

## A Dim Mirror: Archbishop Rowan Williams's Reflections on the 2009 General Convention

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*This article examines "Communion, Covenant, and our Anglican Future," Archbishop Rowan Williams's essay on the 2009 General Convention of the Episcopal Church, in which he addresses legislation concerning the ordination of partnered gay clergy and the provision of rites to bless same-sex unions. This article finds Williams's essay deficient on three points: its distortion of the arguments made by pro-inclusion advocates, its ahistorical vision of how change happens in the church, and its idiosyncratic version of Anglican polity, in which national churches (provinces) are artificial constructs and the diocese is the only organic unit of communion. While Williams is a theologian of great renown and ostensibly seeks the maintenance of unity, this essay's failings will likely increase fragmentation in the church.*

No one could envy the task of Rowan Williams. To be Archbishop of Canterbury is, under the best of circumstances, a fairly thankless job, as one must balance the demands of being a diocesan bishop, the chief primate of the English church, and the figurehead of the Anglican Communion—an "Instrument of Communion," as a number of documents rather impersonally put it. Since 2003, these have not been the best of circumstances, to say the least, as Anglicans have battled over competing understandings of human sexuality. The Church of England saw a crisis over the nomination of a gay-but-celibate man to be bishop of Reading, a nomination that Williams himself quashed in

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a spectacular intervention. The Episcopal Church, the Church of England's American cousin, has battled internally over the election and consecration of the Right Reverend Gene Robinson, a partnered, non-celibate gay man, as bishop of New Hampshire. Several dioceses of the Anglican Church of Canada are in various stages of adopting rites for the blessing of same-sex unions: New Westminster has adopted and used them, while the dioceses of Ottawa, Montreal, Huron, and Niagara are in various stages of exploring and developing such rites. South of the border, a number of dioceses of the Episcopal Church have also authorized rites for the blessing of unions or have policies allowing such blessings, among them Los Angeles, Bethlehem (Pennsylvania), California, Vermont, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Southern Ohio, Southeast Florida, and Washington (D.C.). Through all of this, the archbishop has had to deal with competing pressures from progressives and conservatives and with the threat of schism within the Anglican Communion.

At certain points in the unfolding drama, Williams, who was Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity at Oxford before being elected a diocesan bishop, has weighed in with a theological analysis or statement, sometimes offered formally as a paper, sometimes in more informal contexts. At Cambridge and Oxford, Williams was a brilliant theologian, the author of a wide-ranging body of work of considerable depth and learning. In the present debate on human sexuality, the archbishop of necessity has written with a different, non-academic audience in mind. The archbishop has tended to take a conservative, though not reactionary, line in response to the challenges, whatever his personal views—and the Rowan Williams who was a theologian and diocesan bishop left a paper trail quite different from the Rowan Williams who sits in Lambeth Palace, making it well-nigh impossible for distant outsiders to discern what he truly believes on the issues of the day. It is clear, however, that Williams perceives it to be his role to hold together the Anglican Communion, and that is a task for which no responsible bookmaker would give him easy odds. No one would envy Archbishop Williams, and it would take a cold heart indeed not to pity him.

That having been said, the Archbishop of Canterbury's recent essay, "Communion, Covenant, and our Anglican Future," examining the Episcopal Church's General Convention and more particularly the Convention's approval of two pieces of legislation that touch on human sexuality, is a most unhelpful contribution to the dialogue

within the Anglican Communion, as it breaks down on three fronts.<sup>1</sup> The Convention's legislation addressed separate but related issues: Resolution D025 affirmed that God has called and continues to call gay and lesbian persons in committed relationships to ordained ministry, while Resolution C056 called for the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music to collect and develop rites for the blessing of same-sex unions and also gave bishops permission for a "generous pastoral response" to the needs of same-sex couples.<sup>2</sup> The archbishop's reply misrepresents the arguments in favor of these changes, ignores the general outlines of the history of the church in relation to change, and distorts the polity of his own church. The result is a further straining of the terms of debate and a greater likelihood that the division he so hopes to avoid will in fact come to pass.

