

The Charge of Cultural Imperialism is a Ruse

By Mark Harris

THE 2003 GENERAL CONVENTION of the Episcopal Church will respond in one way or another to resolutions calling for the development of a form for the blessing of committed and faithful relationships other than marriage. It is vital that the General Convention bishops and deputies honor the demand for debate and decision. It is time for a resolution to come out of the legislative committee and make it to the convention floor. It is time to let the General Convention's Yes be Yes and No be No.

There is a ruse being employed by those opposed to the passage or even the consideration of such a resolution, a ruse that must be addressed. It is a ruse already being employed in the attacks on the election of Gene Robinson as Bishop of New Hampshire. That ruse is to accuse supporters of arrogant "cultural imperialism," disregard for mission, and racism.

For many undecided or modestly supportive members in the two houses, charges of these sorts will encourage immobilization, precisely the effect desired by those raising the charge. In the context of the decisions to be made at General Convention, we need to see these and similar charges precisely for what they are — efforts to make liberals feel guilty, to distance the undecided, and to terminate the Convention process for debate and decision by a strikingly uncanonical appeal to consensus.

Charges of cultural imperialism have emerged in several ways:

"The Gift of Sexuality: A Theological Perspective," the paper of the Theological Committee of the House of Bishops (which was received, not adopted, by that House) states, "St. Paul teaches that the wisdom of God is the great reversal of strength and weakness, as the world understands these (1 Cor. 1:27-30). Political, military, economic, and social power often bespeak spiritual weakness..." (p. 3).

The report is right in this, of course. We know that spiritual power, exhibited primarily in prophecy and justice, is not often found in the haunts of the socially or ecclesiastically mighty. This observation is just as true in every other part of the ecclesiastical world, global North or global

South, as it is in the U.S. Episcopal Church.

The writers suggest that the "Western" churches of the Anglican Communion exercise ecclesiastical power that betrays spiritual weakness. They argue that we in the Anglican churches in the West must therefore give way to the understandings, beliefs, feelings and ecclesiastical insights of the churches of the "South," putting aside our "power," which is considered "spiritually weak."

The report appeals to the need for Anglican unity. Its major recommendation is that in the face of lack of consensus by various expressions of

Anglican Communion-wide opinion, those churches considering such action ought not go forward with the planning of such services. Since those churches are from the global North, taking such action would be to exercise spiritually weak but presumably economically strong ecclesial power.

It would, in other words, be culturally, politically and economically imperialistic.

In the Theological Committee report, the phrase itself is not used, but the argument is there. In other documents the name-calling is direct.

"True Union in the Body?" is a tract commissioned by Drexel Gomez, Archbishop of the West Indies, written by authors unnamed (nor is the source of funding indicated). It purports to spell out the orthodox position regarding same-sex relationships and the blessing of such relationships. As far as one can tell, it has no official standing of any agency of the Anglican Communion's instruments of unity, save that it was the basis for discussion at the Primates' May 2003 meeting in Brazil.

In that booklet the authors state, "We are well aware that truth claims can be a cloak for power-games, and that worldviews can be imposed on others in ways that are abusive and oppressive or which marginalize the voiceless" (p. 7). It asks, "Is it a coincidence that the gay movement has arisen in a Western culture that is post-Christian, highly sexualized and, to them [those living in poorer parts of the globe] politically and economically imperialist?" And then, "Those of us living within Western culture need to hear such uncomfortable questions raised from outside."

The charge of cultural imperialism... is being used to cut off debate before it begins.

Here the outline of the cultural imperialist charge is laid out in full:

1. Homosexual Christians are pushing their agenda by the use of the power which belongs to churches of the decadent post-Christian Western culture (i.e. the global North) and not by the truth that comes from the Gospel.
2. Christians in the poorer world believe this is cultural imperialism in its ecclesiastical form.
3. We (presumably Western fair-minded persons) need to listen to and heed this criticism from the wider Christian church (i.e. the churches of the global South). The assumption is that if we listen we will realize that the West is, at least in this instance, spiritually bankrupt.

It may be that for other reasons the West and its churches are indeed spiritually bankrupt, but neither the writers of the House of Bishops' Theological Committee paper, nor the writers or sponsors of the "True Union" paper are in any position to crow. They are both papers commissioned by Episcopal authority, whose very form in Anglican churches betrays imperial origins. The Christianity expressed in the episcopacy throughout the Anglican Communion is sadly lacking in anything like a clear iconographic image of the holiness of God that brings forth justice and prophetic judgment.

