

“MOTIVATED THINKING”
OR
ON WHY THE DYNAMICS OF LIFE WITHIN THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH
SO CLOSELY RESEMBLE THOSE OF THE U.S. CONGRESS

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Polls indicate that people of all political persuasions are frustrated by the “gridlock” that now characterizes congressional debate and action. Many go on to ask how and why this sad state of affairs has come about. Recently, these questions presented themselves to me in a particularly powerful way when I read that unspecified complaints by unspecified persons had been registered under the new Title IV against nine Episcopal Bishops. I wondered on what basis such complaints possibly could have been made. My question became more pressing when later I learned, upon enquiry, that a similar complaint against me had been lodged with my diocese.

The answer to this question came to me in the form of a disturbing thought. Perhaps the complainants believe themselves to be in possession of a set of facts that to my mind are not facts at all. Perhaps their complaint is based upon a construal of reality that to their minds is quite accurate but to mine is utterly fanciful. This thought was followed by another prompted by an article in a recent edition of the *New Yorker* entitled “Unpopular Mandate.”

The gist of the article is this. Public discourse in this country is now dominated by what the author calls “Motivated Thinking.” Dan Kahan, a professor of law and psychology at Yale University, says that motivated thinking occurs “when a person is conforming their assessments of information to some interest or goal that is independent of accuracy.” An interest or goal, he says may be “remaining a well-regarded member of a political party (we might add or a church), or winning the next election, or even just winning an argument.” In these instances and many others, reasoning may well be carried on in a way that is independent of the facts of the matter in question.

The author of the article (Ezra Klein) gives a number of examples of the sort of thinking social scientists have in mind when they speak of Motivated Thinking. My favorite comes from professor Geoffrey Cohen of Stanford University. He showed a group of students two articles—one a generic news story and one that described a proposed welfare policy. The generic story was a decoy. Prof Cohen’s real interest was in reactions to the one describing welfare policy. He wanted to know if party affiliation influenced voters when they assess new policies. To find out he produced multiple versions of the welfare article. Some students read about programs that were generous and others programs that were anything but. Nevertheless, in some versions of these articles that described a generous policy he indicated support by Republican Party leaders; and in some of the ones containing meager programs he described them as having Democratic support. He found that if a liberal student’s party endorsed the meager program so did the liberal student, and if the conservative party leaders supported the more liberal proposal, so did the conservative students. In each case the goal serving to

motivate and shape thinking was based not on an assessment of the policy proposals themselves but upon party loyalty and identification. On both the left and the right Prof. Cohen found that Motivated Thinking rather than assessment of the facts determined the outcome. The author points out a similar dynamic on the national political scene. For example, in respect to health care, much of President Obama's program was once the property of Republicans, but now is opposed by Republicans. Those same programs were once opposed by Democrats but are now supported by them. Why the switch?

Motivated Thinking!

So does Motivated Thinking now shape the dynamics of the common life of the Episcopal Church in the same way it appears to shape the common life of the nation; and if it does, what ought to be done about it? If one reads the blogs on both left and right it is hard to avoid the conclusion that most postings either are made up of highly selective facts or clear falsehoods, or they simply assert what needs to be proved without reference to facts of any kind. Indeed, I would say that the dominant form of church speech on the Internet and elsewhere in The Episcopal Church is comprised of assertion rather than argument. The blogs positively beg for unsupported opinion forcefully asserted and weakly argued (if at all).