### *Distortion of Arguments*

The first failure of Archbishop Williams's essay is his misrepresentation of his opponents' arguments. Williams claims of those in favor of the blessing of same-sex unions and the ordination of gay and lesbian clergy, "Appeal is made to the fundamental human rights dimension of attitudes to LGBT people, and to the impossibility of betraying their proper expectations of a Christian body which has courageously supported them."<sup>3</sup> He goes on to argue, "However the

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<sup>1</sup> The full title is "Communion, Covenant, and our Anglican Future: Reflections on the Episcopal Church's 2009 General Convention for the Bishops, Clergy and Faithful of the Anglican Communion." It is found at <http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/2502>.

<sup>2</sup> Resolution D025 states in part that "the General Convention has come to recognize that the baptized membership of The Episcopal Church includes same-sex couples living in lifelong committed relationships . . . ; that gay and lesbian persons who are part of such relationships have responded to God's call and have exercised various ministries in and on behalf of God's One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church and are currently doing so . . . ; [and] that God has called and may call such individuals, to any ordained ministry in The Episcopal Church." Resolution C056 calls for "an open process for the consideration of theological and liturgical resources for the blessing of same gender relationships" and directs the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music, in consultation with the House of Bishops, to "collect and develop theological and liturgical resources, and report to the 77th General Convention" while stating that "bishops, particularly those in dioceses within civil jurisdictions where same-gender marriage, civil unions, or domestic partnerships are legal, may provide generous pastoral response to meet the needs of members of this Church." See <http://gc2009.org/ViewLegislation/>.

<sup>3</sup> Williams, "Communion," para. 4. "LGBT" is short for "lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered."

issue is not simply about civil liberties or human dignity. . . . It is about whether the Church is free to recognise same-sex unions by means of public blessings.”<sup>4</sup> Later, he writes, “In other words, the question is not a simple one of human rights or human dignity. It is that a certain choice of lifestyle has certain consequences.”<sup>5</sup> Setting aside the use of the word “choice”—which can be read as inflammatory—one is left with a serious distortion of the arguments of those in favor of the blessing of unions and the ordination of partnered gay persons.<sup>6</sup>

While arguments from civil rights have dominated the political debate about same-sex marriage in the secular sphere, the arguments in favor of blessing unions in the Episcopal Church have often focused on baptism, something Williams neglects. The Chicago Consultation, one of the groups pressing for the full inclusion of LGBT persons within the life of the Episcopal Church, is quite explicit in its mission statement and in its latest publication, asserting that “this understanding of baptism—as a covenant of reconciliation that requires us to respond—is the heart of the Chicago Consultation’s support for the inclusion of LGBT people in all orders of ministry and the development of rites to bless the unions of same-sex couples. . . . We also believe that our baptismal promise to do justice requires us to work for full inclusion.”<sup>7</sup> Writing in the same volume, Fredrica Harris Thompsett notes that the elaborate baptismal covenant in the 1979 *Book of Common Prayer*, with its promise to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving one’s neighbor as one’s self, and the promise to

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<sup>4</sup> Williams, “Communion,” para. 6.

<sup>5</sup> Williams, “Communion,” para. 9.

<sup>6</sup> On the criticism of the archbishop for the use of the word “choice,” see, for example, the Very Reverend Sam Candler’s essay at <http://goodfaithandthecommongood.blogspot.com/2009/07/notion-of-choice-in-anglican-communion.html>. The notion that one “chooses” one’s sexual orientation has been undermined by recent science; for a summary, see Timothy F. Sedgwick, “Understandings of Homosexuality” in the Report from the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music in *Report to the 73rd General Convention* (New York: Church Publishing, 2000), 221–222. One suspects that Williams instead refers to living in a committed same-sex relationship as a “choice.” It is noteworthy that one rarely speaks of straight, married couples as exercising a “lifestyle choice,” suggesting that different wording might have been more irenic.

<sup>7</sup> Ruth A. Meyers, “Introduction: Christ’s Work of Reconciliation in the World: Full Inclusion and Relationships in the Anglican Communion,” in *We Will, with God’s Help: Perspectives on Baptism, Sexuality, and the Anglican Communion* (Evanston, Ill.: Chicago Consultation, 2009), 1–2. The document may be found online at [http://www.chicagoconsultation.org/site/1/docs/We\\_Will\\_With\\_God\\_s\\_Help.pdf](http://www.chicagoconsultation.org/site/1/docs/We_Will_With_God_s_Help.pdf).

