Tragedies of Communion: Seeking Reconciliation amid Colonial Legacies

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In seeking justice for LGBT persons, many Episcopalians have found ourselves in significant moral tragedies over recent decades. Support for same-sex relationships often emerged from a concern to stand up for the marginalized and to be "on the right side of history." At the same time, however, we inadvertently alienated many of those historically marginalized in global Anglican conversations, specifically those in the global South. The content and form of the Episcopal Church's public statements in Anglican debates over human sexuality proved subtly—and usually unintentionally—neocolonial. The content of the debate privileged a specifically Western discourse based in the designation of homosexuality, while the form of the debate often resembled an abstracted "white gaze." In seeking a path to reconciliation, the essay concludes by engaging H. Richard Niebuhr's thought, suggesting that he enables us to conceive how we ended up in such tragedies and offers a means to reconciliation by way of repentance.

In recent decades, one refrain in support of same-sex relationships within the Episcopal Church has been a concern to avoid mistakes of the past. Specifically, many narrate support for same-sex relationships referring back to America's racial history and the civil rights movement. Still feeling embarrassed by churches that failed to speak out against racial injustices in the 1960s, these Episcopalians have sought to be on the front end of the next movement against

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injustice. By this account, support for LGBT rights is the next chapter in a series of struggles against injustice including women's rights, civil rights, and now LGBT rights. There is a danger to this narration, however. Seeing certain issues as "the next chapter" in struggles for justice can obscure ways in which we are still being haunted by previous injustices such as racism or colonialism.

Living in East Africa before and after the consecration of Gene Robinson in 2003, I listened to African friends and colleagues speak of their concern about the actions of the Episcopal Church in terms of justice. From 2002 to 2005 I served as an Episcopal missionary with the New Sudan Council of Churches based in Nairobi, Kenya. Many of my African friends narrated Anglican conflicts from the perspective of those historically marginalized from global political conversations—whether in the Anglican Communion or other global institutions like the IMF and the World Bank. Given the historical interconnection between the colonial project and the racial construction of human identities, some saw the Episcopal Church's decisions as another way of disregarding African voices and continuing racial legacies. This is not to say my African friends were of one mind regarding human sexuality; many supported LGBT rights. It is to say, however, that despite the Episcopal Church's intention not to repeat mistakes of the past, especially regarding race, we inadvertently perpetuated many Africans' perceptions of Western, white domination.

Thus, liberal Episcopalians[1] have found ourselves within moral tragedies of significant proportions. Believing LGBT persons deserve the opportunities of lifelong monogamy, with all the subsequent grace it holds for growth in Christian discipleship and virtue, liberal Episcopalians have failed to notice how certain vocabularies and conversation patterns have perpetuated historical associations of Western domination. Seeking justice for one marginalized group has led inadvertently to neglecting matters of justice for another. Failing to acknowledge such moral irony has inhibited the capacity of liberal

[1] In this essay I use the terminology "liberal" and "traditionalist," acknowledging the limitations of the markers. Mindful that all designations on offer possess flaws such as methodological imprecision, reductive binaries, and a certain lack of theological content, I have simply used the terms employed in the document "Same-Sex Relationships in the Life of the Church," offered by the Theology Committee of the House of Bishops and reprinted in this journal, *Anglican Theological Review,* 93, no. 1 (Winter 2011). If nothing else, use of terms that carry such political baggage shows the extent to which this debate has been infused by the political categories of wider Western political debates, a concern lying close at hand to the arguments of this essay.

Episcopalians to account adequately for the complexities of the Anglican Communion's moral landscape over the last decade and a half. The situation has proven especially tragic because many liberals have not recognized their neocolonial assumptions, and thus have not known to act otherwise. In this context tragedy entails an event, especially emerging out of human limitations, that leads to human suffering and struggle. As a liberal Episcopalian myself, I consider this essay a lament—a lament for our colonial past and the ways in which it seeps into our contemporary decision-making. Yet it is a lament that seeks reconciliation. After highlighting the manner in which both the content and form of our debates prove neocolonial, I conclude by turning to Christian ethicist H. Richard Niebuhr for insight. Niebuhr shows how we ended up in such tragedies and offers ways of seeking reconciliation and healing.[2]

The Subtle Imperialism of Language

In one sense, some have accused the Episcopal Church of neocolonialism before. At the height of Anglican conflict a decade ago, accusations of American imperialism abounded. Nigerian Archbishop Peter Akinola criticized the Episcopal Church for unilateral actions while Ugandan Archbishop Nkoyoyo said, "We grieve because we remember the pain that has come from similar imperial actions in the past."[3] Such bishops not only accused the Episcopal Church of not consulting other Anglican provinces before deciding an issue of great ecclesial conflict, they accused the Episcopal Church of not considering the impact of these decisions in cultures outside the modern West.

I argue, however, that our neocolonial behavior was in fact far subtler. First, the content of the debate was neocolonial because the designation "homosexuality" framed the debate in Western terms of a totalizing sexual identity, a designation foreign to many non-Westerners. Second, the form of the debate proved neocolonial as well, in that our responses carried an aloof Western tone—a white

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[2] For an overview of both H. Richard and Reinhold Niebuhr on tragedy, see John Barbour, "Niebuhr vs. Niebuhr: The Tragic Nature of History," *The Christian Century* 101 (November 21, 1984): 1096–1099. Barbour argues that Reinhold primarily locates the origins of tragedy in the limits of human righteousness while H. Richard locates its origins in the limits of human power and capacity.