The Episcopal Church is not far away from its last General Convention—one before which came matters that will define the common life of our church for generations to come. What form of speech characterized these deliberations—assertion or well supported argument, motivated thinking or critical reasoning? I understand there was a good bit of both, but I am troubled by the perception that Motivated Thinking had the upper hand. An open letter of complaint from Bishops Buchanan and Ohl issued just prior to the General Convention against Bishops whom they believed (falsely) supported the Dioceses that left The Episcopal Church only increased my alarm.¹ It provided a classic example of Motivated Thinking—thinking that occurs “when a person is conforming their assessments of information to some interest or goal that is independent of accuracy.” In their conclusion the bishops asked the House of Bishops to “set the record straight on the polity of this church regarding its hierarchical character.” The body of the letter made clear that they believe the hierarchy begins with the General Convention and the Office of the Presiding Bishop, and then works downward to the various dioceses and their respective parishes. It is precisely this view of hierarchy that the bishops against whom complaints have been made dispute.² The nature and extent of hierarchy in The Episcopal Church is a constitutional issue now being debated both within the church and within the courts, yet no argument supporting the request of the Bishops Buchanan and Ohl for a summary judgment in this matter is provided. The House of Bishops was simply asked to make an assertion.

The request of bishops Buchanan and Ohl was supported not by four arguments based upon fact but by four assertions supported by claims that are not true. Quite simply, not

¹ See attachment “Buchanan, Ohl Letter.”

² See attachment “HOB Open Letter.”

only are these assertions not supported by argument each of them is factually inaccurate. They charged that the nine bishops have done The Episcopal Church harm and have given “aid and comfort to breakaway factions who would take title and control of substantially all of the real and personal property of this Church and cripple its mission and ministry.” They provided four reasons in support of these claims. In a response, the nine bishops charged provide a range of facts that reveal the startling paucity of facts behind the allegations of bishops Buchanan and Ohl.

1. Bishops Buchanan and Ohl charged first that the nine bishops have given aid and succor to breakaway factions by claiming that dioceses can unilaterally leave The Episcopal Church. In their response the nine bishops point out that those among their number who filed an *amicus* brief make it clear on the first page that they opposed the decision to leave The Episcopal Church. Further, they did not address in their brief whether withdrawal is permitted under the constitution. Some of them in their own dioceses have actually ruled such proposals out of order. The point they make in their brief is more narrowly focused and does not concern withdrawal from The Episcopal Church or the possession of property. Their concern has to do with a constitutional matter. They argue that the court in a previous ruling had misunderstood the constitutional structure of The Episcopal Church, and had thereby, in a secular court, subverted the constitutional structure of a church. In short, the bishops have made no claim that dioceses can unilaterally leave The Episcopal Church. They have made a claim about the constitution of that church.
2. Bishops Buchanan and Ohl charged in the second place that the accused bishops deny the Dennis Canon and so fail to safeguard church property. The accused bishops have responded that they do not deny the Dennis Canon, and they do not discuss property issues at all. Indeed it is worth noting that their silence in respect to property is palpable given the fact that that The Episcopal Church parties in the Texas litigation have argued that they are entitled to the disputed property even under neutral principles of law. Given the fact that the *amici* bishops have argued that secular courts must use neutral principles (if they are unable easily to identify the nature of a church’s hierarchical authority) it is hard to see how their argument does damage to The Episcopal Church.
3. Thirdly, bishops Buchanan and Ohl claimed that the bishops against whom they have complaints have, in the cases of Fort Worth and Quincy, recognized the wrong bishops and so failed to recognize those established by The Episcopal Church, namely themselves. In taking this stance, the charge is that the nine bishops have rejected the authority of The Episcopal Church to recognize its own bishops and so arrogated to themselves authority to recognize (or not) any bishop. In fact the bishops charged neither deny that The Episcopal Church can “recognize its own Bishops”

nor do they claim that Bishop Iker is still the bishop of the diocese recognized by The Episcopal Church. The fact is that they recognize Bishops Buchanan and Ohl as bishops of the dioceses recognized by the Episcopal Church.