strive for justice and peace among all people, respecting the dignity of every human being, merely makes plain something implicit in the baptismal rite of the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer* and all American Prayer Books from 1789, namely the promise to “obediently keep God’s holy will and commandments, and walk in the same.”<sup>8</sup> The call to do justice is not a “civil rights” claim, but a baptismal obligation. But Thompsett goes further: with delightful irony, given the frequent proof-texting from Paul engaged in by opponents of gay inclusion, she cites Paul’s baptismal hymn in Galatians (“As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female: for all of you are one in Christ Jesus”). This, she argues, is the foundation of the struggle against any and all “oppressive divisions” and by extension supports the campaign for equal access to ordination and to the rites of the church.<sup>9</sup> Baptism lies at the heart of these claims for the full inclusion of gay and lesbian persons. Indeed, Consultation participant Katherine Grieb explicitly rejects the project of arguing from civil rights or human rights, asserting the importance of framing the pro-inclusion argument “biblically, theologically, and liturgically.”<sup>10</sup>

The argument from baptism is not limited to the Chicago Consultation; it has been a part of many of the calls for the full inclusion of LGBT persons in the Episcopal Church, particularly the work of Integrity, the organization for LGBT Episcopalians and their allies. Preaching at the Integrity Eucharist at General Convention 2009, the Right Reverend Barbara Harris noted pungently that if opponents were serious about foreclosing the possibility of gay bishops, the safest course would be to refuse to baptize gay persons: “How can you initiate someone and then treat them like they’re half-assed baptized?”<sup>11</sup> In a more quotidian medium, Integrity’s General Convention 2009

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<sup>8</sup> Fredrica Harris Thompsett, “Coming to our Sacramental Senses: Full Baptismal Participation and Full Inclusion of the People of God,” in *We Will, with God’s Help*,” 6–7.

<sup>9</sup> Thompsett, “Coming to our Sacramental Senses,” 7, quoting Gal. 3:27–28 (NRSV).

<sup>10</sup> A. Katherine Grieb, “Going Far, Going Together: Full Inclusion and the Anglican Communion,” in *We Will, with God’s Help*,” 19.

<sup>11</sup> Barbara Harris, sermon preached at the Integrity Eucharist at the 76th General Convention of the Episcopal Church, 10 July 2009, <http://sites.google.com/site/allthesacraments/Home/eucharist>.

tchotchkes, from coffee mugs to T-shirts, were emblazoned with the slogan, “All the sacraments for all the baptized.”

Overlooking the way that proponents of full inclusion frame their arguments around baptism and the baptismal covenant, Archbishop Williams paints his opponents as making claims based on civil rights alone. While it is true that one does encounter claims made from civil rights, important voices instead make fundamentally theological arguments and eschew claims based in “rights.” The archbishop could instead have argued that claims based in baptism merely beg the question of what obligations are taken on in the sacrament, and traditionally baptism has entailed repentance and taking on the obligations of the Christian moral life. Williams might then have asserted—as many conservatives do—that this moral life requires those in non-marital relationships to abstain from sex, based on a traditional understanding of Christian sexual morality, regardless of how one’s nature and orientation have been formed, and might have followed by asserting that gay persons cannot marry, thereby foreclosing the possibility of licit sexual activity. This line of argument, at least, would be more forthright. But to ignore utterly the claims based in baptism and to impute arguments from civil rights to the proponents of full inclusion, as Williams does, is to distort the responsible, theologically oriented arguments made in favor of same-sex blessings and the ordination of partnered gay persons. Such serious distortion neither advances dialogue nor strengthens the archbishop’s position, and it suggests that Williams either does not understand the advocates of full inclusion or is deliberately distorting them for rhetorical effect.

### *A Historical Vision*

The second weakness of the archbishop’s analysis lies in his vision for how change is accomplished in the church. He asserts, “When a local church seeks to respond to a new question, to the challenge of possible change in its practice or discipline in the light of new facts, new pressures, or new contexts, . . . it needs some way of including in its discernment the judgement of the wider Church,” and in this he is quite right.<sup>12</sup> He goes on to argue, however, that change ought not be made without the *assent* of the wider church: a local church ought not persist “with changes that render it strange to Christian sisters and

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<sup>12</sup> Williams, “Communion,” para. 12.

brothers across the globe. This is not some piece of modern bureaucratic absolutism, but the conviction of the Church from its very early days. The doctrine that ‘what affects the communion of all should be decided by all’ is a venerable principle.”<sup>13</sup> The only way for a “local church” (by which one presumes he means a national church) to move ahead on an issue, absent full agreement by other churches to its decision, is for there to be “a recognition” that a matter is not at the level of importance requiring universal assent. This “recognition” is not asserted by the local church, but appears to emerge by consensus in the wider church—in other words, everyone must agree that they do not need to agree, a proposition that may work in determining a lunch menu but is not likely to prove workable on matters of even slightly greater import. “It takes time and a willingness to believe that what we determine together is more likely, in a New Testament framework, to be in tune with the Holy Spirit than what any one community decides locally.”<sup>14</sup> While the call to consult is good, the archbishop here, and to a greater extent in his other public statements, appears decisively to rule out the possibility of one of the constituent churches of the Anglican Communion taking prophetic action.

