

## Cultural Influences on American Episcopalians

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The current conflict within the Episcopal Church has been described as the result of the Church being too closely aligned with American culture<sup>1</sup>. Those who are arguing against the full inclusion of gay and lesbian people see themselves as pitted against cultural, secular forces which are pulling the Church away from the true Gospel. This paper suggests that those who take this 'conservative' position are as much the products of western culture as those whom they oppose.

In the 1950s American society was taking to the suburbs, and new churches were being built as families grew along with Sunday Schools and women's groups. It was a time of stability and theological consensus as Protestant denominations coalesced around the common enemies of Catholicism and Cold War communism. In contrast the 1960s and 1970s were a time of great change in America and Western Europe as the civil rights and anti-war movements spawned a time of social upheaval which was compounded by the advent of easy birth control and sexual experimentation.

Within the church, social activism took on a new importance as cities turned into urban ghettos and the civil rights movement challenged Christians to support the rights of the oppressed. But social activism was not embraced by everyone – there were many Episcopalians who believed that the Church should stay out of politics and attend to the personal piety of believers.

Sociologist Robert Wuthnow has shown that the debate over direct action and civil disobedience opened up a larger question: that of the relationship between values and behavior. Clearly American culture supported racial equality as a value but that value was not transmitted into actual behavior. If preaching about values did not result in changed behavior, many argued that it was necessary to take their values to the streets and engage in activism. This fundamental issue opened up a new liberal/conservative divide. The new liberals were not defined by theological stance but by their belief in the importance of direct action. Conservatism became associated with the view that direct action was too divisive and conflictual and threatened the Church's traditional social and public role.

Increasingly liberals identified themselves with social justice, and conservatives with evangelism. Those who felt that the church is best suited to molding individual consciences through personal piety and morality and therefore evangelism, Bible Study and missionary efforts saw themselves as conservative – maintaining the established ways; whereas those who thought that direct action was more important than good intentions, and that the church should take action where it saw social injustice were identified as liberal. As these two factions diverged they not only developed different stances on political action but also significantly different theological positions.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> As an example see Ephraim Radner and Philip Turner, *The Fate of Communion*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), p.2

<sup>2</sup> Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988) pp. 146-148

In the late 1950s Dietrich Bonhoeffer's works were published in English, challenging believers to think of God being in the centre of human existence. Bonhoeffer's ideas of a 'religionless Christianity' and 'worldly holiness' connected with Tillich's 'ultimate concern' and Rudolph Bultman's demythologizing of scripture. Together with Reinhold Niebuhr's approach to Christian social action and Harvey Cox's call for a response to The Secular City, these theologians stimulated a new strain of activism among young Episcopal clergy.<sup>3</sup> By the mid 1960s it certainly seemed to some as though heresy was infiltrating the Episcopal Church. A variety of books ranging from the popular to the scholarly proclaimed the 'death of God'. Three Anglicans contributed to the debate, all with quite different emphases. In England, J. A. T. Robinson wrote Honest to God, while in the States, Joseph Fletcher's Situational Ethics attempted to move from legalism to the rule of love, and Paul Van Buren's The Secular Meaning of the Gospel challenged the viability of the dominant neo-orthodox perspective. The media took what might have been a quiet scholarly debate and magnified it into a crisis of faith. Bishop James Pike's book A Time for Christian Candor published in 1964 became a focus for Episcopalians concerned about the erosion of their faith.

At the same time as social activism and liberal theology was impacting the church a number of evangelical organizations were formed which crossed denominational boundaries. The leaders of this new evangelical movement saw themselves as the defenders of theological truth promoting a new spirit of inter-denominational cooperation for the advancement of Christianity<sup>4</sup>. These organizations included the National Association of Evangelicals, Fuller Theological College, Youth for Christ, and, the organization which most provided most national cohesion among evangelicals, the network that supported the Billy Graham Crusades. Given the focus on evangelization in the mainstream denominations, these movements were not seen as different or separate from the work of the churches themselves. Theologically, they began to focus on personal ethics, moral and social issues. Sociologist James Davison Hunter has described the growing alliances between conservatives in different denominations as 'the new ecumenism' since commitment to these groups began to become more important than denomination allegiance.<sup>5</sup>

