

## **Theological and Scriptural Models of the “Inclusive Church”: Harmony or Counterpoint?**

### **Introduction**

I understand my task this morning to lay before you Biblical and if time will permit theological paradigms which might be useful when imaging the Anglican Communion as a church capable of including a wide spectrum of biblical interpretation and theological thinking and to suggest strategies for seeking these same in the life of the Church.

To begin therefore let me make it perfectly clear that the terms ‘Inclusive’ and ‘Inclusivity’ do not appear in the Bible. This of course is not determinative nor does it mean that we are embarking down a path which the Bible itself does not understand to be central to its teachings.

In her recent book *Anglican Diversity* Patricia Bays makes the following assertion:

An inclusive church that has learned to live together with great variety and diversity is well placed to be an instrument of the Gospel in today’s world of rapid change, economic dislocation and great diversity. <sup>1</sup> (p 29)

As a Biblical scholar I am well attuned to diversity of interpretative methods and biblical meanings that derive from these methods but I do not wish to start with the Bible. Instead I wish to start in that place which Bays speaks of as ‘Today’s world’. I will do so from my own experiences within the context of one place in the Anglican Communion, that of Zimbabwe.

### **I Theological Process of Discernment from the Particular to the General**

It happened that in 1998 one of my former students asked me to consider being a Speaker for the annual retreat of Priests of the Anglican Province of Central Africa. I listened as he spoke of their need to be in dialogue with an ordained woman and one who was a scholar ‘to boot’. He suggested that as he had been profoundly moved and influenced by my lectures of the prophets that I might consider giving a series of lectures on the Book of the prophet Amos to these priests. I listened patiently, thanked him for having thought of me, declined the offer and wished him well in his pursuit of finding someone else.

This student however was persistent and two months later I found myself in Zimbabwe. A white, middle aged, upper middle classed, well-educated, unmarried, female Anglican priest. Someone whose only other experience of Africa had been as a member of a Globalization project of Ploughshares, some two years previous. Now I was facing 85 priests from, Botswana, Malawi, Zambia, and Zimbabwe and for some reason an Archdeacon from Mozambique and of course the then Bishop of Harare.

Although I had many enriching experiences on that trip it is one in particular that I think is pertinent to this conference, that of my meeting with members of a branch of the Mother's union'. For it was this informal gathering that produced great awkwardness and one in which I began as the outsider, the one who was by definition not included. What I had not thought through before going to Zimbabwe was that the Mother's Union was in fact a very powerful group. They invited me to speak with them but the awkwardness of the meeting was not due to the fact that I was an ordained female priest (the province was still not ordaining women to the priesthood at that time) but rather that as a woman who had no intentions of leading a life in Religious community I had never married and what's more I had never had a child. To these women I was an aberration and I have no doubt for some an anathema. I did not fit into categories which had been defined as orthodox for women of the region. My personal life, my intimate life was therefore of great interest / concern to them and I found myself at times rather awkwardly having to defend my lifestyle, one which in North America had rarely been alluded to even if people had wanted to discuss it.

In other words I had no status for these women who looked upon me as a poor misbegotten, to be sure 'child of God', who might still be in time to be saved in that at that point I could still conceive.

I am afraid that I do not suppose I made many inroads with these women, as I attempted to incarnate another way of living life being faithful to the Risen Lord, except that when we parted we knew that although I was stranger than even they had thought possible, I was nevertheless a 'friend' whose life story had in fact had quite more in common than they had initially thought.

It is the 'otherness' the 'stranger' the person of 'liminal status' as Turner<sup>ii</sup> would put it, that can cause great anxiety on the one hand but one which on the other hand normally forces people to recognize that there are different paradigms of being in God's creation which are not antithetical to the living out of Baptismal vows.

I do not suspect that they would agree with me that my being a non mother was equivalent to the situation of those in our church communities who are Gay, lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender, and who therefore are considered by some as living on the margins but nor do I think that my being marginalized by their categories totally escaped their recognition that perhaps their categories of orthodox behaviours were too narrowly defined.

The point is that I left as Friend, and sometime during the three hours I became human rather than a problem that had to be addressed and fixed. I was not given honorary status (this would only be possible had I been beyond child bearing age) but I was given back my personhood, and in a small way 'included' in their lives.

- Learning \*1 Theoretical constructs are no substitution for Face to Face discussions.
- Learning \*2 People who accept Jesus as Lord have far more in common than is betrayed by their outward circumstances.
- Learning \*3 Difference is not reason enough for exclusion from the body of Christ
- Learning \*4 Listen to your former students.