[3] Quoted in Willis Jenkins, "Episcopalians, Homosexuality, and World Mission," *Anglican Theological Review* 86, no. 2 (Spring 2004): 297.

gaze—that unintentionally manufactured additional distance between the Episcopal Church and Anglicans in the global South.

The term "homosexuality" found near ubiquitous use throughout global Anglican debates, both by those in favor of same-sex relationships and those opposed. Resolution I.10 from the 1998 Lambeth Conference spoke of "persons who experience themselves as having a homosexual orientation" and committed the church to "listen to the experience of homosexual persons," yet concluded "homosexual practice [is] incompatible with Scripture."[4] The General Convention of the Episcopal Church framed the issue similarly, although its conclusions were more tentative regarding the normativity of same-sex behavior. In 1976, Resolution A069 stated that "homosexual persons are children of God who have a full and equal claim with all other persons upon the love, acceptance, and pastoral concern and care of the Church."[5] Continuing into 2003, General Convention spoke of "our understanding of homosexual persons."[6] Yet a term that might seem a natural designation to Westerners in fact carries centuries of accumulated context. The term assumes an inherent link between sexual acts and sexual identity: it takes the Western emphasis upon expressive individuality and applies it to sex, such that a person may be deemed "homosexual" insofar as they have a rigid sexual subjectivity based on same-sex attraction, with its binary opposite being "heterosexual."

These terms reflect historical shifts in Western thinking regarding same-sex attraction, shifts going as far back as medieval Christendom and finding contemporary formulation within modern science and medicine. Judging from penitential manuals of the Middle Ages, sexual sins were once categorized as one type of sin among many; over time, *sodomia* evolved from a term designating multiple sexual sins to one for same-sex acts among men. Yet a marked gap remained between sexual acts themselves and a person's identity. As the medieval era continued, however, the act of confession came to focus not only upon acts themselves but also upon same-sex *desire*. Seeking to root

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[4] Lambeth 1998 Resolution I.10; www.lambethconference.org/resolutions/1998/1998-1-10.cfm#s1.

[5] General Convention, *Journal of the General Convention of The Episcopal Church, Minneapolis 1976* (New York: General Convention, 1977), C-109; www.episcopalarchives.org/cgi-bin/acts/acts_generate_pdf.pl?resolution=1976-A069.

[6] General Convention, *Journal of the General Convention of The Episcopal Church, Minneapolis 2003* (New York: General Convention, 2004), 615-616; www.episcopalarchives.org/cgi-bin/acts/acts_resolution-complete.pl?resolution=2003-C051.

out sexual sins, confessors sought the motivation behind such sins; sins of *sodomia* became associated with an identity—the sodomite. Thus a gap emerged between those who carried out sexual sins as part of a general sinful nature and those who perpetrated same-sex sins out of a seemingly deviant sexual identity.[7]

Centuries later in the modern West, scientific inquiry carried forward the task of essentializing sexual identity through investigating same-sex practices and habits.[8] The identity "sodomite" retained its religious status, but in time scientists took up research of such identities and provided sexual taxonomies. Such scientific investigation in fact resembled the method of confession, with individuals sharing details of sexual deviance while others listened confidentially. Ellen Armour writes, "Confession may serve a different master, but its practice is aimed toward a similar object: inquiries into acts and desires serve as entry points into identities."[9] Thus the medical profession began employing the term "homosexual" in the late 1800s to designate an abnormal condition contrasted with the normative status of heterosexuality. The designation connecting sexual acts with an expressive human identity gained recognition through the acknowledgment of the medical community. Philosopher Charles Taylor describes how such medical designations help situate our lived experience in the modern West, providing order while also closing off other possible descriptions:

> So medicalization alters our phenomenology of lived experience, suppressing certain facets of this experience, making others recessive, bringing out still others. But it also covers its tracks; we don't see that we're being led to see/feel ourselves in different ways, we just believe naïvely that this is experience itself; we imagine that people have always experienced themselves this way. And we are baffled by accounts of earlier ages.[10]

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[7] Ellen Armour, "Blinding Me with (Queer) Science: Religion, Sexuality, and (Post?) Modernity," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 68, no.1 (2010): 110–112. See also Mark D. Jordan, *The Invention of Sodomy in Christian Theology* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1997) and Mark D. Jordan, *The Ethics of Sex* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 2002).

[8] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Random House Press, 1990).

[9] Armour, "Blinding Me with (Queer) Science," 112.

[10] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 740.

With the scientific status of the medical community, Foucault writes, "the homosexual was now a species."[11] Thus a debate emerged regarding to what extent homosexuality is a naturally occurring phenomenon.

This science of sexuality became the *de facto* language for the gay rights movement, emerging as it did in the modern West. While the science of sexuality first served to contain or control homosexuality, in time the same vocabulary served to empower those labeled "deviant." Foucault writes:

> There is no question that the appearance in nineteenth-century psychiatry, jurisprudence, and literature of a whole series of discourses on the species and subspecies of homosexuality, inversion, pederasty, and "psychic hermaphrodism" made possible a strong advance of social controls into this area of "perversity"; but it also made possible the formation of a "reverse" discourse: homosexuality began to speak in its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or "naturality" be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified.[12]