In the early 1960s the English evangelical leader, John Stott, started making contacts with the few scattered evangelicals in the Episcopal Church and a small branch of the Evangelical Fellowship in the Anglican Communion (EFAC)<sup>6</sup> was formed. There was however, little conservative mobilization within the Episcopal Church prior to the mid 1970s. Episcopalians (along with conservative Presbyterians, Methodists and other Evangelicals) were taking part in inter-denominational evangelical groups as well as

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<sup>3</sup> Gardiner H. Shattuck Jr., *Episcopalians and Race*, (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2000) p. 93

<sup>4</sup> Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion*, p. 177

<sup>5</sup> James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: the Struggle to Define America*, (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1991) pp. 92, 97

<sup>6</sup> Founded by John Stott in London in 1961, the EFAC seeks to extend evangelical teaching throughout the Anglican Communion. See 'EFAC-USA: 1961-1999: Revival of the Evangelical Movement in the Episcopal Church', <http://www.episcopalian.org/efac/articles/afachst.html>: accessed 14/02/06

being influenced by evangelical preachers, and the new pietist movement was beginning to grow. In 1960 The Rev. Dennis Bennett of St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Van Nuys California received the 'baptism of the Spirit', an event which sparked the beginning of the charismatic movement, and, according to historian Les Fairfield, the return of the Wesleyan Holiness movement to the Episcopal Church.<sup>7</sup> The Holiness movement emphasized morality and the importance of the supernatural work of Holy Spirit in overcoming people's natural tendencies toward evil. Preachers within this tradition taught not only a definite conversion but a 'second blessing' in which the Holy Spirit freed the believer from sin's power. In the 1970s this teaching began to spread rapidly through the church by means of predominately lay led workshops, seminars and conferences organized by Episcopal Renewal Ministries and Faith Alive.<sup>8</sup>

For Americans as a whole, the 1960s had brought a completely new set of religious issues around which positions could be, and were, taken. These included the civil rights movement, the Vietnam War, denominational mergers and schisms, and also a range of new religious groups which brought Buddhist, Hindu and syncretic ideas informed by mysticism and popular psychology to contribute to the general cultural upheaval.

As a result of increased spending on higher education there was not only an increase in the number of college age people due to the post-war 'baby boom' (the population of 18 to 24 year olds increased by 8 million between 1960 and 1970), but also a higher proportion of young people (from 22.3 percent in 1960 to 35.2 percent in 1970) actually attended college. This expansion of higher education had some dramatic accompanying cultural changes, the biggest of which, according to Wuthnow, was the increase in social tolerance and emphasis on egalitarianism. Many studies of this period showed that liberal attitudes were strongly correlated with higher education. In fact, level of education was found to be the single most important predictor of differences in attitudes and values.<sup>9</sup>

Increasing liberalization led to a significant drop in church attendance, which effected all the mainstream Protestant denominations. In 1970 Episcopal Church attendance dropped for the first time. Although this drop may be seen as the result of the social change staking place, a study was published which concluded that the decline in membership of the mainstream denominations was due to church leaders engaging in social activism rather than providing and maintaining spiritual meaning. This analysis was appropriated by Episcopalians who had retained a conservative theological outlook. They denounced the social activism of the national leadership as being out of touch with the parishes where people were looking for spiritual guidance, biblical understanding and personal renewal. Many wealthy churches in the South and Southwest withheld funding and in 1971 the national church staff was cut almost in half due to budget shortages.

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<sup>7</sup> Les Fairfield, 'Modernist Decline and Evangelical Renewal: the Episcopal Church from 1873 to 1998', originally published in *Mission and Ministry*, Trinity Episcopal School for Ministry, 1998, <http://www.tesm.edu/articles/fairfield-modernist-decline-and-evangelical-renewal.html>: accessed 01/02/06

<sup>8</sup> Episcopal Renewal Ministries, now called Acts29 Ministries, was founded in 1973 to be 'a premier, Christian resource force for discipleship, renewal and ministry in the power of the Holy Spirit'; Faith Alive also provides parish renewal weekends.