I have started by way of this personal reflection because of my unrelenting belief that all theology, biblical and otherwise, arises out of personal experience which is guided sometimes in mysterious ways by the Spirit of the living God. This is not to say that such theology which arises from experience is always sufficiently profound so as to unite the multiplicities of experience which inform our life in Christ, nor that such theologies are the only vehicle of revelation. Rather because even though such experiences may be provisional they attest to the life of the Spirit and therefore our willingness to entertain different paradigms of what it may mean to be inclusive of different thought patterns as well as different Biblical and theological perspectives in the Anglican Communion. It is this 'willingness' which allows us to experience what the Virginia Report spoke of as the 'The mutuality and interdependence of each member and each part of the Church'<sup>iii</sup> (Virginia Report 240-241).

## **II Mutuality and Interdependence as Dynamic of Inclusive Church: Harmony or Counterpoint?**

Seen together these terms seem not to need much unpacking. Any reasonable person can understand that to be inclusive of thoughts which differ from your own requires a commitment to study these within the context of mutuality and Interdependence. To include someone's thoughts in your paradigms requires an acceptance that the 'otherness' is not completely alien to your fundamental world view which in this context would mean having a centre in Christ.

It is this centre of being 'In Christ' which allows us to speak of Mutuality and Interdependence as a form of counterpoint.

Viewing Inclusivity as Counterpoint and not simply Harmony is of course dangerous.<sup>iv</sup> But then, is this not what scripture itself witnesses to in that we have in the Biblical tradition theological viewpoints, which do not always harmonize?

## **III Communion as voices of Counterpoint**

The term Counterpoint comes from the Latin *contrapunctum*. 'against note'. In music, counterpoint is the relationship between two or more voices that are

independent in contour and rhythm, and interdependent in harmony. According to the on-line Groves dictionary of music,

despite differences in usage, the terms ‘counterpoint’ and ‘polyphony’ are practically synonymous, they nonetheless signify two different styles of writing in Adorno’s view: ‘counterpoint’ denotes a composition in which parts are graduated according to rank, ‘polyphony’ is a melodic arrangement of parts of equal importance (‘Die Funktion des Kontrapunkts in der neuen Musik’, *Nervenzpunkte der neuen Musik*, 1969, pp.69, 73)<sup>v</sup>

In musical composition when one part is added to an existing one, the new part is said to be 'in counterpoint with' it<sup>vi</sup> I would suggest that the constant search by various members of the Anglican Communion to forge univocal responses has driven the communion to a state of near paralysis. As one friend has put it to me “at the moment in the communion we have discord with an unresolved correction. That is disharmony.”

As you are aware, counterpoint is in the same key but with a different melody and sometimes time and as John Rahn has stated:

"It is hard to write a beautiful song. It is harder to write several individually beautiful songs that, when sung simultaneously, sound as a more beautiful polyphonic whole. The internal structures that create each of the voices separately must contribute to the emergent structure of the polyphony, which in turn must reinforce and comment on the structures of the individual voices. The way that is accomplished in detail is...!counterpoint'." <sup>vii</sup>

The question is whether or not Counterpoint can be seen as a realistic option when thinking of the Communion as a whole and our individual lives in particular. In some ways the Windsor Report seeks the univocal in its search for a covenantal formulary which all can agree on and which will prevent one province from acting according to its own melodic line. In so doing it betrays its innate authoritarianism precisely because such a covenant would have no need for mutuality and interdependence which the Virginia report held out as being the most promising way forward for deliberations of all kinds in the Communion.<sup>viii</sup>

#### **IV The Biblical tradition as Counterpoint<sup>ix</sup>**

We hear time and again of the necessity of reading scripture within its own historical perspectives. To this end there are any number of methods, which have been developed to aid our so doing. Scriptural proof texting has never been a method of argumentation which the communion has sought to uplift nor guide it in its deliberations. Yet if we were to be honest with ourselves we would have to

acknowledge that we have resorted to such methods in the past when we discussed racial and gender inclusiveness, and do so now when we hear some at least, pull verses of Scripture out of the context of the Bible as a whole when arguing against same sex relationships..

So much now has been written in terms of the meaning of various scripture passages which mention sex between members of the same sex that I do not have anything more to add. **Sufficient to issue a warning that given the paucity of such verses in Scripture and the fact that there is no agreement in terms of their meaning, let alone relevance for discussions on matters of homosexual orientation, these alone should not bear the weight of ethical decisions which could result in the exclusion of some.**

On the other hand Scripture itself gives us the paradigm of counterpoint which I think we should pay attention to as it is via this concept that we can better grasp how the biblical tradition created new theologies to account for circumstances which had changed.