The gay rights movement turned around the negative connotation, suggesting that the naturalness of same-sex desire should serve as a reason to receive certain social and ecclesial goods such as marriage. This strategy proved eminently sensible, given the discourse based in homosexuality and heterosexuality was the only discourse available. Regardless of whether liberal or traditionalist, therefore, most Episcopalians have brought with them the discourse of homosexuality to wider Anglican debates: while they generally assume the designation to be a universal descriptor, it reflects religious and scientific approaches contingent to Western culture. Sexual acts are tied to sexual identity, so the thinking goes, and one's sexual identity is part of "who one is"—part of an essential self, a totalizing individual identity.[13]

Indeed, people understand sexuality quite differently in various parts of the world. Same-sex activity has been conceived historically through flexible understandings of gender, for example, in various

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[11] Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 43.
[12] Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 101.
[13] Armour, "Blinding Me with (Queer) Science," 116.

parts of Africa.[14] People may conceive themselves crossing gender boundaries in sexual encounters with someone of their same sex—thus a male might be called "wife" to another man or a female considered a "husband" to another female. When Westerners impose their own categories upon such situations, confusion inevitably ensues. For example, an anthropologist working among the Nuer of Ethiopia and South Sudan in the 1970s took his informants at face value when they told him there was no homosexuality among them. Yet later his primary informant told him about a man who consistently dressed as a woman and was permitted to marry a husband. Somewhat surprised, the anthropologist inquired further. "This was different," the Nuer informant clarified, "because 'the man had actually become a woman'; the prophet of Deng had been consulted and had agreed to his change of status. The prophet had decided to call on the spirits and after consultation had declared that indeed the man was a woman. Therefore, he could dress in women's clothes and behave as a woman. From that time onward it was agreed that 'he' should be called 'she,' and 'she' was allowed to marry a husband." "All very confusing" the anthropologist admitted.[15] Confusing because the Nuer imaginary of sexuality proved sufficiently different from Western orientation essentialism. Indeed, the accommodation of the Nuer man, strange though it may appear to Western conceptions of sexuality, was a means of integrating his same-sex attraction into the moral community of Nuer.

When some bishops from the global South say that homosexuality is a Western import, then, they are not wrong—they needn't read Michel Foucault to see instinctively its Western particularity. At the 1998 Lambeth Conference, many bishops from the global South acknowledged the term was quite uncommon in their home regions,

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[14] While data is limited due to the scarcity of written records, some limited conclusions are available: Stephen O. Murray and Will Roscoe, eds., *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands: Studies in African Homosexualities* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998). See also Kevin Ward, "Same-Sex Relations in Africa and the Debate on Homosexuality in East African Anglicanism," *Anglican Theological Review* 84, no. 1 (Winter 2002): 81–111.

[15] Anthropologist Brian MacDermot, quoted in Murray and Roscoe, *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands*, xv. The editors write, "Although [MacDermot] found Nuer statements confusing, there was no contradiction from their point of view. The old man who did women's work had changed his gender, as far as they were concerned. Thus intercourse with him was not viewed as an encounter between two men" (25).

even "definitionally alien."[16] It is not that their languages do not have words for same-sex behavior or for those who consistently experience same-sex attraction; many African languages have such words and some have multiple words. It is that the terms do not portray an expressive individual identity as in the modern West.[17] Even when African church leaders use the term "homosexuality," many use it differently than Westerners: not as a strict translation of indigenous words for those who experience same-sex attraction, per se, but as a term that retains a distinctly foreign sense. Indeed, many African church leaders and politicians have capitalized on the foreign quality of the term. They have retooled Western sexual discourse to forcefully oppose same-sex behavior of any kind in their home regions, arguing that the behavior is of foreign origin, with some asserting that Africans do not experience same-sex attraction (a questionable claim indeed). Thus "homosexuality" becomes a hybrid term, in that it retains something of its Western origin but also becomes adapted for local purposes of portraying same-sex behavior as foreign to Africa. In some regions, opposition to homosexuality has also become enshrined in legal codes, drawing justifiable concern from human rights activists, both African and Western. Ironically, often these legal codes are themselves based upon Western jurisprudence; the rigidity of Western-styled law has likely inhibited certain inclusive indigenous instincts, like those of the Nuer community above. Nevertheless, such opposition shows how narratives of neocolonialism and homosexuality spread far beyond church teaching into realms of politics and law, only adding to the complexities of our Communion's moral struggles.

In the Anglican Communion's own conversations, certain Western assumptions about human sexuality dominated conversation from the start, because Western vocabulary became the *de facto* vocabulary for the Communion. Repeated use of categories like homosexuality and heterosexuality assured that Western classifications retained priority. African philosopher Kwasi Wiredu highlights the connection between use of European language and the colonial project: "A language, most assuredly, is not conceptually neutral; syntax and vocabulary are apt to

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[16] Neville Hoad, *African Intimacies: Race, Homosexuality, and Globalization* (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 54.

[17] Murray and Roscoe, *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands*, 279–282.

suggest definite modes of conceptualization."[18] This is not to say that using a Western language need be inherently neocolonial for Wiredu, it is simply to say that decolonized philosophy and religion require the intellectual dexterity of moving between the thought worlds of one's native language and a European language—an additional dexterity not required for the native Westerner discussing religion in one's own tongue. Frantz Fanon makes the point more starkly: "[One] who possesses a language possesses as an indirect consequence the world expressed and implied by this language. You can see what we are driving at: there is an extraordinary power in the possession of a language."[19] By controlling the language of sexuality, Westerners thereby held "extraordinary power" in Anglican debates, a point not lost on Anglicans in the global South. Indeed, assuming such universality in language comes with an inherent yet generally unspoken assumption: if terms like "homosexuality" and "heterosexuality" are presumed to be universal ways of categorizing human sexual experience, the conclusion follows that others (generally non-Westerners) will also one day come to narrate their sexual experiences in these same terms. The use of such discourses in a global context then assumes that reasonable non-Western peoples will eventually use this same discourse as well, all while overlooking the historical contingency of Western categories. Western discourse then becomes the perceived height of moral achievement, with non-Western peoples living in various intermediary stages leading to the conclusions of the West. Such presumptions apply whether one is for or against the inclusion of same-sex behavior in the church's life.[20] The universalizing character of Western language thus becomes a fulcrum of our neocolonialism.