<sup>9</sup> Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion*, p. 157

Out of the ferment of the 1960s three independent movements developed. The mainstream churches, including the Episcopal Church, moved firmly to the left and became involved in social activism without unanimous support from the dioceses and parishes. In addition, evangelicals began to make alliances across denominational boundaries and to articulate theology and define moral positions which were antithetical to the liberalized secular culture. Finally, the gay liberation movement which was beginning to grow in the late 1960s really developed momentum after the Stonewall riot in 1969. In the 1970s and 1980s these three movements grew stronger and came into conflict with each other.

Two announcements were made in 1974 which symbolized the continuing development of two of these movements. In November 1974, Louie Crew launched a newsletter, *Integrity, A Gay Episcopalian Forum*, with the announcement:

This publication begins with the awesome challenge to help carry out the Great Commission to the most neglected and persecuted part of Christendom, the Gay Children of God, particularly to those within the Episcopal Church. INTEGRITY is a forum and invites contributions from all persons who respect the Christian wholeness of all Gay people.

The Rev. John Guest and the Rev. John Howe of St. Stephen's in Sewickley near Pittsburgh, had become the leaders of the growing evangelical movement within the Episcopal Church. Concerned that some in the renewal movement were leaving the Church because they no longer felt welcome, Guest and Howe determined that it was necessary to train clergy who would teach and lead evangelical congregations. Initially they encouraged potential clergy to train in England, but as more and more students approached them, they decided it was time to create a specifically evangelical seminary in the US. They were able to develop their ideas with support from the leading British evangelical, John Stott. At a National Episcopal Conference on Renewal held in Atlanta in 1974, John Guest announced 'We in the Fellowship of Witness are committed to seeing the establishment of a new seminary in the Episcopal Church, one that will be thoroughly biblical and evangelical.' The two thousand attendees responded with a standing ovation.<sup>10</sup>

Both these initiatives were created to help people already within the Episcopal Church who felt unwelcome in some way. Integrity was formed 'to help carry out the Great Commission to the most neglected and persecuted part of Christendom' while the Trinity Episcopal School of Ministry, as the new seminary was to be called, was to train clergy for those in the renewal movement who no longer felt welcome within the Church.

There had been gay and lesbian people in the church for a long time, but the gay liberation movement encouraged them to 'come out of the closet' and give voice to the oppression and discrimination that they had experienced. Their movement meshed with the impetus for social justice within the 'liberal' branch of the

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<sup>10</sup> Janet Leighton, *Lift High the Cross*, (Wheaton: Harold Shaw, 1995),

church and in 1976 the General Convention which approved the ordination of women also agreed 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.'

There had been very few evangelicals within the Episcopal church since the late nineteenth century but this changed with the Billy Graham crusades and the increasing development of evangelical para-church organizations. Having had a heart-warming and life changing experience, evangelical Episcopalians felt that they were 'odd man out' in the church which they perceived as increasingly liberal. Their experience meshed with the beliefs of Episcopalian 'conservatives' who emphasized personal piety over social action.

Thus, as the 'culture war' which was being experienced within American society was translated into the experience of the Episcopal church it became associated on the one hand with the full inclusion of gay and lesbian people, and on the other with evangelicals and those involved in the renewal movement. Both groups experienced themselves as marginalized and in need of being welcomed and incorporated into the Church.

During subsequent years, the Episcopal Church experienced a similar bifurcation to the rest of American society. The country became deeply divided between 'liberals' and 'conservatives' with gay rights becoming a wedge issue which brought 'conservatives' to the political arena. The rise of the so-called 'Religious Right' is a cultural phenomenon which helped to bring George W. Bush to the White House and keep him there for two terms.

The term 'fundamentalist' as well as being over-used, is most frequently used pejoratively. However a considerable body of academic literature has arisen which uses this term to describe religious groups who share some specific criteria. The Fundamentalism Project at the University of Chicago defines fundamentalism as 'a discernible pattern of religious militance by which self-styled "true believers" attempt to arrest the erosion of religious identity, fortify the borders of the religious community, and create viable alternatives to secular institutions and behaviors.'<sup>11</sup> These groups flourish in the modern culture and have a symbiotic relationship with the society against which they protest.<sup>12</sup> Their struggle is against those whom they believe to have allowed secular beliefs, values and norms of behavior to corrupt the faith. Thus their first enemies are those within their own church or religious group.