(i) There is the example of 2<sup>nd</sup> Isaiah, the prophet of the exile, who rejects the theology of the pre-exilic Deuteronomic school and develops a paradigm of suffering servant to signal that Israel has now redeemed herself from her suffering.

(ii) Then there is the example from 3<sup>rd</sup> Isaiah, which deals with a matter of Levitical Law. The legal codes of the Torah considered many groups or classes of people to be outcasts. Yet in Isaiah 56:4-6 we read of another proposal that was less stringent in policies of exclusion.

In Deuteronomy 23:1-2, two sexual minorities, eunuchs and illegitimate children, are excluded from the assembly of the Lord. Regarding the exclusion of eunuchs, similar laws are found in Leviticus 21:17-21; 22:22-24, where sexual blemishes are seen as an indication of impurity and marks the person unacceptable to God. Eunuchs were cut off from benefits of cult and family life. In this regard they were like childless widows and stand outside the usual patterns of procreation and the blessings of prosperity that came from that. They are seen as being cursed by God. For example, Isaiah understands eunuchs to be barren, without off-spring and therefore "cut-off" from society and a generative future in the land. They are people under a curse and without power.

In Isaiah 56:4-6, we see another rule and custom articulated one in which eunuchs and foreigners are given God's blessing. The curse implicit in the law codes of Leviticus and Deuteronomy, is modified in that the excluded ones are now to be amongst the included. The modification comes by way of a new, conditional covenant, one which will include those previously 'cut off'. The conditions of the covenant blessings are three-fold, "to the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant" (Isa. 56:4). Thus, while "cut-off" from eternal life through bearing of children; it is through their

faith and obedience that eunuchs will gain an everlasting name. The same blessings are also extended to foreigners (Isa. 56:6), who are included under seven conditions, namely to "join themselves to the LORD, to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD, and to be his servants, all who keep the Sabbath, and do not profane it, and hold fast (God's) covenant (Isa. 56:6). This stands in counterpoint to the barrier of distinction and strict applications of gender related prohibitions under the Law codes of Leviticus and Deuteronomy. Nevertheless, the counterpoint which is created is not an open ended antinomianism. For these two groups must fulfill certain obligations. Are these not analogous to the obligations expected of those who as members of the Body of Christ through Baptism are expected to uphold? Be they Heterosexual, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual or Transgendered?

The topic of eunuchs is broached when we come to the New Testament as we read in Matthew 19:12, an ignoring of the provisions of the Torah (Deut. 23:2; Leviticus 21:17-21; 22:22-24) The result is a broadening of membership of the community. Gender roles as defined by the norms of patriarchy are broadened and those once excluded can now be included in promoting the kingdom of God.

Matthew 19:12 reads

“... for there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can.” (Matt. 19:12).

The implication of this last phrase “Let anyone accept this who can’ is important as we look at our own context of the Anglican Communion as a whole, for it is clear that what is implied is that some would or could not accept such a proposition, but in any case, both remain included.

(iv) There is also the great ‘protest literature’ of the Book of Job as a case point, for it is this book which delivers a radically different perspective to righteousness in the face of what is considered to be an inadequate ‘wisdom theology’ of the day. In the case of the Book of Job, the main character’s personal experience leads him to challenge the accepted theology of the day which dictated that the righteous are rewarded and the unrighteous punished. This of course is not what Job experiences and hence leads to the philosophical discourses of the book. The conclusion of these discourses being that “Job you were right to question the theology of the day in the light of your experience and your ‘comforters’ were wrong to uphold such a theology at your expense. What is now necessary to understand is that ‘Your God is too small’ if you think that I can be boxed in to any one particular theology of justice.”

The point I am trying to make here is that through these examples from the law, the prophets and the writings and then the Gospel, we have examples which

produce counterpoint and not harmony when considered within the Bible as a whole. The power of these examples is not so much in terms of their providing paradigms of reversal but rather in the understanding that theology does not remain stagnant and that when there are new perspectives to be given the older perspective is not simply erased from the memory of the written record. **Rather the new is placed side by side with the old and a form of counterpoint is created.** I will leave the experts of music to discuss further the attributes of harmony, counterpoint and polyphony but I will suggest that counterpoint is a far more complex and thus when seen in the Biblical text allows for the sorts of complex and different situations we find in the Anglican Communion, indeed in the Church as a whole.

Needless to say that proof texting of any kind, will radically distort if not negate the complex counterpoint of the Biblical tradition as a whole.

