

Address to the College of Bishops, St. Hugh's Oxford,

September 10, 2012

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'On the Theology of Women Bishops'

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First, let me express my gratitude to Archbishop Rowan, and to you all, for inviting me to speak briefly to you today on the topic of 'The Theology of Women Bishops'. I am deeply honoured to be asked to contribute to your thinking at this crucial moment in the Church of England's life and decision-making, and very glad to be with you. I thank you all for your invitation and for your welcome.

I propose to offer to you this afternoon only three distinct *theological* reflections on our topic. If you are hoping that I shall suggest a specific way through the dilemmas of the various proposed Amendments to Clause 5

(1) (c), you will be disappointed: I have not taken this invitation as a request to air my own views on that specific matter, although we could discuss it and it will soon be clear enough where I stand overall. But although that pragmatic question is of course uppermost in all your minds just now, I want to urge – in the strongest terms - that it should not supervene too hastily over the deeper theological and philosophical issues that are at stake here. For these are issues, I suggest, of more enormous profundity and peril for our Anglican heritage than seems to be generally recognized, even now - issues, however, which are still in danger of being submerged and repressed in the rush to effect some quick diplomatic solution to an embarrassing and painful impasse. Could it be, then, that the delay caused to the progress of the decision by the resistance to the Archbishops' amendment has at least this to be said for it –

that it drives us back once more, and doubtless painfully, to these theological basics?

The three theological points I want to cover, then, albeit briefly, are these.

First, the episcopacy as locus of unity: I believe we cannot now, especially after the July synod's vote, avoid a probing return to certain fundamental reflections about the essential nature of the episcopate, biblically and classically conceived. Something absolutely crucial to the episcopal role is at stake in our decisions: its intrinsic and organic connection to the presbyterate and the diaconate, first; and – from there - its expression of unity, authority and indeed accountability within the Church at large. A loss of coherence on these points does not only open up the spectre of a second-rate sort of episcopacy for women, but thereby also represents a severe blow to the structure and standing of episcopacy *tout court*.

Second, the status of reason as mediator of the primacy of scriptural authority in the Anglican tradition: here is something specific to the legacy of Hooker, I want to argue, which both makes it mandatory that no rational inconsistency is introduced into our perception of episcopacy, but which also significantly supports a *developmental* notion of reason and its creative implications.

Third, the dangers of a creeping bureaucratization in our Church: here my theological concern is the covert replacement, in the midst of our disagreements, of a genuinely theological and spiritual perception of the episcopacy with a worldly view of 'leadership' which itself has deleterious implications for episcopacy in general, but arguably for female episcopacy in particular.

Let me now expand a little on each of these three points in turn. I shall give by far the most space to the first one.

1. *The Bishop as Locus of Unity:*

When Archbishop Rowan asked me to speak today on ‘the theology of women bishops’ my first, and instinctive, thought was to riposte that surely there can be no ‘theology of women bishops’ *as such*. By this I intend neither a false repression of gender difference, nor an equally false appeal to secular egalitarianism. But what *is* surely at stake here is simply the very notion of episcopacy itself - as intrinsically linked to the presbyterate and the diaconate, and as distinctively the locus of spiritual authority and unity. Long ago J B Lightfoot argued painstakingly and convincingly of the New Testament evidences that no consistent wedge can be drawn between the *presbyteros* and the *episcopos*, the differences being mainly ones of

flavour or context. Outside the New Testament, Ignatius of Antioch's reflections on the emerging role of the episcopate as symbol of unity and authority (now over and amongst presbyters, as Christ to his apostles) are especially poignant when we hear of the troubling 'silence' of one early bishop of Ephesus, a sign (on a reading which I favour) not of episcopal inefficacy but of the patient bearing within the bishop's body of the ongoing weight of church tensions and disagreements. Like Christ before his accusers is silent so, at least on occasions of difficulty, is the judicious and prayerful bishop, patiently holding the church together. I mention this telling example for a particular reason, of course: it is a fascinating instance of a trait (intentional and mandated silence) elsewhere culturally and biblically expected of *women*, yet here becoming the means of Christ-like episcopal *authority*; moreover, the unity *within differences* this posture of silence expresses is in no way the

result of divvying up different jurisdictions or ‘integrities’; were that the case, the bishop could precisely no longer manifest true unity, a role which becomes all the more emphatically emphasized, as is well known, in the work of Cyprian and his successors. Whilst later, post-Constantinian, writers on the episcopate evidence enormously varied perceptions of its authority and how it is to be exercised (whether as a civil servant, a king, a prophet, or a Father-god), the issue of symbolic unity remains a constant, as does that of the organic connection of diaconate, priesthood and episcopacy.

