

Conversations in the Communion: We Need More Than a Translator

Ephraim Radner

I confess that my heart sank when reading Susan Russell's recent description of her visit to England, with other gay advocates, to talk to Communion representatives before the upcoming Primates' Meeting ["A California Yankee in King Arthur's Communion"]. Russell insists that there be "listening to" and "conversation with" gay Anglicans of the Communion, and she believes that the current unraveling of the Communion is due to the "steadfast refusal" of Communion leaders to pursue such discussions. What depressed me was the context Russell believes must obtain if this conversation is to be acceptable.

Russell's governing assumption is that the position for which she is an advocate -- full gay inclusion in the life and leadership of the church -- is correct and God-affirmed. This is no surprise: most of us think that our positions are correct and operate from that conviction; most of us think God is on our side. So the assumption isn't odd in itself. What is odd is the assumption's relation to the grievance that it is meant to inform, that is, the fact that the Communion has "steadfastly refused" to engage in a "listening process" as promised with her and with those whom she represents.

Such "listening" in this case, after all, is meant to promote understanding and thereby to further "discernment" about Christian teaching on sexuality. But discernment for whom? Not apparently for Russell, since "full gay inclusion" is already understood to be a "Gospel imperative" and because of this fact is already being lived out "incarnationally". But, then, if the Communion's "instruments of unity" that have denied such an "imperative" also believe their views are correct and God-affirmed, the "listening" is at its least rancorous about two groups hearing how certain the other is. And it is hard to be sympathetic with a grievance based on a failure to trade immovable commitments.

This represents, we all know, part of the difficulty of the moment. For the "listening" process proposed (and not pursued) by various Lambeth resolutions was based on a vision quite different from Russell's. These resolutions had, as their foundation, an acknowledged teaching on sexuality that claimed that such "full inclusion" was in fact *not* God-affirmed; indeed that Scripture could *not* sustain it. Yet for Russell, these teachings cannot be the basis for a discussion, but rather must be seen as elements that are themselves "in question" from the start, if not outright mistaken.

So what, in this context, would be the purpose of a conversation? Perhaps simply to hear why Russell and others believe the Communion to be wrong, and to hear their reasons for ignoring the Communion's teaching. But that it not at all what the Lambeth resolutions themselves viewed as the goal of listening. The "listening" envisaged by the Lambeth resolutions, instead, implied the search for new understanding within the context of a received teaching; it even hinted at new learning, if not thereby necessarily promising change in doctrine or discipline. What Russell seeks, however is not clarity but concession. And the tone of grievance is shown to be an articulation of demand. Michael Hopkins' claim in his essay on "Broken Promises" referred to by Russell, is that

many Provinces haven't "listened" according to resolutions passed in Lambeth '78 and '88. This is undoubtedly true (although not entirely). But it is true in large part because the framework for this process – the acceptance of a Scriptural "norm" regarding sexual behavior – was up front rejected by those who wanted to be listened to. So the grievance here is transformed into an alternative theological premise. For the actual theological premise of these resolutions was that the "Scriptural norm" did not permit ordinations and blessings of partnered and sexually active gay persons.

Of course, gay priests have in fact been ordained and same-sex blessings performed for years within North America (and Britain as well, it appears), all during the period in which this "listening" was to have taken place. This is all well-known. Hence, "Changing Attitude's" recent Submission to the Primates on "Inclusive Communion" (signed by Russell among others) states an obvious commitment on their part, that "the full inclusion of lesbian and gay people in the Church at all levels is a Gospel imperative" and that "we do not approve of the moratoria on consecrations and blessings proposed. True discernment can only happen in the context of people's experience of these developments. Moreover we cannot expect people's lives to be put on hold while discernment takes place." In other words: we will keep doing what we've been doing for a long time, and you must listen to us, no matter what you thought you were proposing in '78 and '88 and '98.

Again, this is not just cultural respect that is being asked for, as if American Episcopalians have some unusual custom, quaint and innocuous, that non-Americans around the world ought to acknowledge and entertain with curiosity. The argument has recently been pressed – by our Presiding Bishop among others – that ECUSA's polity is really quite unique and democratic and the rest of the Communion simply doesn't understand our special way of doing things, culturally peculiar as it is. Yet at the same time, we are told by people like Russell that the councils of the Communion are themselves "unrepresentative" because they are all made up of bishops, and have few laity and not many women and so on, and therefore cannot count as authoritative. This sounds very much as if what is "peculiar" to ECUSA's American culture is actually morally normative for the rest of the Communion. Which is simply another way of saying, "we are right and you are wrong, and we will find a way to get our way everywhere".

What, then, was the "conversation" to be about? Integrity and similar groups did not accept the very premises of the resolutions, which were meant to provide the space for "listening". Instead, they have insisted that the only way to have "discernment" is to act in rejection of the premises and now officially to *permit*, even embrace their rejection altogether. And they are aggrieved that this is seen as problematic.