This is the same stance taken by the Windsor Report in 2004. The Windsor Report described each constituent church’s autonomy as limited by the “commitments of communion,” and argues that on “essential matters of common concern”—which are defined as “essential” and as “of common concern” simply on the basis of any member church’s say-so—a church cannot teach anew and act anew without the determination by the “Instruments of Unity” (the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Primates’ Meeting, Lambeth Conference, and the Anglican Consultative Council, although chiefly the former two) that this action “is neither critical to the maintenance of communion nor likely to harm the common good.”<sup>15</sup> This effectively closed the door on prophetic action in the service of justice: as the Right Reverend Paul Marshall’s 2004 critique pointed out, there is “no respectful provision in the report for conscientious action. . . . The report seems not to recognize, regarding us whom it criticizes, that if one comes to the conclusion that something is morally mandated, one cannot deny

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<sup>13</sup> Williams, “Communion,” paras. 12–13.

<sup>14</sup> Williams, “Communion,” para. 13.

<sup>15</sup> The Lambeth Commission on Communion, *The Windsor Report 2004* (London: Anglican Communion Office, 2004), 37.

what has come to be seen as justice because there is resistance to the idea in other places.”<sup>16</sup> As the Reverend Canon Marilyn McCord Adams (then Regius Professor of Divinity at Oxford) argued, the Windsor Report’s insistence on consensus before innovation would make change in the contested areas of gender and sexuality virtually impossible:

In the best of circumstances, even among those of similar backgrounds, fresh consensus is the work of decades. . . . Since existing institutions are protected by taboos and sanctions, attempts to uproot them are bound to meet with virulent resistance. . . . Whole-some change will not win majority consensus until the upheaval is over and things once again settle down.<sup>17</sup>

Williams revisits the same ground in this essay as the Windsor Report, making the same point: the actions of Anglicans in one place are subject to an absolute veto by other Anglicans across the globe, should those other Anglicans deem the matter to be of “essential” importance. Williams states it quite baldly in his discussion of the particular matter of same-sex unions: “A major change [such as a member church recognizing same-sex unions] naturally needs a strong level of consensus and solid theological grounding. This is not our situation in the Communion.”<sup>18</sup> There is no consensus, and therefore the Episcopal Church should not act, regardless of the demands it perceives in the gospel. It must wait. The archbishop implicitly rejects the maxim attributed to William Gladstone, “Justice delayed is justice denied”—indeed, “justice” as a concept appears not to enter into his analysis, even when it is distinguishable from the concept of “human rights” that he rejects in the opening paragraphs of his essay.

In saying that the church as a whole—by which the archbishop appears to mean the entire Anglican Communion—must embrace a new theological stance on important issues before it can be acted upon, the archbishop sets the bar very high. It is, in fact, set too high to permit such innovations as the ordination of women, the remarriage of

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<sup>16</sup> Paul V. Marshall, “Institution Over Inspiration?” *The Witness* (October 19, 2004); <http://www.thewitness.org/article.php?id=86>.

<sup>17</sup> Marilyn McCord Adams, “Faithfulness in Crisis,” in *Gays and the Future of Anglicanism: Responses to the Windsor Report*, ed. Andrew Linzey and Richard Kirker (New York: O Books, 2005), 75.

<sup>18</sup> Williams, “Communion,” paras. 7–8.

divorced persons, or even the use of a prayer book other than the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer* to order worship, for there was no contemporary consensus in the Anglican Communion on any of these points. While it might be argued now that these matters do not rise to the same level of seriousness as the ordination of partnered gay persons or the blessing of same-sex unions, and that the several churches agreed that there was no need for consensus on these points, that would be to overlook the great anxiety that greeted each when they were innovations. At certain points, in each instance, a national church went ahead despite the loud objections of others.