I remind you of this familiar historical material for only one reason, which I wish now to put sharply, though I trust not offensively. As I expressed this same point at the *Transformations* conference on women’s ministries last year, the last 20-year hiatus in our Church’s life, during which time women have been able to be ordained to the

priesthood but barred from the episcopate, represents as I see it a lapsing into theological incoherence more powerful and damaging than any I can think of in Anglican history. But as it is left to our Roman Catholic and Orthodox interlocutors to remind us (the memorable interjection by Ephrem Lash at Synod is a case in point), there is no such thing, in a theo-logic of any veracity, of a legitimately-ordained priest who is inherently banned from the episcopate by gender. Such an idea is not just an offence to the secular world, as a matter of ‘rights’ and ‘equality’ (something I only care about for its apologetic dangers); but it is more importantly an offence to *theological truth*, a running sore of incoherence in our theological life-world without whose resolution and healing no other, related, theological project in our Church can I believe go forward and flourish. So what we have created in the past 20 years is a theological anomaly which has insidiously been made

to seem *normal*: a whole cadre of priests (is it 30% of our priesthood now?) who are supposedly intrinsically disabled from exercising the charisms of spiritual unity and authority historically associated with the episcopate. It is here that the main *theological* scandal still lies: the implicit creation of second-class priesthood. The terrible danger is that this may now be extended into second-class episcopacy.

Perhaps the main problem is that this incoherence is often fatally confused with three other things characteristic of our ecclesial tradition, but which are emphatically not the same phenomenon: *first*, the distinctive Anglican tradition of theological balance – the desire and commitment to honour both Catholic and Reformed traditions which was at the heart of the Elizabethan settlement and Hooker’s (to my mind, *entirely* coherent) polity; *second*, the concomitant insistence on human courtesy to one’s theological opponents, which remains an

admirable ongoing Anglican trait, and one which I defend to the hilt; and *third* (and much more disingenuously) the recent Anglican tendency to wallow in priestly powerlessness, failure, confusion and self-abnegation – as if this were a virtue in itself, rather than - as I see it – an unfortunate perversion of a truly kenotic Christlikeness. In short, this current problem of theological incoherence over the female episcopate is in a qualitatively different category from the (merely supposed) historic ‘incoherence’ of, say, the theology of the eucharist in the Elizabethan prayer book, or of the doctrine of predestination in the 39 articles. There tensions were legitimately held together; here, something theologically unsustainable is at stake.

How is this incoherence then to be addressed? The plea I make to you is to face and resolve it, not to compound it by additional theological confusions or practical evasions. If a female bishop is to exercise the

authority, and provide the symbolic unity, that the historic episcopate bespeaks, she cannot do it if the incoherence problem is merely shifted into a new realm: that of incompatible and *vying* forms of episcopal authority. And only consider too the moral, as well as the theological, dangers here for a moment: the sad case of the Chichester diocese is now actively before our attention in the Gladwin report. Some words from that report are pointedly relevant to the decisions you will make about the Amendment on women bishops. I quote:

‘Although delegation is essential in practice for the exercise of episcopal ministry, *this should never be allowed to undermine the overarching position of the diocesan*’. Or again, ‘Confidence can only be restored to the diocese in relation to its safeguarding work if its leadership can complete the transformation needed into *a united and trusting group of people* focused on their duty to ensure the

Church is safe for children and vulnerable adults'. Moral confusion and lack of accountability easily follow from lack of unity and responsibility in a diocese. The Gladwin report could hardly have been published at a more opportune time.

I now come, much more briefly, to my second and third points.