I belabor this point in order to emphasize how incongruent are the notions of "listening" and "conversation" at issue here between Russell and the Communion. So incongruent are they, in fact, that it is hard to know what one is talking about really. And, in this light, the outbursts of anger Russell evidences seem to stem from profound misunderstandings of what we are all doing, evidently at cross-purposes. This is the best

I can manage in trying to grasp on what rational basis Russell can describe Communion (and not just “conservative”) alarm and reaction as “temper tantrums”; can picture Communion defenders and conservatives as being primarily “anti-women’s ordination” (when that is patently false as a general rule – among Americans as much as among Africans); can refer to ECUSA conservatives as somehow being a tiny minority of those “who lost”, when in fact the only representative councils we have in the Communion (and that included American bishops) have been quite clear in their consensual rejection of General Convention actions (as have most of our major ecumenical partners); and can demonstrate the purported “lack of unanimity” around Lambeth I.10 through only two examples – a few bishops in the dwindling Episcopal Church of Scotland and the Diocese of LA (although I suppose many other American bishops could have been mentioned). On the face of it, these kinds of claims simply don’t fit.

But one must also try to make sense of this. Some of Russell’s presenting grievances are real, after all and very importantly so, on a number of fronts. They are all, however, political grievances. And the problem here is that the “politics of grievance” has been transposed into a “theology of grievance” which is something – despite Liberationist meanderings – that has never been viewed as a valid way of thinking about the Christian vocation. Nonetheless, we cannot dismiss the lack of courtesy, human respect, and in some places, human decency shown by Christians and their leaders towards gay persons, including those within their churches. Indeed it must be mourned over and rectified. There is no doubt that in many parts of the world – including parts of the United States – homosexuals are not only vilified, but publicly degraded and mistreated. And Christian churches in some cases actually encourage this. It is right to be aggrieved by this and to bring one’s grievance before the tribunal of public opinion and justice both within and outside the Christian Church.

But Russell and her cohorts go much further than this. They move forward with the assumption here that, if this kind of political grievance is well-founded, then the “ethics and theology” of the Church itself must clearly be shaped by these realities on a fundamental level. This simply isn’t true. The Church of Christ is bound, for a number of reasons, to promote the dignified treatment of gay persons, and indeed of all kinds of people, and to oppose their political (in the broad sense) mistreatment. But does this in any way translate into or imply that the Church affirms the characteristics or behaviors that define such particular human groupings, or that the Church must reorder her life to uphold these behaviors? Hardly. One can be rightly aggrieved for how persons are treated; but one cannot therefore claim that such persons have some kind of theologically-grounded place of moral or doctrinal acceptance within the Church’s ordered life.

A simple example suffices to expose this fallacy. The Christian has a number of good reasons – not all of them of some first-order theological character – for upholding the rights of “free speech” or “free assembly” in a given society where Christians live (or perhaps even do not live). Some of these reasons may have something to do with the Christian conception of “conscience” and of “freedom” in the eyes of God – hence the long-standing Christian prohibition of forced baptisms (frequently ignored); some may

have something to do with prudential concerns regarding common civic life. But just because the Christian Church may therefore seek to defend the rights of individuals to speak freely, and may be informed in such defenses by theological concerns, this does not nor should it imply any affirmation of or even condoning of the actual speech articulated by the individuals in question. In fact, the Church may even find the speech at issue to be reprehensible and blasphemous, and unacceptable among its own members. This has, in fact, proved to be the case in the United States with respect to a number of hateful and atheistic platforms that the Church, nonetheless, believes it appropriate to safeguard within the civic realm.

Theology and ethics enter here, of course; but they enter as unsystematic elements by which to inform political demands upon the Church's choices within the civic sphere of the larger society in which Christians are called to act responsibly. And all of these are themselves subject to a range of practical judgments that are not fundamentally related to basic doctrinal and disciplinary matters of the Christian community. "Justice" here is the coincidence of various theological and pragmatic concerns. It is by no means a simple equivalent of the "justice" of, say, the Old Testament prophets (cf. Micah 6:8), where the revealed Law of God is the very particular context in which "judgment" and "righteousness" find their clear enunciation.

Christians, likewise, are bound to respond with care and decisiveness to the legitimate grievances of gay persons as to their mistreatment not only within the civil sphere, but especially by persons within the church as it touches upon the reality of human dignity in general. But such an obligation in no way implies that the Church is to affirm homosexuality as a lived expression of self in accordance with the will of God – God's "justice" -- especially among those who claim to be disciples of Jesus Christ. Indeed, the Church has always said the opposite.