An Aloof White Gaze

Not only did the content of the debate employ Western assumptions that obfuscated non-Western views on sexuality, its form carried an aloof tone, illustrating the Western tendency to abstract the self

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[18] Kwasi Wiredu, "Toward Decolonizing African Philosophy and Religion," *African Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 4 (1998): 17.

[19] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 1952, 2008), 2.

[20] For examples of neocolonial behavior among traditionalists, see Miranda K. Hassett, *Anglican Communion in Crisis: How Episcopal Dissidents and Their African Allies Are Reshaping Anglicanism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2007), 205–206.

from its environs. Many Episcopal liberals—especially those in positions representing the wider church—went out of their way to choose language that would not incite further conflict. Yet the aloofness of their rhetoric in fact echoed the tone of Westerners calmly responding to complaints about imperialisms of the past. Those in the global South have become accustomed to Westerners responding to cries of neocolonialism with an even, detached tone that communicates objectivity. Yet when those who have known oppression cry out about imperialism, they seek to be heard, not offered analysis.

Theologian J. Kameron Carter calls this tendency to abstract the self and analyze a social situation the "white gaze."[21] Such a gaze entails an attempt to remove oneself from present circumstances to offer wide-ranging reflections upon their surroundings, like an explorer viewing a landscape from afar. While reflecting upon one's surroundings is certainly an experience of all human cultures, the tendency to abstract the self beyond one's environment proves especially Western. Charles Taylor describes this discourse, which imitates natural science: "It presents the universe as *a system before our gaze*, whereby we can grasp the whole in a kind of tableau. Indeed . . . the truly moral agent should be able to abstract from his own situation, and adopt the standpoint of the 'impartial spectator'." The white gaze is "the classic stand of disengagement . . . from which the thinker is disintricated; even though he may also recognize that he figures as a small component within it, this is not the vantage from which he is now contemplating the whole."[22]

Frantz Fanon describes being on the other side of this analytical gaze. Amid expressions of frustration or jubilation by colonized peoples, the orderly and remote analysis of Westerners serves to relativize and thereby diminish lived experience. On one occasion, Fanon describes his jubilation at having discovered *negritude*—a cultural movement celebrating the accomplishments of indigenous African culture, art, and politics. Yet Fanon soon reads Jean-Paul Sartre, who

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[21] J. Kameron Carter, "Black Intellectuals and Religion," course at Duke Divinity School, Spring 2008. See also J. Kameron Carter, *Race: A Theological Account* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), in which he similarly speaks of "the ascetic gaze of whiteness" (343) and the white "normative gaze" as identified in Cornel West's work (49). The "white gaze" may also refer to the experience of whites physically staring at non-white persons with implicit judgments; see Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 90.

[22] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 232, italics added.

describes *negritude* as "the weak stage of a dialectical progression: the theoretical and practical affirmation of white supremacy is the thesis." Sartre's strictly analytical description shuts out Fanon's emotive and hopeful response, because Sartre simply situates *negritude* within a seemingly inevitable dialectic. It is no longer a movement deserving attention on its own terms but rather becomes subsumed under the white gaze. "When I read this page," Fanon says, "I felt they had robbed me of my last chance."[23] Rather than sensing one's frustration has been heard and absorbed, one feels Westerners to be as remote as ever.

Such cultural habits set the scene for substantial miscommunication around the consecration of Gene Robinson. The Episcopal Church had not played a major role in the Anglican Communion for some decades, thus decreasing its interpersonal relationships with others in the Communion, only to emerge suddenly on the controversial issue of same-sex relationships.[24] Archbishops like Akinola and Nkoyoyo cried out that Americans were acting imperialistic, while American leaders responded by calmly clarifying the context. Presiding Bishop Frank Griswold, who admirably weathered much incendiary language from various quarters and carefully sought to avoid needlessly exacerbating conflict, nevertheless employed this tactic of an even-handed and detached tone. His letter to Anglican primates, following the General Convention's consent to the election of Robinson, methodically explained the context of the Episcopal Church's decision-making. He implored against heeding the "urgent voices which speak of crisis," and offered ecclesial and scriptural reasons for consenting to Robinson's election. After acknowledging the difficulty the Episcopal Church's decisions brought to those elsewhere in the Communion, he offered didactic explanation. On Anglicanism, he said, "My own sense is that one of our Anglican gifts is to contain different theological perspectives within a context of common prayer"; on scripture, "there is no such thing as a neutral reading of Scripture"; on differences in polity, "it is incumbent upon me as Presiding Bishop to honor the life of my own church and the canonically prescribed election process of a diocese." Across the letter, the tone remained detached and aloof. His aim, he said, was to explain context: "I hope

[23] Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 112.