2. *The Status of Reason in the Tradition of Hooker.* The subtlety of Richard Hooker's account of the relation of Scripture, tradition and reason in Bk V of the *Ecclesiastical Polity* is one of the most distinctive and remarkable features of historic Anglican theology, and - I believe - of considerable importance for our current dilemmas about women bishops. But I am not sure that sufficient account has yet been taken of this strand of our heritage. As you will recall, Hooker has a very high view of reason in

relation to Scripture, since those who bear and remake 'tradition' are always the 'rational saints' of any generation. Moreover, and remarkably for his time, Hooker's vision of both 'natural law' and of 'reason' is developmental: one can only hypothesize that Newman's much later views on the development of doctrine may have been at least partly inspired by his reading of Hooker. My motivation for mentioning this in this context, however, is two-fold. First, the status and place of reason in the Anglican hierarchy of theological criteria acts, or should act, as a point of resistance to *any* forms of theological compromise which are actually contradictory: p and not $\neg p$ simply cannot co-exist in such a framework. (Thus - and such was I presume the instinctive reaction of the House of Clergy in synod - one cannot *simultaneously* hold what might be seen as a Donatist theology of taint in relation to women priests or bishops, *and* an Augustinian theology of objectively valid

sacramental orders, and maintain a coherent theology of the church.) When provisions are made for those who disagree within the Church, then, it cannot be on the basis of such an actual internal *contradiction* – or else our beloved Church of England will indeed have finally lost her reason. On the other hand, and secondly, however, Hooker’s perspective does indeed allow for novelties in the rational reception of Bible and tradition: the plastic nature of Hooker’s view of reason, and its deep understanding of historical embeddedness, does allow for creative *development* in response to the primacy of Scriptural authority and the deposit of tradition, without the danger of a merely historical or moral relativism. There is nothing in Hooker, then, that would give credence to the slogan that ‘nothing new is ever true’. But there is everything to suggest the possibility of hopes for future creativity and renewal.

Up till now, in my first two points, I have been stressing the importance of the issues of both theological and philosophical *coherence* in the debates about women bishops and whatever provisions are to be made for those who cannot acknowledge them. I come, lastly, to a rather different issue – the danger of the covert assimilation of worldly or bureaucratic notions of power and authority into the decisions of the Church about episcopal standing and oversight.

3. The Secular Bureaucratization of the Episcopate?

This last danger, too, seems to have crept up on our Church at a time when the Doctrine Commission was – apparently for financial reasons - in abeyance, and questions of theological coherence not always to the fore in synodical discussions. Along with the notable turn in priestly life in general to the secular bureaucratic models of ‘leadership’,

‘efficiency’ and mission-‘efficacy’ has gone an almost-unnoticed capitulation – as I see it - to the idolatry of *busyness*, in which modern women priests (often landed with the jobs that involve overseeing multiple parishes) have for the most part mutely colluded, fearful that to do otherwise would signal ‘failure’ to their male colleagues or overseers, including of course their bishops. The costliness to them/us of this pressure merely to ‘cope’ in a whirlwind of ever-consuming administrative demands and inevitably eroded prayer is a problem that goes well beyond the particular matter under discussion. But I dare to raise it here because it says something about the culture in which a merely pragmatic or political, rather than a truly theological, solution to an ecclesiastical impasse also becomes a distinct danger. Is our creeping ecclesial bureaucratization indeed the way forward for the Church in all its ministries, or is it here – rather than in any inappropriate commitment to

worldly feminism and egalitarianism, as is often claimed – that the issue of women bishops is partly also stalled and hiddenly entangled with secular mores?

Let me conclude. I have in these brief remarks this afternoon done little, I am certain, to relieve anxieties in this room as to how our current difficulties are to be resolved. Very much the opposite, I suspect. My intention, however, has precisely not been to offer any immediate palliative, but to point afresh and uncompromisingly to the underlying theological and philosophical issues which cannot credibly be gainsaid if a lasting solution to the issue of female bishops is to be achieved. I am a theologian and philosopher of religion, after all. What will have been clear, I trust, is that a ‘theology of women bishops’, if there is to be such, must be a renewed and distinctly Anglican theology of the episcopate *in toto*, not a capitulation to a

second-order ‘female’ form of the office, or to any other political compromise which hides an actual theological contradiction, or – again – to some negotiated pragmatic stand-off which continue to distract our gaze from the already-undermined position of women clergy in our church. Twenty years ago our Church voted to ordain women; we have arrived at the point when all the indications are that the current theological anomaly of priests who cannot by definition be bishops has become an unacceptable *skandalon* to the Church’s life. This is not because of a capitulation to secular feminism: it is, as I’ve tried to show here afresh, because of a commitment to the historic nature of Christian ordained ministry and in particular to the distinctive theological principles of Anglicanism. I am myself - though you may not think it – fully committed to the attempt to find courteously-ordered arrangements for those who currently disagree; what I am

completely opposed to is the introduction of new incoherences into the theological picture. It is truth that is at stake. And while truth can be two-eyed it cannot be two-faced.