Their focus is on their hostility to the dominant group and their demand that it change. Fundamentalists tend to perceive reality in term of binary opposites; us

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<sup>11</sup> G. A. Almond, R.E. Appleby & E. Sivan *Strong Religion: The Rise of Fundamentalisms around the World*, (2003, Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 17

<sup>12</sup> Peter Herriott, *Religious Fundamentalism and Social Identity*, (2007, Hove and New York: Routledge), 13-14

and them, bad and good, progressive and orthodox, truth versus error. They are very concerned about correct doctrine and correct moral behavior and create clear boundaries to decide who is in and who is not. American politicians have been assessed by the 'Religious Right' on their approach to life politics (abortion, euthanasia, gay rights) and on whether they are 'true believers'. These have become lines of demarcation, just as within the Episcopal church, the full inclusion of gay people and the 'authority' and interpretation of the Bible have become lines that mark the 'orthodox' from the 'progressive'. A belief in the Holy Book is often seen as one of the defining characteristics of 'fundamentalists'. Although few Episcopalians take the Bible literally, understanding it to include metaphor and poetry, many conservatives share a selective reading of Holy Scripture which they see as being so authoritative that any alternative viewpoint is immediately suspect.

'Fundamentalists' experience themselves as being in the midst of a war. In the rhetoric of many Episcopalians, and former Episcopalians who have now joined African dioceses, there is this sense of being embattled and needing to fight for the true faith. This sense of battle has been picked up by the American media who have far more interest in conflict than in peaceful co-existence. It is exemplified in the book by British journalist Stephen Bates about the similar experience of the Church of England, entitled "The Church at War". The media serves not only to report on what is happening but also to provide information to those upon whom it reports. Thus media reports of conflict in the Church serve to escalate the conflict and to make it seem a much greater part of the Church's agenda than would be the case without the secular press and television.

Those in the Network of Anglican Communion Dioceses and Parishes and other conservative groups who are protesting the Episcopal Church do not see themselves as 'fundamentalists' but as true believers battling the secularization of their Church. However they share the basic characteristics of dualistic conceptions of reality, being at war for the truth, a focus on authority in Scripture combined with specific interpretations of the truth and a nostalgia for an idealized past with the American Religious Right and other 'fundamentalist' groups around the world. This movement is a reaction to modernist culture. Religious 'fundamentalism' is as much a cultural-social phenomenon as the increasing visibility and acceptance of gay and lesbian people.

The degree to which gay and lesbian people are actually accepted and have equal civil rights with heterosexuals varies around the United States. There are places where openly gay and lesbian people are likely to be attacked and murders motivated by hatred of gays are still commonplace. There are States where gay and lesbian parents can lose their ability to live with and raise their own children; there are others where gay and lesbian couples can legally adopt children. It is a fallacy to think that the American culture is universally supportive of gay and lesbian people. For the Episcopal Church to fully accept gays and lesbians in all rites and all orders of ministry would be counter-cultural.

In this brief essay I have attempted to describe how the societal unrest of the 1960s and 1970s in the United States led to a bifurcation in the culture and particularly the religious culture, a division which has been described as ‘the culture wars’. On the one side are ‘liberals’ who believe in action for social justice and on the other ‘conservatives’ who emphasize personal piety and morality. This division has been exploited for political ends by those who sought to rally the “Religious Right” in support of conservative political positions and have used gay rights as an issue around which to rally supporters.

The cultural divide has been mirrored within the Episcopal Church, but not in the way often portrayed by conservative writers who depict the (thirty year long) debate over gay inclusion as the Church being absorbed into the culture and those who gay inclusion as morally superior. Increasingly research in many fields of social science describes the ‘fundamentalist’ reaction to modernity which exists in symbiotic relationship to the very secularization it contests. The rhetoric and actions of conservative Episcopalians fit into this model and may therefore be seen to be just as much the result of American culture as the attempt to fully include gays and lesbians in the Church.

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