[24] Jenkins, "Episcopalians, Homosexuality, and World Mission." See also Hassett, *Anglican Communion in Crisis*, 47–70.

this letter helps to clarify the actions of our General Convention and my own views, and supplies answers to some of the questions you have raised."[25] His letter to the Episcopal Church following the *Windsor Report* followed a similar, even-handed approach. He provided an overview of ecclesial landscape: "The Commission was obliged to consider a number of sometimes conflicting concerns"; he spoke of "widely divergent understandings and points of view" in the Communion. He explained the context of the Episcopal Church, doing ministry "in a society where homosexuality is openly discussed." He then offered reflections on Anglican comprehensiveness, describing the church as a "diverse center . . . characterized by a spirit of mutual respect and affection rather than hostility and suspicion." Only toward the end of the letter did he express regret for how difficult and painful decisions of the Episcopal Church have been for others elsewhere in the Communion.[26] Griswold's statements were careful, reflective, and theological; he refused to be absorbed into the heat of the conflict. To do so, he distanced himself from the acerbic rhetoric so prevalent at that time. Perhaps we could have asked little more of Griswold—especially given his pastoral gifts as a teacher—for had he taken a more defensive posture, surely the conflict would have been worse. Yet here again tragedy emerges: the pattern of calmly explaining the context echoes the white gaze, the move to abstraction distances those pained by the legacies of colonialism.

The House of Bishops likewise initially abstracted themselves from the conflict. Their January 2005 statement from Salt Lake City, Utah was a case in point. After the *Windsor Report* recommended repentance from the Episcopal Church, the House of Bishops obliged, but not before saying "we affirm that we all need to repent." They went on to say, "We repent of the ways we as bishops have sometimes treated each other, failing to honor Christ's presence in one another."[27] Yet affirming first that "all need to repent" rhetorically distanced themselves from the heat of the conflict by making a general,

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[25] Frank T. Griswold, "For the Primates of the Anglican Communion and Moderators of the United Churches," August 19, 2003; arc.episcopalchurch.org/presiding-bishop/1275_19083_ENG_HTML.htm.

[26] Frank T. Griswold, "A Word to the Church: Some Preliminary Reflections Regarding the Windsor Report," October 18, 2004; archive.episcopalchurch.org/3577_52922_ENG_HTM.htm.

[27] House of Bishops, "A Word to the Church," January 12–13, 2005; archive.episcopalchurch.org/26769_57297_ENG_HTM.htm.

abstracted statement before expressing their own repentance. The tendency toward abstraction emerged at the moment when contrition was most needed. This is not to say that many bishops in the global South did not need to repent for their own acrimonious language. It is simply to say that distancing oneself through abstraction only serves to detach oneself from the conflict and hinder repentance.

The 2006 General Convention's resolutions exhibited similar characteristics of careful, if aloof, language distancing the church from the fray of conflict. For example, it resolved to "reaffirm the abiding commitment of The Episcopal Church to the fellowship of churches that constitute the Anglican Communion and seek to live into the highest degree of communion possible."[28] As legislative resolutions go, I suspect this is as warm as can be expected. Yet it is not a stirring statement of desired harmony. Likewise, the General Convention expressed "its regret for straining the bonds of affection in the events surrounding the General Convention of 2003"; it offered "sincerest apology," and indeed asked for forgiveness. [29] These were remarkable accomplishments given the extensive procedure involved in any piece of General Convention legislation—much less one as public as Resolution A160. Yet the language remained so restrained and clinical that others might reasonably think the Episcopal Church had not fully absorbed their concerns. Again, tragedy emerges in the fact that these statements were carefully worded to avoid inciting further conflict, yet they widened the distance between the West and the global South.

The aloof white gaze of the Episcopal Church's carefully crafted statements took place within a context of other far more inflammatory ones, thereby exacerbating unintended neocolonialisms. Such inflammatory statements are worth highlighting as a brief aside, not only because they display the worst of Western paternalism, but also because they colored how Anglicans in the global South received our more carefully crafted statements. Some Westerners expressed concern that Africans are too close to shocking and exotic practices to speak to the West about homosexuality. Writing about the Anglican conflict, one British journalist expressed a sentiment also heard within

[28] General Convention 2006, Resolution A159; www.episcopalarchives.org/cgi-bin/acts/acts_resolution.pl?resolution=2006-A159.

[29] General Convention 2006, Resolution A160; www.episcopalarchives.org/cgi-bin/acts/acts_resolution.pl?resolution=2006-A160.

the Episcopal Church: "Nigeria tolerates polygamy, child sacrifice and the stoning to death of adulterous women (but not their male partners) seemingly without demur but cannot contemplate how a loving relationship between couples of the same sex could be tolerated."[30] Similarly, Bishop Spong's infamous caricaturing of African bishops before Lambeth 1998 deeply harmed perceptions between Westerners and the global South. "They're yet to face the intellectual revolution of Copernicus and Einstein that we've had to face in the developing world," he said. "That's just not on their radar screen."[31] (Spong later apologized for the statement.) Spong's word choice proves illuminating. His use of "developing world" for the modern West at first seems surprising, given it is more often used for countries once termed the "Third World." Yet calling the West "developing" discloses a notion, all too common in colonial discourse, that the West is in a constant state of progression while others remain static and unchanging—or at least not progressing as rapidly as the West. Such assertions serve less as genuine analyses of the global South and more as mirrors to the West's own sense of superiority. As postcolonial theory argues, the Westerner manufactures an Other by way of contrast with itself, often selecting the most exotic and foreign qualities of non-Western peoples.[32] Rather than being attentive to others on their own terms, one assumes that the path of progress toward cultural maturity inevitably follows the Western trajectory. Such sentiments do not represent the mainstream, but they do influence ways in which other liberal statements are heard by the global South—while also making the need for acts of reconciliation all the more urgent. In the spirit of such reconciliation, I turn to H. Richard Niebuhr.