The charge that liberals have an exclusive monopoly on cultural imperialism is hogwash. It is a scam meant to inhibit and cow moderate and liberal leaders of the Episcopal Church. It is meant to produce a guilt reaction and a withdrawal from the contest at hand. It is, in other words, precisely the kind of power play that it claims to be exposing.

The charge is a ruse, and we should name and scorn it as such. There are many arguments for or against the proposal to develop rites for the blessing of same-sex relationships, but cultural imperialism is not a valid one. Those who oppose these rites must be expected to openly argue for their cause. They have done so with considerable skill. But when they charge cultural imperialism we need to pass them by.

The charge of cultural imperialism is not an argument against General Convention resolutions concerning the blessing of relationships. It is not an argument against the long and careful processes in the Diocese of New Westminster, or against the prayerful episcopal election of Gene Robinson. It is an argument against the integrity of persons supporting such resolutions. It is that great dirty ploy of debate, the *ad hominem* argument, used when the debate has gotten desperate.

The charge of cultural imperialism is appropriate as a challenge to accountability. But this is not the dynamic of this charge in the debate at hand. Here, in the context of a General Convention, it is being used to cut off debate before it begins. It is being used as a label, a branding instrument, an instrument of fear. And we must respond as one ought to all such branding, with courage and determination to act as God gives us light.

"Issues take us away from mission"

Opponents to the movement for the church's blessing of same-sex unions have recently used another related argument — a charge that "issues" take us away from the call to mission." They argue that the concerns of LGBT people as a "special interest group" detract us

from mission. In this argument, the "homosexual community's issues" have no business being imposed on the Episcopal Church, much less the Anglican Communion, since it, after all, needs to be about mission.

Opponents of the blessing rites are quick to claim that it is the churches of the global North that are "failing." They argue that these churches need to drop the "gay Christian agenda," since it is the churches of the global South that are on the numerical rise. Surely, they insist, it is cultural imperialism, not mission, that is forcing the issue in the global North. "Not issues, but mission," they cry.

Humbug! Mission is shot through and through with issues related to being made new in Christ. People and nations everywhere are in need of new life in Christ and issues of cultural, social, economic and political life are always at stake. The restoration and unity which are the purpose of mission concern precisely the issues that separate and incapacitate us. The success of mission is not about numbers, but about justice done for the oppressed, about the lifting of burdens, and proclaiming Christ crucified, and no church in the Anglican Communion — or elsewhere for that matter — has any business bragging about its success.

Concerns about racism

There are finally elements of the charge of cultural imperialism that raise concerns about racism. Peter Akinola, Archbishop of Nigeria, made a statement at the 1998 Lambeth Conference, which he echoed in May 2003 following the decision in the Diocese of New Westminster in Canada to authorize and use rites for the blessing of same-sex unions. He said,

"Many of us from the two-thirds world feel that the global North still seeks to retain its disproportionate power and influence in our church just as in the world. It is significant that those dioceses most tempted to indulge themselves with unilateral actions, taken without consulting the wider Communion, seem so often to be among those materially most advantaged and to be in the global North. Should this not occasion reflection? Do we not see here, in the ready assertion of superior wisdom, a new imperialism?"

The imperialism here referenced is not cultural (which can be and is exercised by all sorts of communities). The accusation here is about the global North (read white) exercising imperialism against the two-thirds world (read people of color).

The Episcopal Church will indeed have to answer to charges of cultural imperialism, disregard for mission and racism in many specifics of its life, programs and policies. But the charges filed here in various and indirect ways are not about such matters of content. The charge of racism here is made in order to silence individuals, groups, dioceses and member churches of the Anglican Communion. They are raised not to change minds but to immobilize.

The response to such charges is to take courage: courage in the process of deliberation, debate and vote that constitutes the work and life of General Convention; courage in the knowledge that God indeed works purpose from our efforts to discern a way reflective of the Way of Christ; courage in the corrective that the Holy Spirit brings to all our efforts, both in the Episcopal Church and in the wider life in Christ.

It is time to let the General Convention's Yes be Yes and No be No. ●

about the author

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