The archbishop appears content to close off the possibility of prophetic action in order to preserve unity—as Bishop Marshall observed, this is a fundamentally institutional (even curial) response to what is asserted to be a movement of the Spirit.<sup>19</sup> The archbishop operates with tidy categories, overlooking other cases of gravity in which the several churches have acted without consensus.

Perhaps this is the result of his training as a theologian, or rather as a theologian of a certain sort. For Williams appears, at least in this essay, to believe that theology exists before practice, and that one might arrive at a reasoned theological judgment in favor of a change before that change is ever implemented. To a historian, this view is quaint at best. Again and again, the history of Christianity, and more particularly the history of Anglicanism, shows that it is practice that drives theology. Precipitous action has, historically, been what forced the church to stop and think, and sometimes to change its mind. For example, in the Acts of the Apostles it was Paul converting uncircumcised Gentiles that prompted the council at Jerusalem to decide that it was legitimate to do so (and meanwhile Peter had been dining with and baptizing them willy-nilly for several chapters!).<sup>20</sup> In addition to such prophetic action, often more mundane practices can shape theology, even regarding core doctrines. It was the perception of an assault on the popular practice of venerating the Virgin Mary as *Theotokos*, God-bearer, that helped to animate the campaign against Arius and, later, against Nestorius, in the great christological controversies of the fourth and fifth centuries. Mary was termed “God-bearer” in the liturgy, the cathedral church at Ephesus was dedicated to her, and some prayers addressed her directly. Rather than seeing her simply as the vessel that

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<sup>19</sup> Marshall, “Institution Over Inspiration?”

<sup>20</sup> Acts 15.

bore Christ, basking (in a theological sense) in his reflected glory, some worshiped her directly “for herself and for the assistance she might give mankind.”<sup>21</sup> Nestorius had attacked this veneration of Mary, canceling a liturgical festival in her honor, and argued that she was not *Theotokos* but only *Christotokos* (Christ-bearer). In doing so he alienated many, including a large number of the monks in his see city, Constantinople.<sup>22</sup> When the emperor called a council at Ephesus in 431, with the expectation that it would support Nestorius, pro-Marian crowds forced the assembly to excommunicate Nestorius and endorse the claim of Mary to be *Theotokos*. Indeed, as Jaroslav Pelikan put it, “theology had to come to terms with liturgy”; at several points in Pelikan’s masterful narrative of the christological controversies of the early church, liturgical acclamations were a step ahead of theological formulations.<sup>23</sup> Driven by popular piety, theologians were forced to develop their concepts of the Incarnation.

Both prophetic and mundane actions continued to push theology forward in the twentieth century. In the recent history of the Episcopal Church, it was the prophetic, irregular ordinations of eleven women in Philadelphia in 1974 that prompted the church to relent and approve the ordination of women in 1976, a step that had been voted down at the 1973 General Convention, just one year before those irregular ordinations. And it was the quotidian ministry of women priests over the intervening years that prepared the way for the consecration of Barbara Harris in 1989 as the Episcopal Church’s first female bishop.

For all his intellectual gifts, Williams is clearly a theologian of a certain sort: he operates with clean, philosophical categories, and in his reflections on the General Convention he overlooks the messy realities of dealing with humans and with human institutions. For historians, history is composed of just those messy realities, and for churches, historically speaking, it is prophetic, some would say precipitous,

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<sup>21</sup> Timothy E. Gregory, *Vox Populi: Popular Opinion and Violence in the Religious Controversies of the Fifth Century A.D.* (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1979), 98–99. I am grateful to the Reverend Dr. Benjamin King for suggesting this source.

<sup>22</sup> Gregory, *Vox Populi*, 92–97.

<sup>23</sup> Gregory, *Vox Populi*, 92–112; Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100–600)*, vol. 1 in *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine* (Chicago, Ill: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 241–277. The quotation is at 241.

