

No, God would not have approved of gay bishops

Anglican evangelicals are right. Knowingly to appoint gay bishops robs Christianity of meaning. It is time that convinced Christians stopped trying to reconcile their spiritual beliefs with the modern age and understood that if one thing comes clearly through every account we have of Jesus's teaching, it is that His followers are not urged to accommodate themselves to their age or to the mind of God. Christianity is not supposed to be comfortable or feel "natural". The mind of God, contemplating the behaviour of man, is not expected to be suffused with a spirit of "whatever".

As it happens I do not believe in the mind of God. But Christians do and must strive to know more of it. Nothing they read in the Old and New Testaments gives a scintilla of support to the view that the God of Israel was an inclusive God, or inclined to go with the grain of human nature; much they read suggests a righteous going against the grain.

Certainly it is true that Jesus departed from conventional Judaic teaching in the emphasis He put on forgiveness, but neither the story (for example) of the woman taken in adultery, nor the parable of the prodigal son suggest that He countenanced a continuation of the sins of either. What these stories teach is that repentance is acceptable to God but ever late it comes, and that the virtuous should not behave in a vindictive manner towards sinners. That is a very different thing from a shoulder-shrugging chuckle of "different strokes for different folks".

When the row over the appointment of gay bishops first blew up I expected, being gay, to join the side of the Christian modernisers. But try as I do to summon up enthusiasm for my natural allies, sorry as I feel for homosexuals struggling to reconcile their sexuality with their membership of the Church, and strive though I have to feel indignant at the conservative evangelicals, passion fails me. I know why.

"Inclusive", "moderate" or "sensible" Christianity is inching its way up a philosophical cul-de-sac. The Church stands for revealed truth and divine inspiration or it stands for nothing. Belief grounded in everyday experience alone is not belief. The attempt, sustained since the Reformation, to establish the truth of Christianity on the rock of human observation of our own natures and of the world around us

runs right against what the Bible teaches from the moment Moses beheld a burning bush in the Egyptian desert to the point when Jesus rises from the dead in His sepulchre. Stripped of the supernatural, the Church is on a losing wicket.

Even as a ten-year-old boy in Miss Silk's Scripture class, when I heard the account of how the parting of the Red Sea could actually be explained by freak tides, and that the story of the loaves and fishes really taught us how Jesus set an example by sharing His disciples' picnic (so everybody else shared theirs), I thought: "Don't be silly Miss Silk! If Jesus couldn't do miracles, why should we listen? If the bush was just burning naturally, then Moses was fooled."

But — perhaps because like countless would-be Christians down the ages I was fighting an internal scepticism about the supernatural claims of religion — I found myself as an undergraduate powerfully drawn towards the sermons and writings of Joseph Butler. The persuasive, quiet sense of this early-18th-century Bishop of Durham makes (as our college dean, Mark Santer, later to become Bishop of Birmingham, put it gently to me) "the best case one can" for the theory of natural religion.

By induction alone, Butler seems to suggest, we can draw from what we know of ourselves, of science, and of our world, a picture of the mind of God. He was suspicious of revelation. Butler it was who remarked to the evangelist John Wesley: "Sir, the pretending to extraordinary revelations and gifts of the Holy Ghost is a horrid thing, a very horrid thing."

In typically compressed but lucid style, he ascribed human goodness to a divine intention. Look at human nature, he said. "It will as fully appear from this our nature ... is adapted to virtue, as, from the idea of a watch, it appears that its nature ... is adapted to measure time." Every work, he said, "is a system; and as every particular thing, both natural and artificial, is for some use or purpose, out of or beyond itself,"

so we must ask what mankind is for. He went on to induce the existence of God from the fact that human nature yearns towards something greater and more perfect than itself.

My 1910 *Encyclopaedia Britannica* devotes 6,000 words to Joseph Butler, and about the same to John Wesley. By the 1960 edition Wesley is steady at 6,000 but Butler is down to a quarter of that length. Today Wesley gets about six times as many words as Butler. Revelation may be a very horrid thing, but it seems to be selling better than reason.

At university I tried very hard to convince myself (as one senses Butler was trying to convince himself) that this appeal to sense will do. I was wrestling with my own sexual leanings at the time (I was 19) and the idea that anything we find within ourselves must be put there for a purpose appealed. Interestingly, it is the Butlerian slant we get today from those Anglicans who advocate

the ordination of gay bishops: God cannot reject any loving impulse. He has implanted in men, they say. "Really?" I asked the shade of Joseph Butler at 19, and ask the modernists now: how about child-molesting?

At 20 I turned from natural religion to an agnosticism which by degrees has slipped into something as close to atheism as makes no difference. But one could

as easily — or, at least, as logically — have turned the other way: towards evangelism, revealed truth and self-denial. For though the New Testament says little about sex or marriage, nothing in the Gospels suggests any departure from Judaic wisdom on such matters, a pretty robust sense of which we gain from the Old Testament.

Jesus was never reluctant to challenge received wisdoms that He wanted to change. He gives no impression that He came into the world to revolutionise sexual mores. Even our eye, if it offends us, must be plucked out.

So this, in summary, is my charge against the Anglican modernists. Can they point to biblical authority for what, on any estimate, amounts

to a disturbing challenge to the values assumed in both Testaments? No. Can they point to any divinely inspired religious leader since to whom has been revealed God's benevolent intentions towards homosexuals? I know of no such saint or holy man. Most have taught the opposite.

Can they honestly say that they would have drawn from Christ's teachings the same lessons of sexual tolerance in 1000, or 1590, or indeed 1950? Surely not, for almost no such voices were heard then.

In which case, to what does this "reform" amount? Like the changes to Church teaching on divorce or Sunday observance, the new tolerance gains its force within the Anglican Communion from a fear of becoming isolated from changing public morals. Is that a reason for a Christian to modify his own morality? I cannot recall that Moses took this view of golden calf worship. Whispering beneath the modernisers' soft aspirational language of love and tolerance, I hear an insistent "when in Rome, we must do as the Romans do. Times have changed." Gays in particular should be very wary of that message; some of us remember when it was used against us, and such a time may come again.

A religion needs a compass. Logic alone does not point the way and religion adds to the general stock of human reasonableness a new directional needle — if it adds anything at all. I cannot read the Gospels in any way other than as declaring that this was revealed to man by God through Jesus. Revelation, therefore, not logic, must lie at the core of the Church's message. You cannot pick and choose from revealed truth.

The path to which the compass points may be a stony one, but this should not matter to a believer. The teachings of the early Church looked unattractive to the Romans. Revelation pointed the way, and only Revelation can point the way now. I believe this Revelation is false, but Christians have nothing else firm to cling to. The common sense of 1720 may almost have seemed to suffice in Joseph Butler's day, but it will not suffice now. The Church must take wings and fly above sense, or it will drown. Let it fly — and fly away.

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