Thus, Russell's dismissal of traditional (Anglican) teaching regarding sexuality as representing a subservient and blinkered interest in "Levitical purity codes" and "ecclesiology" in the face of the great Judgment of Christ demonstrates not only an ignorance (or rejection) on her part of what this teaching actually is and what are its foundations, but also a complete confusion as to where the "conversation" about the fulfillment of human personhood, in Christian terms, is located – not in the category of political grievance and its demands (whose reach she has extended far beyond its legitimate sphere), but precisely of theology itself. While claiming to desire such a Scriptural and theological conversation, however, she excludes from the start the very foundations by which such a conversation has any semantic reach and common apprehension within the Christian Church: the "grammar" of the Christian faith according to the Church's consensual reading of Scripture itself.

This confusion – witting or not -- probably accounts for the apparent absence of awareness regarding the "failures" of communication against which she complains. For the "conversation" she desires, as I have pointed out earlier, appears to be one of a political process of acceptance of *faits-accomplis*, rather than a search for a Christian understanding upon which any re-articulation of teaching and order could be

implemented. For, from the start, the assumption held by Russell's movement has been that there is no such teaching and order that ought to be respected; only a state of affairs that needs to be rectified and embodied in civic and ecclesial statute (or removal of the same).

Something basic is going on here in this way of thinking by which political grievances are assumed to be equivalent to theological imperatives. I am not sure of its ground, but the method represents a category mistake of enormous proportions. Let me use an analogy.

There are not many "creationists" in ECUSA. But the movements that have successfully pressed for "gay inclusion" in the Christian Church, like Integrity, stand as conceptual analogues to Creationism's bizarre and destructive advancing of categorical confusions. Just as creationists have attempted (and succeeded in some places at doing) to re-define the disciplines of "science" within the sphere of public education according to a religious intellectual practice that has nothing to do with the physical sciences, so too the movements of gay inclusion within the churches have tried to impose the principles of a limited conceptual sphere – civil grievances, identified by a particular form of sexual self-expression -- upon an entirely different realm of knowledge and experience, theology.

This outlook, which is derived from political categories, is now pretending – and the word is too weak here, because it is a kind of Alice-in-Wonderland inversion of normal reality and semantic understanding – to define by their alien substance the shape and decisions of a Christian Church whose religious contours simply *mean something different altogether*. We are calling black white, and white black. It is mind-numbing. Alas, this is a category mistake of such complete rupture as to bring an outcome wholly destructive of a host of spiritual and civic integrities together (e.g. using the word "marriage" to name something utterly alien to its proper semantic referent, and so confusing civil law, theology, and common speech all at once). People can go down this road; people have. But is it a surprise that in doing so everything falls apart?

It is not my purpose to implicate Integrity and its kin with the kinds of prejudiced know-nothingism we sometimes associate with "Creation Science", although there are odd kinds of similarities between the two that go beyond the simple conceptual analogue (e.g. claiming "divinely created" physical/genetic realities [what could this mean?] that determine sexual orientation, despite lack of anything approaching established let alone accepted evidence, and erecting from these ideological convictions a pseudo-scientific screen that has deflected clear thinking). The main connection I am drawing is between each movement's attempt to use a political process to colonize an alien conceptual realm with incompatible ideas, methods, and purposes.

Those of us in Colorado, for instance, are familiar with Integrity members' support of civil lawsuits against parish and diocese (and their leaders) over the removal a gay youth director, subsequent to her participation in a same-sex blessing with her partner. The lawsuits were based on municipal, state, and federal employment statutes. These lawsuits

were eventually deemed by the courts to be unfounded, precisely on the basis of a distinction between civil and religious/theological realms of order. The courts determined that the religious and moral convictions of churches as they are theologically ordered -- even to the point of informing acceptable behavior within the ecclesial community -- are not governed by the state's secular laws of equal opportunity. Yet it is revealing that this categorical distinction, enshrined (still) in American constitutional law, is also precisely what Integrity refuses to accept as relevant to the "conversation".

And in light of this refusal, I fear that the "conversation" Russell not only seeks, but demands, cannot go anywhere. The kinds of category confusions represented here -- at least as perceived by one group of interlocutors -- can only doom speaking and listening to a realm of mutual misunderstanding. Furthermore, the confusion is one whose consequences are fraught with political violence, not simply because the Anglican Communion hates gay people -- a moral failure, where present, that *does* demand more than talk to overcome -- but because when political grievances attempt to determine theological truth, the truth itself becomes the victim.

How then shall we speak with one another? The mutual accusations being hurled as to "who started this mess?" have some historical interest. I continue to believe, however, that the main framework of the Windsor Report's proposal is rightly ordered in a way that properly sidesteps these recriminations: we speak to one another, not so much in terms of a "how", as of a "where" -- within the Church's communion and her forms of common life, speech, and council. Returning to *this* place would be a start. We have already seen many who clearly do not want this, each holding different ground. The Windsor Report describes this as "walking apart". So be it. But there are many others, far many more, who would like to walk the other path.