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[30] Stephen Bates, quoted in Grant LeMarquand, "African Responses to New Hampshire and New Westminster: An Address," *Anglican and Episcopal History* 75, no. 1 (2006): 33.

[31] Quoted in Hassett, *Anglican Communion in Crisis*, 72. Hassett also provides examples of similar sentiments spoken at the parish level.

[32] For seminal texts in postcolonial theory, see Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978) and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, eds., *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271–313.

Seeking Reconciliation amid Tragedy: Thinking with H. Richard Niebuhr

Amid our baffling interplay of imperialism, mission history, and modern-day globalization, we should not lose heart, for there are seasoned theological voices familiar with the troubles of tragedy. In this case, H. Richard Niebuhr proves especially fruitful in three ways. First, Niebuhr situates the sources of our moral tragedy. He then offers tools to assess our past and present without resorting to a white gaze. Finally, he offers a spirituality of repentance that strives toward reconciliation.

First, how did we end up in such tragic moral ironies, despite sincere attempts to avoid the mistakes of our past? H. Richard Niebuhr's account of the self as a *responsible* being provides an explanation. Niebuhr means responsible in the sense of one who *responds* to one's environs. In any and every action, the human being is responding to something: the self exists "in response to actions upon us in society and in time."[33] The human responds to various stimuli—including the community around her, the natural environment, others acting upon her, and God's own actions. Moral agency comes into play insofar as humans interpret our situation in a particular way and act accordingly: "In all our actions [we] answer to action upon us in accordance with our interpretation of such action."[34] Within this understanding, human beings do not simply exist within time. We carry history with us, because we are always responding to a history that came before us—a history that is in fact part of us. Niebuhr writes:

> My past is with me now; it is in my present as conscious and unconscious memory; it is here now as habits of behavior, of speech and thought, as ways of cutting up and dividing into shapes and forms the great mass of impressions made on my senses by the energies assailing them from without. My interpersonal past also is with me in all my present meetings with other selves. It is there in all my love and guilt. The self does not leave its past behind as the moving hand of a clock does; its past is inscribed into it more

[33] H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy* (Louisville, Ky.: John Knox Press, 1963, 1999), 108.

[34] Niebuhr, *Responsible Self*, 57.

> deeply than the past of geologic formations is crystallized in their present form.[35]

Our pasts are more a part of us than we can understand. Our cultural histories become sedimented into our individual and collective consciousness and decision-making.[36] Thus Episcopal liberals act tragically because we are products of a Western culture that, for centuries, has seen itself in a state of perpetual progress and advancement, especially in comparison with those outside the West. We inherited the colonialisms of our culture's past—through the habits of our economic and political life, through our social imaginaries. This does not imply, however, that we become trapped in our histories.

The responsible self bears moral agency through interpreting what is happening around her and responding accordingly. For H. Richard Niebuhr, we get beyond tragedy first by recognizing its extent. If the human self is primarily responsive to its environment and history, then the first question of ethics is simply to ask, "What is going on?"[37] The greater understanding we have of the complexities of our moral situation, the more ably we may fittingly respond. "The decisive question" for ethics, Niebuhr contends, is not "'What is the goal?' nor yet 'What is the law?' but 'What is happening?'." The subsequent question becomes, "'What is the fitting response to what is happening?'"[38] Ethical judgments come into play as we interpret our situation and choose to respond based on this interpretation. This interpretation and judgment is no easy task, however. The moral life is prone to tragedy in part because our assumptions are so close to us that we sometimes hardly recognize them. "Unquestioned, almost inaccessible assumptions in our common minds determine how we interpret and how we react," Niebuhr writes.[39] Yet attentive interpretation of "what is going on" does provide moral insight unavailable without such due reflection. One who is mindful of, say, one's nationalism or a culture's colonial past can have a level of moral insight one would otherwise lack.

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35 Niebuhr, *Responsible Self*, 93.

36 The idea of self and collective identity as "sedimented" from its past comes from Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

37 Niebuhr, *Responsible Self*, 60.

38 Niebuhr, *Responsible Self*, 67.

39 Niebuhr, *Responsible Self*, 139.

How is such analysis distinguished from the abstracted white gaze, however? How is such explanation not also aloof and remote? Niebuhr's attention to historical particularity and our embeddedness within the world around us prove the distinguishing factors. Rather than attempting to abstract the self from its environs, Niebuhr aims to show the extent to which the self always reasons within a history and culture. Unlike the white gaze, which attempts to view the landscape remotely, Niebuhr's approach aims to see one's placement within a larger whole. We reason within our particularity, not in spite of it. Thus the methodology of this essay has been to reason from within my own particular experiences, having served as a missionary in East Africa and now working as an Episcopal priest within an American parish, then connecting these experiences with others' theoretical observations, such as Fanon, Foucault, and Taylor. The act of interpretation oftentimes, if not inevitably, entails some risk of abstraction, yet H. Richard Niebuhr's attention to one's historical situatedness at least checks unwarranted abstraction, while also offering a more realistic epistemology than the white gaze.