action that often prompts change. That Williams would make such an ahistorical analysis is incongruous, even ironic, given that in 2005 he produced a small book on the study of church history, in which he acknowledged the impact of context on theology. He described the early church's theological debate and discussion as "an attempt to balance a number of potentially highly paradoxical concerns in the least unstable or nonsensical way, *in light of specific practices of worship and corporate behaviour*."<sup>24</sup> But even in that book Williams did not concede that practice sometimes drives theology; rather, for him practice is simply one input among many to be taken into account. The brief, rare historical narratives Williams recounted in his book did not do much to relate actual practice at the popular level to the history of ideas, the latter being Williams's stronger interest: he noted that the Donatist controversy involved the practice of rebaptizing, and he framed much of the early church's doctrinal controversies in the context of the practice (if one may call it that) of martyrdom.<sup>25</sup> This is an inadequate treatment of history, in what is really a work of historical theology, a study of the development of doctrine.<sup>26</sup> Overall, the concern of *Why Study the Past?* was to argue that church history can and should be undertaken as a spiritual or moral discipline, rather than as detached, critical scholarship. It reads as an admonition to historians to take theology seriously, rather than to theologians to take history seriously.

Williams's ahistorical reflections on the Convention, as well as his spotty use of history in *Why Study the Past?*, may betray a larger problem in theology as it is sometimes practiced: one can arrive at theological conclusions without taking account of historical realities. But given that Christianity takes the Incarnation seriously, and given that we believe that the Spirit is active even today in the world, then we must take history seriously. Indeed, Christianity (in contrast to Deism) has always asserted that God acts in history, from the Creation

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<sup>24</sup> Rowan Williams, *Why Study the Past? The Quest for the Historical Church*, Sarum Theological Lectures (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 2005), 42. Emphasis in the original. See also pages 44–45 for more on context and theology.

<sup>25</sup> Williams, *Why Study the Past?*, 34–55.

<sup>26</sup> In one earlier work, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition*, Williams showed fairly careful attention to historical context, in an initial chapter [Rowan Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition* (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1987), 32–47; see also 87–91]. Yet even in *Arius* the account centers on the development of doctrine, apart from its larger setting more broadly defined.

to the present, not least in moments such as the deliverance of Israel at the Red Sea, the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, and the spread of the gospel through the world. Good theology takes account of historical realities alongside its consideration of abstract propositions; Williams's theologizing in this essay does not do this.

### *Poisonous Polity*

But both of these flaws could be overlooked, were it not for the third and most dangerous assumption in the archbishop's essay. Williams has set forth an idiosyncratic and profoundly ahistorical view of the diocese as the fundamental unit of the church, with provinces/national churches as mere fictions, created only as a matter of convenience. He seems wedded to the idea that dioceses, not national churches/provinces, are in communion (or out of communion) with the see of Canterbury, and the implication is that dioceses might freely sign the Anglican Covenant he champions as the remedy for all of the Anglican Communion's ills, even if the national church to which they belong might not do so.

This is articulated in a small part of the archbishop's essay. In the penultimate paragraph, Williams raises the issue of diocesan autonomy directly:

It is my strong hope that all provinces will respond favourably to the invitation to Covenant [sic]. But in the current context, the question is becoming more sharply defined of whether, if a province declines such an invitation, any elements within it will be free . . . to adopt the Covenant as a sign of their wish to act in a certain level of mutuality with other parts of the Communion.<sup>27</sup>

While he raises it as a question, his claims in the preceding paragraphs for the great importance of the Covenant in the life of the Anglican Communion strongly imply that the answer to the question should be yes: dioceses should be able to adopt the proposed Anglican Covenant.

Williams subsequently has offered a partial clarification of his position. In a letter to the bishop of Central Florida, dated September 28, 2009 and widely reported in the church press, Williams conceded that the Covenant itself allows only for provinces (national churches)

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<sup>27</sup> Williams, "Communion," para. 25.

to be signatories, but that dioceses might “endorse” the Covenant, and that such an endorsement would have a beneficial effect on that diocese’s relations with the Anglican Communion.<sup>28</sup> It is nevertheless clear that Williams sees the diocese as capable of acting autonomously, apart from the province/national church, in relation to the Anglican Communion and the proposed Covenant.

