

Religion Today
November 9-15, 2003
Responses to the New Episcopalian Bishop
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It has finally happened. A major Christian denomination has formally recognized and blessed the practice of homosexuality. The Episcopal Church, U.S.A., did this when it consecrated Gene Robinson as the Bishop of New Hampshire on Nov. 2. For many, this is a time of rejoicing. For others, this is moment of tragedy.

The debate over the acceptability of Bishop Robinson has centered on questions of authority, i.e., does the Episcopal Church have the authority to ordain an openly gay bishop? I'll offer some thoughts, centered on three types of authority: traditional church organization, Scripture, and God.

Bishop Robinson's consecration is an innovation in church organization, to say the least. The response of approximately half of the primates of Anglican dioceses around the world, mostly in Africa, South America and Asia, has been an organizational one. They have declared themselves to be in "impaired communion" with the U.S. church. Although they had threatened to completely "break communion" with the U.S. church, these dioceses settled on a lesser action. While it is unclear exactly what impaired communion means, the difference leaves the way open for negotiation. A broken communion would have meant that the Africans would not have attended the same meetings as the Americans. An impaired communion may suggest that they will attend the same meetings but not celebrate Christian rituals together.

The American church's response also is organizational. Robinson was validly elected as bishop by the diocese of New Hampshire and by the entire American church. His elevation results from a careful adherence to rules and procedures traditionally used by the Episcopal Church. On the basis of tradition, then, Robinson must be consecrated. Those "traditionalists" who object to Robinson's new position actually are objecting to the results of the traditional process.

It should not be overlooked that Anglicanism worldwide is already out of union. The Archbishop of the Southern Cone diocese, in South America, already has broken communion with the Canadian Anglican

Church after one of its priests married a gay couple in keeping with Canada's new law allowing gay marriage.

The strident objections to homosexuality are mainly based on Scripture. There is no space here to go into the extensive debate on biblical interpretation. It should be mentioned, however, that the biblical strictures against homosexuality are weaker than their proponents claim. To provide a comparison, the biblical basis for slavery is much stronger and much more extensive in Scripture than is the case against homosexuality. Yet the Christian church managed to overcome the biblical warrant for slavery and outlaw its practice. Indeed, the Anglican Church was a leader in the elimination of slavery. It is ironic, then, that the African churches are the quickest in citing Scripture against Robinson's consecration.

One authority seems to be missing from the whole debate, at least as it is reported in the media, namely, God. The Episcopal Church, like other churches, is built on its relationship with God. Its members and leaders pray and worship regularly, seek God's guidance, and attempt to do His will. Gene Robinson, as a priest and now as a bishop, has sought to follow God's leading. Like many gays who have followed God's calling into the ministry, he has prayerfully looked for divine guidance throughout his life as a priest. And it seems that God has given it. To the extent that people can recognize a God-centered life and God's leadership, the Episcopalian of New Hampshire and the representatives of the American Episcopalian Church have seen this in Gene Robinson. Or perhaps God's guidance is indicated by Reverend Phelps, who was apparently present at the consecration ceremony with his "God hates Fags" signs.

Christianity's views of sexuality, and not just of homosexuality, have been a source of contention throughout its history. At different times, they have become more open or more restrictive, they have helped unify and helped divide. What will happen now in Anglicanism? Only time will tell.