It has been the burden of this essay to describe a small piece of "what is going on" in the Anglican Communion today. The debates within the Anglican Communion have been not only about sexuality and the place of scripture—though these are two primary components—but also about the political power of the global South within the Communion. The sexuality debate provided Anglicans in the global South an opportunity to see themselves not at the margins of the Communion but at its center. As Neville Hoad argues, "Being an African enable[d] a claim to represent the Anglican universal rather than continuing to carry the marker of cultural difference."[40] To the extent that liberals fail to recognize this neocolonial aspect of the Anglican conflict, we fail to see "what is going on." Sexuality proved not only a subject of ecclesial debate. Sexuality became a cipher for wider conflicts over unequal historical power dynamics across the Communion, conflicts which included not only ecclesial dynamics but also economics, race, and legacies of colonialism.

Such interpretation is not simply historical or sociological, however: for Niebuhr, discerning "what is going on" also involves interpreting and responding to the actions of God, thereby leading to a spirituality of repentance. In interpreting such actions within situations

[40] Hoad, *African Intimacies*, xxi.

of tragedy, Niebuhr commonly highlights two theological concerns, God's judgment and human repentance. Within scripture, Niebuhr points to the Old Testament prophets as his primary example of interpreting God's actions within history.[41] The prophets view geopolitics of the Ancient Near East through a theological lens; events like the sieges and invasions of the Assyrian empire call Israel to recognize judgment and seek repentance. Likewise in the twentieth century, during the Manchurian Crisis, Niebuhr argues that Christians should recognize God's judgment upon nationalism and self-interest and thus repent for the sins of their nation.[42] In World War II, Niebuhr calls war the judgment of God, because human beings are reaping the results of "the self-centered character of nations, churches, classes and individual men."[43] Niebuhr does not mean judgment in a vindictive sense: judgment entails humans "reaping what they have sown," as well as the "corrective action of a God who is loyal to his creatures."[44] Judgment is an act of God's faithfulness to human beings, in that God judges in order to redeem. Put simply, judgment that calls forth repentance leads to redemption. Thus in our own situation of tragedy, if we seek to discern God's actions, we do well to look for God's judgment and then seek repentance.

Uncomfortable though it may be, recognizing God's judgments enables us to see that the conflicts of the Communion *are* in some ways consequences of our own sins—those "known and unknown." Our inadvertent neocolonial behavior emerged from the colonial behavior of prior Westerners, whose behavior emerged out of a sense of Western superiority over the non-Western Other. As responsive creatures, we carried our culture's past sins with us; indeed, sometimes our assumptions have been so close to us that we have lacked the tools to identify them as colonial legacies. Nevertheless, one who sows in colonialism reaps in neocolonialism: we have received back from Anglicans in the global South the frustration they have felt toward Westerners for centuries. "We live in the kind of world which visits

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41 Niebuhr, *Responsible Self*, 66–67.

42 H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Grace of Doing Nothing," in *War in the Twentieth Century: Sources in Theological Ethics*, ed. Richard B. Miller (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 6–11.

43 H. Richard Niebuhr, "War as the Judgment of God," in Miller, *War in the Twentieth Century*, 53.

44 Niebuhr, "War as the Judgment of God," 48, and H. Richard Niebuhr, "Is God in the War?" in Miller, *War in the Twentieth Century*, 59.

our iniquities upon us and our children, no matter how much we pray and desire that it be otherwise," Niebuhr writes, drawing from the Deuteronomistic historian.[45] Again, Niebuhr's point is not pessimism or fatalism, but rather cognizance that consequences of some wrongs do not simply go away. In God's providential ordering, repercussions of some tragedies have to take their course before healing can truly emerge. Niebuhr writes, "History is not a perennial tragedy but a road to fulfillment and that fulfillment requires the tragic outcome of every self-assertion, for it is a fulfillment which can only be designated as 'love'."[46] God is judging the Episcopal Church through this conflict, just as God is judging every other province in the Communion through this conflict.

Such recognition of one's past sins then enables repentance. Seeking repentance, for Niebuhr, does not entail forcefully controlling a course of events, but rather "eliminating weeds and tilling the soil" for the action of God to sprout up. "[The] method is not one of striving for perfection or of acting perfectly, but of clearing the road by repentance and forgiveness."[47] We find some hope in this regard, because such practices of repentance are underway, however haltingly. Despite the Episcopal Church's initial abstracted attempt at repentance in January 2005, its posture has changed and moved toward heartfelt repentance. The House of Bishops' meeting in March 2005 at Camp Allen, Texas, for example, carried a humbled tone. It conveyed the need to listen and learn from others in the Communion, rather than offer didactic explanations. "Our hope and intention is to use the time ahead to initiate ways to speak with and learn from our brothers and sisters across the Communion about our common commitment to Christ and the different ways we seek to articulate, not only with lips but in our lives, the gospel we share," the bishops said. They expressed a growing realization of the deep—indeed tragic—situations confronting them: "We faced into our deep divisions with an openness that has not characterized our recent past." This kind of openness and honesty led to a remarkable statement of hope: "We believe this marks the beginning of a new day in our life together as bishops and

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[45] H. Richard Niebuhr, "A Communication: The Only Way Into the Kingdom of God," in Miller, *War in the Twentieth Century*, 20.

[46] Niebuhr, "A Communication," 20.