This same, eccentric ecclesiology was made even clearer in the archbishop’s letter of 14 October 2007 to the Right Reverend John Howe, bishop of Central Florida, a letter that was widely disseminated. In that letter, the archbishop states, “Any Diocese compliant with Windsor remains clearly in communion with Canterbury and the mainstream of the Communion, whatever may be the longer-term result for others in The Episcopal Church. The organ of union with the wider Church is the Bishop and the Diocese rather than the Provincial structure as such.” Later in the same letter, Williams writes dismissively of “the abstract reality of the ‘national church.’”<sup>29</sup> This is a position that the archbishop set forth later, in more subtle terms, in his Advent 2007 letter to the primates of the Anglican Communion, in which he asserted that “the Communion is a voluntary association of provinces *and dioceses*,” and that the Episcopal bishops and dioceses who have distanced themselves from the actions of General Convention and the election of Bishop Robinson (particularly the so-called “Windsor bishops,” who publicly endorsed the principles of the Windsor Report) are “clearly in fellowship with the Communion,” even if the Episcopal Church might not be.<sup>30</sup> Williams strongly implies in this Advent letter what he says more explicitly in the October letter to Howe, that dioceses might join in the Communion apart from their national churches. Williams appears to believe sincerely that the province/national church is an artificial construct, and therefore that individual dioceses are free to endorse his Covenant and to conduct relations with the wider Anglican Communion apart from their provinces.

While this view of the national church or province as an artificial construct may have been true in late antiquity, under the umbrella of a

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<sup>28</sup> Pat Ashworth, “Covenant will be ‘only for provinces,’” *Church Times* (9 October 2009); <http://www.churchtimes.co.uk/content.asp?id=83126>.

<sup>29</sup> Rowan Williams to John Howe, 14 October 2007.

<sup>30</sup> Rowan Williams, “The Archbishop’s Advent Letter to Primates” (14 December 2007), sections 2 and 3; <http://archbishopofcanterbury.org/1587>. Emphasis added.

trans-national empire (that of the Romans), it was a debated proposition even in the Middle Ages, as monarchs and popes battled over control of the church, thereby creating fissures along national lines. Bishops in various countries found themselves from time to time out of communion with (the trans-national power of) the papacy because the local monarch was at odds with the pope. This friction was the root of the Investiture Controversy, in which a monarch asserted the right to invest bishops with their insignia of office, over and against the trans-national authority of the pope.<sup>31</sup> The outcome of this in the Middle Ages was at best a draw, with monarchs nominating but popes investing with episcopal insignia; the (later) outcome in the English Reformation was much clearer.

Williams claims that the diocese is the primary unit of the church and the basis for its connection to the wider Christian community, but this has not been an observable phenomenon in Anglicanism from the first phase of the English Reformation. It was a founding proposition of Anglicanism that churches were organized along national lines. Thomas Cranmer argued in 1540:

All Christian princes have committed unto them immediately of God the whole cure of all their subjects, as well concerning the administration of God's word for the cure of souls, as concerning the ministration of things political and civil governance. . . . The ministers of God's word under his majesty be the bishops, parsons, vicars, and such other priests as be appointed by his highness to that ministration: as for example, the bishop of Canterbury, the bishop of Duresme [Durham], the bishop of Winchester, the parson of Winwick, &c. All the said officers and ministers, as well of the one sort as the other, be appointed, assigned, and elected in every place, by the laws and orders of kings and princes.<sup>32</sup>

Cranmer even asserted that a monarch might, in cases of necessity, appoint bishops without ordination, and without other bishops being

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<sup>31</sup> On investiture, see I. S. Robinson, *The Papacy, 1073–1198: Continuity and Innovation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 102, 104, 398–413, 421–439.

<sup>32</sup> Thomas Cranmer, “[Questions and answers concerning the sacraments and the appointment and power of bishops and priests],” in *Miscellaneous Writings and Letters of Thomas Cranmer*, ed. John Edmund Cox (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1846), 116.

involved in the process.<sup>33</sup> This authority was based on the concept of the national church, and there was little or no place in Cranmer's vision for diocesan autonomy or independence. Similarly, Article 37 of the Thirty-Nine Articles asserted that the monarch had the ultimate authority in ecclesiastical matters and that his or her decisions were not subject to any foreign jurisdiction.<sup>34</sup> Archbishop John Whitgift, Elizabeth I's third Archbishop of Canterbury, moreover described the bishops of the church as merely the ecclesiastical equivalent of justices of the peace—both were the monarch's civil servants—and he asserted that there was no difference between the church of Christ and the Christian commonwealth ruled over by a Christian prince. For Whitgift, citizenship in the nation was identical with membership of the Church of England.<sup>35</sup> His conception of the Christian commonwealth, which was widely shared in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England, could only have existed if the church was understood to be composed along national, and not diocesan, lines. Finally, the founding of the Episcopal Church as an independent church was necessitated by the American Revolution, which broke all ties of allegiance to the British crown. Samuel Seabury had to seek ordination from the nonjuring Scots, and not the bishops of the Church of England, precisely because the English could not grasp the concept of a trans-national church. Consequently, they imposed the oath of supremacy and oath of allegiance on all new bishops, oaths a citizen of the new United States could not swear. If there are examples of trans-national lines of authority in the history of post-Reformation Anglicanism, they can only be ascribed to the imperial vision of the British empire, with English bishops sent off to rule dioceses around the world that had little connection to any neighbors, but primarily to the homeland. The archbishop's vision of the national church as an artificial convenience is significantly untested in his own country, and it is manifestly true that Williams's ecclesiology flies in the face of that of the first several generations of Anglicans.

