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Gay Bishop Threatens the Safety of African Christians
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The stakes are quite high for the consecration of V. Gene Robinson as the Episcopal Bishop of New Hampshire on Nov. 2.

Even though The Reverend Canon Robinson has been overwhelmingly elected to this post through the standard procedure, since he lives as an openly gay man with his partner of 12 years, many Anglican leaders around the world have threatened to go "out of communion" with the American church if the consecration goes ahead. An emergency meeting of the leaders of the 70-million member Anglican Church worldwide failed to find a compromise. From media accounts, it seems everyone in the Church -- from the primates to the American bishops, to church members, to Canon Robinson himself -- thinks that a split would be bad. But if the alternative is to refuse a duly elected bishop his post, then so be it, say the Americans. The entire Anglican Church is aghast, waiting for disaster to fall.

Perhaps a split in the Anglican Church would not be a disaster. In some ways it is inevitable. The Anglican Church gained its worldwide standing through British colonialism. As Great Britain conquered lands around the world, the Anglican Church sent missionaries into them to win souls for Christ. In many areas they were quite successful, establishing strong branches of the Church. By the end of last century, however, Britain had granted independence to all the territory it once controlled. Politically, then, the British Empire is gone. But the worldwide Anglican Church remains, trying to maintain a unity which politicians long ago abandoned. Without imperial support, perhaps the unified Anglican Church can no longer be maintained.

The problem with empires is that they tend to put the needs of the empire above local needs. And the dispute over soon-to-be Bishop Robinson is really a clash over the local concerns of the churches on two continents. The North America churches are addressing the issue of gay participation in the church. The United States is focusing on the question of bishops, while the Canadian church is involved

with the issue of gay marriage. The Africa churches, which adamantly oppose Robinson's appointment as bishop and which are threatening the split, have a different set of local concerns. One of the most prominent of these is the competition with Islam.

Islam is much less tolerant of gays than is American society. For Islam, as for many conservative Christians, this is a moral issue. If the African Anglican Church became identified with gay rights through this act of the American Episcopal Church, this would impact the Muslim view of African Anglicans, so the argument goes.

In Nigeria, for instance, where many Anglican Christians find that the competition with their Muslim neighbors can erupt into violence, the idea that the Anglicans favored gays would inflame the friction between the communities, and thus the lives of Anglicans. A public, no-compromise, "withdrawal of communion" from the American Episcopal Church would, it is thought, prevent the American action from being identified with the Nigerian Anglican Church.

While this would be saddening to many, as I observed, the alternative would be for Canon Robinson to back down and not become a bishop. This would preserve Anglican unity. However, it would do so by letting the local concerns of the African churches, in particular its competition with Islam, dictate American church policy and actions. Given that the churches of each continent face such different situations, perhaps the best approach is simply to let each one address its own needs without having to worry about the needs of the other churches.