4. In the fourth place Bishops Buchanan and Ohl claimed that by their actions the nine bishops have violated ecclesiastical authority and the boundaries of Episcopal jurisdiction. They have done so because they have inserted “themselves in local litigation against the ecclesiastical authority in those dioceses without the consent of the diocesan authority.” In their response the bishops point to certain facts that belie these claims. First, they have performed no Episcopal acts in another diocese. Second, they have done what they have done as an exercise of their civic right to petition the government. They point out that to their knowledge no one has ever before suggested that petitioning the legislatures or courts in the various states and the District of Columbia requires the consent of the local bishop. They note further that they are not the first bishops from other dioceses of The Episcopal Church to file an *amicus* brief this year with the Texas Supreme Court. One was filed in Bishop Ohl’s former diocese and no complaint was made in that case. The bishops rightly conclude that in this instance “it is the views we express, not the act of filing a brief, to which objection is taken.” Finally, the bishops noted that if the claim of bishops Buchanan and Ohl is that their submissions might have an effect in another diocese they must point out that they have done no more than respond to submissions by others that they believe in fact will have “very profound and harmful effects on all our dioceses...”

The rehearsal of facts provided by the nine bishops in their response to bishops Buchanan and Ohl display the charges made by the latter as a classic example of Motivated Thinking—thinking that occurs “when a person is conforming their assessments of information to some interest or goal that is independent of accuracy.” In this case the goal, or goals, of their complaint and request seem to be silencing of contrary opinion, continued possession of disputed property, their own Episcopal authority, and a particular view of the nature of hierarchy within The Episcopal Church. With the exception of silencing contrary opinion, I believe bishops Buchanan and Ohl were within their rights to pursue the goals that motivate their thinking. What I lament is that (as the response of the nine bishops makes clear) the thinking and facts deployed in support of these goals was carried on in a way that is “independent of accuracy.”

I would be less than honest if I did not state what is obvious. Having been the subject of a similar complaint, I have a particular interest in this case. However, I have been assured that I have no reason to worry about that. My concern is the form in which deliberations within the Episcopal Church now take place. The response of bishops Buchanan and Ohl to the action of the nine bishops provides a prismatic example of the sort of thinking and speaking that is dominant within the nation and within The Episcopal

Church. Our public space is filled with Motivated Thinking; and our speech and actions are designed to support, with or without the benefit of facts and sound reasoning, the goals to which we have attached ourselves.

Sadly, this disease is no respecter of political affiliation or ideological commitment. It infects both the left and the right in national politics and so also the left and right within The Episcopal Church. The public life of The Episcopal Church has become a mirror image of the public life of the nation. Its leaders deal in assertions the truth of which they seek to establish by deceptive rhetoric and the exercise of power rather than reasoning based upon a careful assessment of the facts.

Of course, motivated thinking will always be present in public discourse. We are all to one degree or another motivated thinkers. Bring to mind our courts of law and our political system. Lawyers are paid to be successful motivated thinkers. Politicians succeed or fail on the basis of how successful they are at Motivated Thinking. In each case, however, there are publically recognized and supported practices in place that hold in check just how far advocates can rearrange or invent the facts to which they lay claim. In the courts there are impartial judges and juries. In politics there are institutionalized guardians of the facts. There are, for example, universities, the press and the court of public opinion. But, within The Episcopal Church, institutional checks on Motivated Thinking have fallen into serious disrepair. Sadly, as the case of the Quincy Three and the Fort Worth Seven make clear, nowhere is this disrepair more on display than at our General Convention whose ethos, format and mode of operation almost require the triumph of motivated thoughts.

By all reports, the delegates to the past General Convention asked serious questions about the program, budget, constitution and organization of The Episcopal Church. All of these concerns are appropriate, timely and important. My suggestion is that that the delegates would have been well served by considerations of even greater importance—the manner of their deliberations. In particular, it is of the greatest importance to note that The Episcopal Church no longer carries on its business in a manner that befits a church. This sad situation has come about because it has allowed the virtues, practices and protocols that promote civil and responsible public discourse to decay or vanish. The most important issue the delegates to the next General Convention can address is how The Episcopal Church, at this point in its history, might reform the ethos and practices that govern its common life so that Motivated Thinking can be checked by both love and truth.