need to carter for Nigerian Anglicans in America initiated a process for the provision of pastoral care for these members abroad. CANA was eventually inaugurated in 2006 and an orthodox English born American clergyman, Martyn Minns was elected as bishop for CANA and consecrated in the National Christian Centre Abuja on 20th August 2006 to supervise the missionary initiative in America and Canada. (p. 2).

The Church Year Calendar (Annual calendar of Church of Nigeria, 2015) states that:

> CANA has grown to its present state of three dioceses with two Nigerian bishops and a full complement of expatriate Nigerian clergymen and other officials running the pastoral and administrative aspects of the Convocation in America and Canada. (pp. 971-972).

In other words, through the formation of CANA, the Church of Nigeria is presently overseeing and supervising the spectacular growth of three ecclesiastical structures spanning the USA and Canada.

3.8. Amendment of the Ordinal

The ordinal refers to the set forms and liturgy for the ordination of deacons and priests, and the consecration of bishops in the

Anglican Communion. Part of the response to the revisionism of the western churches was the revision of the ordinal of the Church of Nigeria to meet the challenges of the time and to assert Nigeria's conservative theological stance. The Group Three Report of the Draft of the Revised Vision of the Church of Nigeria (A working constitution of the Anglican Church in Nigeria, 2010) recommends that "every bishop, priest and church official should be made to subscribe to an oath of the acceptance of the biblical standards of human sexuality" (p. 6). The Church of Nigeria consequently agreed to add a new oath to its ordinal as proposed. The formal compulsory subscription to this new oath by ordination, collation and consecration candidates during such services has since taken effect in all the Anglican dioceses in Nigeria, and the stated goal is to keep out sex deviants from the church's pastoral and administrative hierarchies.

3.9. Moves for Greater Economic Self-reliance

The logistics needed to confront the deviant churches of the western world include well grounded and sustainable means of finances, of which the erring churches are in no short supply. In this regard, the first resolution of the All African Anglican Bishops' Conference held in Lagos in 2004 emphasized the need for the churches in Africa to become self-reliant just as they have become self-governing and self-propagating, through economic self-empowerment. This called for a new attitude and orientation to investment and economic activities, to over-turn the he-who-pays-the-piper-dictates-the-tune erstwhile relationship with the West which also aids the attempts at theological imperialism. Accordingly, the Church pursued this objective in the following major areas:

(a) A successful One billion naira endowment fund was accomplished which made funds available for other investments.
(b) The Church of Nigeria organized two well-packaged economic empowerment seminars in 2005 and 2009, exposing dioceses to various investment possibilities.
(c) The Church has undertaken a 21-storey multi billion naira project sited at the Central Business District of Abuja. The project is on-going and will be called the Church of Nigeria Towers when completed.
(d) The Church established Crowther Radio and the ACNN satellite television Channel to make its voice heard and to boost its revenue.
(e) The Church established the Crowther Graduate School at Abeokuta to curtail overseas post-graduate theological study trips by church members and save money for the church.

These and other measures already taken have visibly changed the economic horizon of the Church of Nigeria and are yielding much fruit for the future development of the Church.

4. Conclusion

The Anglican Communion has recently been under pressure regarding issues of sexual morality. Western culture which has virtually been secularized has encouraged an unprecedented libertarian sexual behaviour. By this approach, sexual relations came to be seen as a private matter of the individuals concerned and the consequences of the use of one's sexual powers to the community faded into the background. Modern liberal biblical scholarship has succeeded largely in watering down the seriousness of the sexual aberrations inherent in homosexual

unions and acts, and this unworthy effort has badly affected Anglicanism in modern times, especially due to its incoherent, de-centralized power structure. The problem created by the homosexual debate has formed a strong wall of separation between provinces of the Anglican Church. In some sections of the Communion, spirituality and practice have been seriously affected by the culture of modernity.

Some Churches have permitted homosexual practices and even presented them as normal means of experiencing God. Though it cannot be denied that every society has had its own share and experience of sexual aberrations since the beginning of the history of man, the modern approach presupposes that codes that guide and regulate sexual morality have lost relevance and need updating. Acknowledging the fact that doctrines and traditions of the Christian religion develop and grow in the tension between traditional theological inheritance and the dynamics of socio-cultural pressure, an integrated approach requires both that Christianity stands firmly and clearly for its historic convictions, while offering love and ready assistance to penitent deviants who recognize the need for amendment of life and re-integration in the body of Christ. Those 'secular Christians' who insist on celebrating the sin of homosexuality as their right, even in the church should be stoutly resisted in order to secure and safeguard the values of the family institution which ensure the continued existence of the society. The Anglican Church in Nigeria has actually excelled in its well-calculated response to the revisionist challenge in the Anglican Communion.

However, there is still the need for different Christian denominations in Africa to strengthen their theological education, and the curriculum content constantly regulated and monitored, to curtail the infiltration of liberal revisionist theology in African

Christianity. Furthermore, African Christian missionaries are now needed in Western Christianity more than ever to try to assuage the tide of 'secular Christianity' sweeping across the West. Denominations that have the wherewithal should consider re-evangelizing the erring white people whose post-modernism is a threat to the Christian faith.

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