## **V People of God or People of Circumstance**

To these biblical examples I would cite the story of the centurion's paralysed son in Mathew 8:5-18 and its parallel in Luke 7:1-10; the story of the Canaanite woman of Mathew 15:21-28 and its parallel in Mark 7:24-30; the story of Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch in Acts 8:27-39. All these instances point to the inclusive nature of Jesus' teachings about the Kingdom in that all these examples are of people who are included because of their faith in the Lordship of Jesus. Their gender, ethnic, religious and social status are of no significance, except that they witness to the groups of people who are most ready to hear and accept Jesus' Kingdom teachings, namely those who have no status and are positively reviled by those who are closest to Jesus. Even the outcast eunuch of Acts is accorded inclusion through Baptism. Each of these stories has a depth of meaning which time this morning does not permit our looking at, but the idea that the New Testament does not speak of including those once considered as 'outsiders', and this by the Law is simply not born out by the biblical tradition.

The question for us today as in every day is to look carefully at the ways in which we carve boundaries which would exclude. From the Biblical traditions' witness the regulations governing such boundaries should not be determined on the basis of anything other than a willingness to accept Jesus as Lord and a willingness to act according to the values of the kingdom. Ethnic, religious, gender, and social status are not determinative. These are matters of circumstance, not faith. It would seem that we should be able to add sexual orientation to the list as but another example of prejudice now seen as unwarranted but we are soon faced with the reality that past arguments for excluding some from certain offices of the church based on biblical notions of race, and gender are still being used by members of the Communion.

## VI Loving the Sinner but not the Sin

When we come to the issue of sexual orientation there has developed a rather strange notion that somehow you can distinguish between that orientation and the way it manifests itself. This is a fair enough possibility as I am sure that we would all agree that heterosexual behaviour is not something which is accepted 'carte blanche' by members of the Body of Christ. That is to say that there are any number of heterosexual behaviours, which we would agree, are unacceptable because of their innate structures of power imbalance. So incest, sex with a dead person, sex with what any particular society determines as being a 'minor', infidelity to a spouse. (This last category including for example, heterosexual members of the Body of Christ who belong to 'wife-swapping' clubs).

I would suggest to you that the distinction between who a lesbian or Gay person is in terms of their sexual orientation is not capable of being divorced from their primary locus of desire and therefore their fundamental yearning for relationships, which are other than heterosexual. The phrase "practicing homosexual" is a nonsense, indeed it serves only to diminish and humiliate the personhood of the one it seeks to describe.

If the usual biblical proof texts, that is Leviticus 18 and or Romans 1 are used to argue against such desires then it is quite clear that in the first instance what is being spoken of is anal sex between men, a prohibition which is intimately tied to issues of ritual purity, and in the latter case actions which are entered into which promote licentiousness and therefore infidelity and are therefore equated with idolatry.

But I give you now another scenario. A Christian who happens to be homosexual might say, I uphold my baptismal vows and receive communion at the table of the Lord every Sunday. I am a faithful member of the body Christ and seek to incarnate the values of the kingdom of God in all that I do, and say and think. The regulations governing the blessing of same sex unions, as envisioned in the Diocese of New Westminster, are in keeping with the values of the kingdom of God in that they speak amongst other things of fidelity to the other partner and seek to regulate relationships within the people of God to promote 'Kingdom values'. My relationship with my beloved is of primary importance to my life for it defines who I am and I want nothing more than to be granted the privilege of living my life in Christ with my beloved by my side. It is this relationship which I vow to be faithful to and would want the world to know about. Therefore I ask that it be blessed in a ceremony which will proclaim to the rest of the world that I and my beloved are one and that we will lead our lives together in Christ.

How can this homosexual Christian be denied such a ceremony? Why would anyone want to deny him/her that ceremony?

I personally, have never accepted the speculative and scientifically unfounded notion that homosexual orientation is reversible. Nor do I think that the

complexities involved in psycho-sexual identity development are anywhere presumed by the biblical writers. These are understandings that have only come to light in the past century.

I do however hold that those who belong to the body of Christ as defined in their baptismal vows are bound by those vows to certain behaviours and that there are certain behaviours, which because of their effects nullify baptismal vows. Consequently, there are certain possible lifestyles that are incommensurate with the Gospel be they heterosexual or homosexual. For example, I cannot see how wife swapping is commensurate with a sacramental theology of marriage. It therefore lies outside the vision of baptismal vows and is therefore to be condemned by the church. I think it would be a rare priest who upon discovery that there were a number in her parish who had started up a Friday night wife swapping club would upon such a discovery permit these same people to the table of the Lord.

