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America's Challenge to the Worldwide Anglican Church
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Professor Jacob Neusner observed, "All Scripture is sacred, but not all Scripture is relevant." Despite this comment's sacrilegious sound, even religious believers who stress most strongly the Bible's importance would agree that they both believe this and practice it.

In Christianity, for example, few think that the guidelines for animal sacrifice found in Exodus and Leviticus should be followed in Christian worship. Most American Christians uphold the Bible's rules that permit divorce, rather than those that do not. Indeed, divorce rates are highest among the denominations most emphasizing biblical literacy. Even the Bible's strictures against dealing in monetary interest are ignored in our capitalist economy.

It is one matter to ignore a biblical injunction out of customary practice; it is another to move a scriptural rule from being followed to being not followed. This is the underlying problem with the Episcopal Church (U.S.A.), as the American Anglican Church is called, and its ordination of a gay bishop in 2004. In the view of most Anglican bishops around the world, this move contravenes scriptural mandates against the mere practice of homosexuality, let alone approval of such activity through ordination.

Some national Anglican churches, including the Nigerian Church, have "broken communion" with the American Church and the unity of the worldwide Anglican Church is threatened over this issue. At its national convention last week, the Episcopal Church endorsed a compromise that encourages ongoing dialogue with the rest of the Anglican Church and avoids immediate expulsion.

The heat generated in this dispute overshadows the history of debate about sexual matters among Anglicans and within Christianity in general. The Biblical books were written within patriarchal societies in which the family was the basic social unit. While this led to the rejection of same-sex unions, it also restricted women's ability to participate in public religious activities. Christianity followed these restrictions. The Apostle Paul wrote, "Women should be silent in churches, for they are not permitted to speak but should be subordinate" (1 Corinthians 14:34). While some churches still follow this practice, such as the Roman Catholics and most Baptist denominations, most mainstream American Protestant churches over the last century or so have changed to allow women to enter ministerial roles.

The Episcopal Church's struggle to bring women into the priesthood and then promote them to bishops reveals

that it is torn between its American setting and its international ties. Within American Protestantism, the Episcopal Church was a late-comer to women's ordination. The United Church of Christ ordained women as early as 1810, while the Presbyterians ordained their first woman in 1893. The United Methodist Church started its policy of women's ordination in 1956, while the Lutheran Church in America began ordaining women in 1970. In contrast, it was not until 1976 that the Episcopal Church sanctioned women's ordination.

This was immediately seen as a challenge by the worldwide Anglican Communion. Although the Hong Kong Anglican Church had ordained its first woman in 1944, few other national churches permitted the ordination of women. When the American Church in 1985 announced its intention to ordain a female bishop, the Communion reacted with shock, with several national churches threatening to break communion. The Anglican leader, the Archbishop of Canterbury, formed a commission to develop a solution to the situation. Essentially, the result was an agreement to disagree, yet remain united.

This has led to a confusing situation. At the start of 2006, only 24 national provinces of the Anglican Church permitted the ordination of women to the priesthood, while only 14 allowed the ordination of women as bishops.

The Church of England itself, the founding church of the Anglican Communion, does not yet permit women to serve as bishops. Furthermore, only three provinces have actually appointed women as bishops. So when the Episcopal conference last week voted to appoint Katherine Jefferts Schori as the next Presiding Bishop of the entire American Church, it was pushing the envelope of women's acceptance in the Anglican Communion.

Bishop Schori will be the world's first woman to hold that position and it will be interesting to see how she will be accepted by her peers. She now holds the highest position in the Church outside the Archbishop of Canterbury and she will be interacting with the Presiding Bishops from many nations. Only two of them will have experienced a woman bishop of any kind, and most have yet to allow any type of female ordination. Will they insist on her being biblical, that she be silent and submissive? Her authority, like their own, comes from the bishops and church members who elected her. They elected her to speak and to lead. It will be interesting to watch.