[47] Niebuhr, "A Communication," 21.

as the Episcopal Church."[48] By my reading, this statement marked a turning point in public communications from the Episcopal Church's leadership toward genuine repentance and reconciliation.[49]

Conclusion: Toward Reconciling Conversation

A question remains as to how we pursue justice for LGBT persons, excluded from the church's traditional conception of monogamy, while also assuring that their inclusion be accompanied by genuine listening to the global South. Models for such cross-cultural dialogue are emerging. When Bishop Shannon Johnston, for example, shared his decision to begin the process of blessing same-sex unions in the Diocese of Virginia, he explained the decision to global mission partners through sharing a personal, vulnerable experience from his own prayer life. While praying about decisions he faced, Bishop Johnston had an unexpected moment in his daily prayer; in this moment it became clear that he should move forward with same-sex blessings in the diocese.[50] Rather than speaking of prayer in the abstract as from a white gaze, Bishop Johnston spoke about a deeply personal lived experience. Even though many partners overseas disagreed with his decision, they sympathized with his prayerful decision-making process. The common language of prayer provided a bridge for respecting one another amid differences. In fact, more than one mission companion told him that even though they disagreed with the decision, they would have done the same thing were they in Bishop Johnston's position. That is, they also would have responded to prayer as they understood it. Indeed, others shared that they had prayed, just as Bishop Johnston, yet with different answers regarding same-sex blessings. Johnston and these bishops agreed, however, that their shared commitment to prayer was more important than what each of them perceived to hear in such prayer. His decision to ground his explanation not in didactic reflection but in an experience of prayer provided space for reconciling conversation.

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[48] House of Bishops, "A Word to the Church," March 16, 2005; archive.episcopalchurch.org/3577_60048_ENG_HTM.htm.

[49] See the similar tone in "House of Bishops Response 'to Questions and Concerns Raised by our Anglican Communion Partners,'" September 25, 2007; archive.episcopalchurch.org/79901_90457_ENG_HTM.htm.

[50] Shannon S. Johnston, "Surprised by Prayer," *Virginia Episcopalian* 120, no. 4 (July 2011): 12; www.thediocese.net/Customer-Content/WWW/CMS/files/JulyVE11_web.pdf.

Many have expressed hope that the Anglican Communion's crisis, despite the painful struggles of recent decades, can somehow emerge in a new form—one more interconnected, more shaped by mutual love and friendship between Anglican sisters and brothers across the globe. The Indaba Process of Lambeth 2008 allowed such frank and reconciling conversation, in large part because it departed from Lambeth's previous methods of Western parliamentary-styled decision-making.[51] Instead, it encouraged bishops to listen to one another firsthand. The Indaba groups made increasing room for a spirituality of reconciliation, as do Communion-wide efforts like the Continuing Indaba Process and Anglican Bishops in Dialogue. We will continue, no doubt, to hurt one another; but this should not deter us. As H. Richard Niebuhr writes:

> It is of course too much to say that the ethics of Christians is the ethics of the reconciled, or that their interpretations of life and death and neighbors have all passed through *metanoia*. For we who call ourselves by Christ's name recognize the presence in ourselves of the responses of distrust, of the ethics of death, as well as the movement toward life. In our biographies as in our human history the process of reconciliation has begun; at no point is it complete.[52]

Our reconciliation in the Anglican Communion and our unity are proleptic, only foretastes of the unity of the church in the heavenly Jerusalem. As Presiding Bishop Griswold writes, "The Anglican Communion is in some sense a vision of who we might become rather than a fully defined ecclesial body. By God's grace, we discover through the Anglican Communion the ever deeper communion that Christ has won for us. In this regard I think of the words of 1 John, 'What we will be has yet to be revealed.'"[53]

It is not too late for the Anglican Communion to model a reconciling conversation regarding human sexuality—or other subjects that will inevitably arise. What might a global Anglican conversation

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[51] The Indaba Process drew directly from practices of reconciliation in southern Africa, especially the Zulu and Xhosa. In these cultures, Indaba aims to give all a voice and to reach common consensus through focused deliberation.

[52] Niebuhr, *Responsible Self*, 144.

[53] Frank T. Griswold, "Presiding Bishop's Letter to Bishops on Lambeth Commission Report," September 17, 2004; archive.episcopalchurch.org/3577_51055_ENG_HTM.htm.

regarding same-sex attraction entail? First, it could involve listening to Africans and others in the global South as they share their experiences of same-sex attraction, without assuming their conclusions will immediately resemble our own. Indeed, many Africans have begun to share such experiences, even at great personal risk. Listening could then lead to global cross-pollination regarding justice for those experiencing same-sex attraction.[54] Finally, the conversation could be based in shared theological categories, rather than categories particular to a single culture within the Communion. I suspect that the place to start is not in Western discourses of homosexuality or Western liberal conceptions of justice, but rather in discerning the role of rightly ordered desire in a faithful Christian sexual life.[55] This approach, based in Christian theological vocabulary and attentive to the needs of those who experience same-sex attraction, is a way of framing the conversation in terms not exclusive to the West. The Anglican Communion can be a place where such conversation happens, a community in which all are in Christ, whether Jew or Greek, African or Westerner, gay or straight.

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[54] For examples of Anglicans in the global South sharing experiences regarding same-sex attraction and for a model for such cross-cultural conversations, see Terry Brown, ed., *Other Voices, Other Worlds: The Global Church Speaks Out on Homosexuality* (New York: Church Publishing, 2006).

[55] See Sarah Coakley, "Afterword: Beyond Libertarianism and Repression: The Quest for an Anglican Theological Ascetics," in Brown, *Other Voices, Other Worlds*, 331–338. See also Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay 'On the Trinity'* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013).