### **Concluding Remarks**

This past decade has been a turbulent one for the Anglican Communion, largely because of its desire to remain a ‘broad church’ whose theology is capable of enveloping different perspectives and therefore meanings based on this or that biblical text. **We continue however to miss the point when we do not take seriously the fact that it is not the authority of the Bible which is in question but rather the authority of the interpretative method.** There is no denying that the perspectives of feminist biblical scholars and others who have named the destructive forces of Patriarchal thinking with regards to inclusivity, have pushed our understanding of the Biblical tradition beyond its own boundaries.<sup>x</sup>

If harmony is what we seek then the biblical text is not where we should start. The Biblical text is clear that what is needed is an ability to understand life in the Spirit as counterpoint, and therefore polyphony. In this understanding, we will better grasp how the biblical traditions create from within an interpretation of tradition, which permits the ongoing revelation of Holy Spirit. This of course is not to suggest that we can manipulate Holy Spirit, but rather that we not erase from our memory the biblical tradition of counterpoint in which and from which Holy Spirit acts.

If harmony is what we seek, then it will not be found within the confines of the patriarchally defined theologies of the past, which took very little consideration of the perspectives of women and certain other disenfranchised groups spoken of in the Biblical tradition.

Let it be that the Anglican Communion continue to delight in the many voices it has come to know from within as much as from without, for there can be no denial of the many ways in which our ecumenical partners have broadened our foci. The results of the ‘Listening Process’ are still emerging and we must be

careful to do nothing which might undermine these no matter how much our sensibilities may be shocked from the conclusions of our sisters and brothers in various parts of the communion including our own province. It may be that I will not be able to sing the melodies of one part of the communion but this must not mean that I should shut them out of my hearing in search of harmony. It must not mean that I cease to see the other as Friend.

As my former professor of theology and now colleague put it to me the other day, in an e-mail response to what I had written, it is:

Not that harmony is undesirable, but it is always 'not yet'. And when we make 'harmony' here and now the norm for all relationships, including those that constitute the church, we set up a false ideal in relation to which we all (when we are honest) fail.... a real conversation--in fact real love--depends upon this non-harmonious status, upon there being two. There is a very questionable eschatology at work in situations (whether churches or families or love-relationships) where harmony is expected in all its fulfilment. The 'not yet' must be observed--not for theoretical reasons, but because otherwise the truth of difference, otherness, or whatever you may call it, is violated.

We who constitute part of the vision of the Kingdom, you and I, are diminished when all we seek for is harmony. There are no short cuts when it comes to 'hearing' the other, and even fewer when what is being expected, is the listening to the polyphony created by the counterpoint of our contemporary circumstances as they combine with our Biblical and theological heritages.

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<sup>i</sup> Patricia Bays, , *Anglican Diversity: Challenges for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (ABC Publishing: Toronto,2001)

<sup>ii</sup> V. Turner, *The ritual process: Structure and anti-structure*, (Aldine, 1969)

<sup>iii</sup> <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/documents/virginia/english/index.html>

<sup>iv</sup> I am grateful to Archbishop Michael Peers who pointed out in a letter written to me after the conference that "The negotiations leading to the formation of the General Synod were very difficult" and required a great deal of negotiating in order to surmount the fears of a union between the eastern and western Church of England churches in Canada. The Archbishop referred me to the Journal of Proceedings of the First Session of the General Synod of the Church of England in the Dominion of Canada, (The British Whig Office,Kingston 1894) and in particular to

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the sermon preached by the Metropolitan of Rupert's Land ( pp64-70) wherein the Archbishop speaks of the union as: 'not a bringing together of estranged and separated bretheren, but of those who have come from one household – the Mother Church of England and Ireland – and have been all along of one mind. It is in short not for harmony, but for strength.' P67

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<http://www.grovemusic.com/shared/views/article.html?section=music.42927.1.7#music.42927.1.7>

<sup>vi</sup> Stanley Sadie, ed., *The Grove Concise Dictionary of Music* Macmillan Press Ltd., London.

<sup>vii</sup> John Rahn, (2000). *Music Inside Out: Going Too Far in Musical Essays*, p. 177

<sup>viii</sup> "A Response to the Windsor Report", Windsor Report Response Group for the Council of General Synod of the Anglican Church of Canada. March 2007.  
<http://www.anglican.ca/faith/identity/index.htm>

<sup>ix</sup> Bruce Zuckerman, *Job the Silent* (OUP, 1991)

<sup>x</sup> Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, , *Jesus and the Politics of Interpretation* (Continuum International Publishing Group, 2000); *Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Orbis Books 2001). R.R Reuther,, *Sexism and God Talk* ( Beacon press 1983 ); *Goddesses and the Divine Feminine: A Western Religious History* (University of California Press, 2005) Bernadette Brooten, , *Love Between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism* (University of Chicago Press, 1996)