

ANOTHER VOICE

MATTHEW PARRIS

The fact is that I don't give a damn about gay bishops

Why is it that not only I but millions (I suspect) of my fellow-countrymen too are left cold by the dispute raging within the Church of England about gay bishops? One has only to see the newspaper headline for the eye to slide away.

It was not always thus. Such controversies used to fire many of us on both sides of the argument with passionate conviction. There was a time when I would have leapt to my laptop, determined to join the debate. Chosen as a panellist on BBC 1's *Question Time* in a week when such a question was likely to come up, I would have counted myself lucky.

Yet switching on the programme last Thursday to hear David Dimbleby turn to that redoubtable contributor to *Thought for the Day* Anne Atkins and ask whether she thought the new Bishop of Reading ought to be homosexual, I groaned inwardly, she groaned audibly, and I thought, 'Rather her than me.' I could not stir myself to an opinion.

This is a dangerous condition for a columnist. The affliction may spread. What if I lose the capacity to get steamed up on other topics too? There must be a limit to the number of columns one can pen describing one's indifference to the latest news.

But this, I fear, is going to be one of them. The Bishop of Reading looks like a nice man, the Bishop of Oxford (who appointed him) sounds like a clever man, and the Archbishop of Canterbury is transparently a good man, but they could be Satanists, Creationists or nudists, for all I care.

Friends in the ministry who are gay, as well as homosexual friends who are keen churchgoers, express disappointment when agnostic gays respond in this way, as though we were letting them down. But the compatibility or otherwise of a Church's teachings with a churchgoer's persuasions is surely a matter for those who subscribe to the tenets on which that Church is founded. Increasingly it strikes me as no business of the rest of us.

If feminist Jews were to campaign against the restriction of the bar mitzvah ceremony to boys, then we gentiles would have no status in the controversy; and disputes between liberal and orthodox Jews about how a good Jew ought to live lie right outside my concern. I do not believe that the Jews are God's chosen race, and so the debate about the special ways in which his chosen race should conduct their

lives are — to me — perfectly empty, the major premise of the argument being a fallacy born of superstition.

One rarely hears of non-Muslims wading into discussions about the correct interpretation of the Koran's teachings on sexuality, and for a good reason: these teachings are a coin backed by a central claim, that there is one God, Allah, and Mohammed is his Prophet. Take away that claim and the currency is baseless.

No religion for which the ultimate Because is 'Because it is God's will' deserves any purchase on the attention of those unpersuaded by the existence of that God or that will, except (and until) they first succeed in establishing their God as a fact. By the same token nobody thus unpersuaded has a right to be heard in their courts. It may be that among the natives of Papua New Guinea there have been lively disputes as to how best — if the talismanic power of the heads they shrink is to be maximised — these heads should be pickled. This is not a debate in which I seek a hearing. I do not think they should be shrinking heads at all. I do not believe the finished product has any talismanic powers, however pickled.

The right sexual qualifications for a bishop of Reading are in the same case. I do not believe in bishops. Only God's blessing can make a man a bishop, and God's blessing is not a resource I acknowledge. There is no sexuality which will assist a man's episcopal progress because there are no bishops of Reading, only people who mistakenly think they are the bishops of Reading. Liberal Anglicans who believe that homosexuality in a clergyman is compatible with the Divine Will, and conservative Anglicans who believe it is not, are both equally wrong. There is no Divine Will.

For this reason I have always been bemused by the tendency of modern Christians to explain why the moral prescriptions which they claim as divinely ordained are also practi-

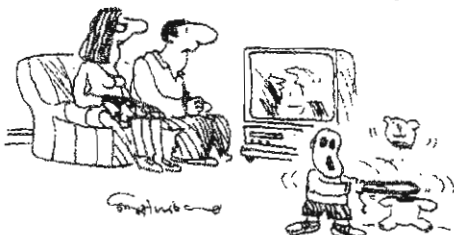
cal good sense and right for society. Snakes alive, if Christianity's central claim — that God walked the earth as Jesus — were true, then what need would there be to persuade us that Christ's teaching also makes practical sense in human terms? If it did not seem to, then should believers not conclude that must be because our human understanding is incomplete? If Jesus really were God's son, and no man came to the Father except through him, then as far as I would be concerned I would abjure homosexuality, heterosexuality, or any kind of sexuality — and spend the rest of my life skinning naked down Mont Blanc with a daffodil stuck up my bottom, too — if such were his commands. He would know best.

When a Christian says, 'This is God's will, but be assured that you will also find it justifies itself in human terms,' one senses that the speaker may be feeling a bit wobbly about the first part of his assertion — like those Roman Catholics who say, 'God has pronounced embryological research with fertilised eggs as sinful — and furthermore here is a scientist who will explain why it is also scientifically unnecessary.' One wonders how the opinion of a scientist could ever add force to the will of God.

I have not the least problem with the thought that the implementation of God's will might impede research/cause unwanted babies to be born/overpopulate the world/condemn unhappily married couples to misery/stop homosexuals having fun. We should simply defer to his judgment. I cheered Anne Atkins as she laboured to din it into her audience's head that, for a Christian, the fact that the opinion of society as a whole is moving in a certain direction could not be a knockdown argument for following it. 'When in Rome do as the Romans do' is not my reading of the Gospels, nor was it that of the early Christians.

There was a time when the Church of England spoke, in one sense, for more than its members, being the spiritual embodiment of a nation. It can no longer make that claim. This releases the Church from the attempt to make sense to us non-believers; and it should release us from the temptation to try to make sense to the Church. The Church and England should go their separate ways.

Matthew Parris is a political columnist of the Times.



'Have you been letting him watch your videos again?'