If the archbishop genuinely believes that the diocese is the basic unit of the church and that dioceses are free to associate with

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<sup>33</sup> Cranmer, "[Questions and answers]," 117.

<sup>34</sup> "The Thirty-Nine Articles," in *Documents of the English Reformation*, ed. Gerald Bray (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 1994), 307–308.

<sup>35</sup> John Whitgift, "Defense of the Answer to the Admonition," in *The Works of John Whitgift*, ed. John Ayre (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1853), 3:302–303; 3:160–161; see also 3:198.

whomever they wish, the implications are profound. First, this argument appears to be a charter for diocesan secession. The Archbishop of Canterbury—whosoever is in the chair at the time—would have the right to determine which dioceses are in and out of the Anglican Communion, allowing an end-run of the national church structure of the Episcopal Church by the so-called “Windsor bishops” and their sympathizers. This may tell observers more of the archbishop’s strategic intentions than either his appearance at the General Convention in 2009 or his earlier appearance at the House of Bishops meeting in New Orleans in 2007. But second, this concept also opens the way for all manner of consequences in his own territory that Williams likely does not intend. It would pave the way for progressive dioceses in the Church of England to unite with an overseas primate—perhaps, for example, the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church. Williams’s novel theory will likely lead to more fragmentation, not less, and he may find that turnabout is indeed fair play.

### *Conclusion*

Williams’s essay, then, is marred by its dishonest assessment of the arguments in favor of same-sex blessings and the ordination of partnered gay persons, by its ahistorical view of the way that change can come to the church, and by its pernicious and idiosyncratic vision of Anglican polity. More than calling for a simple continuation of the three “moratoria” (on the election of partnered gay clergy as bishops, on the blessing of same-sex unions, and on cross-border intrusions by bishops), the archbishop’s essay rules out substantive change in the church on any controversial issue, and it paves the way for the secession of individual dioceses from their national churches. Rather than maintaining peace and protecting the unity of the Anglican Communion—Williams’s ostensible goal—his essay opens the door for further dissension and fragmentation, even as it attempts to close the intellectual door on substantive change.

The Episcopal Church’s first bishop, Samuel Seabury, was ordained by Scottish nonjuring bishops, and as a condition of his ordination, Seabury agreed not to recognize Church of England clergy operating in Scotland.<sup>36</sup> The English bishops, by contrast, refused to

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<sup>36</sup> Paul V. Marshall, *One, Catholic, and Apostolic: Samuel Seabury and the Early Episcopal Church* (New York: Church Publishing, 2004), 93; for the Concordat text, see the Appendices [on CD-ROM], 394.

recognize Seabury as a bishop—and indeed, decades after the Church of England ordained a pair of American bishops, it refused to permit American bishops visiting in England to function according to their order in liturgical events. The American bishops were treated in the first three quarters of the nineteenth century with the disdain that would have greeted Lutherans or Methodists, not fellow members of a worldwide communion.<sup>37</sup> If the Episcopal Church was able to survive in its fragile, early decades what amounted at best to a sort of benign neglect by Canterbury, it certainly could do so again, if it were to come to that. Many of the informal and missional connections between American Episcopalians and their Anglican sisters and brothers in England, Africa, and around the world would likely survive in some form. Whatever the eventual outcome—and the messiness of history is a reminder that predictions are always to be taken with a grain of salt—it is clear that the archbishop's latest essay neither advances the cause of peace nor contributes much to the debate. While Williams's words may benefit the institutional Communion, they do not advance true communion—something more elusive, to be sure, but also more to be prized.

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<sup>37</sup> Paul V. Marshall, "A Note on the Role of North America in the Evolution of Anglicanism," *Anglican Theological Review* 87, no. 4 (Fall 2005): 551–554.

