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Splinter Episcopalians

Giving Gravitas to Trivia

Ari Goldman, the former religion editor of The New York Times (and not coincidentally my favorite secular religion newspaper writer in America during my active career), once told me that the only way he could get a religion story on the front page of the Times was to combine religion with sex. I thought of that when I picked up the Times on December 4 and discovered a front page, left hand column, lead story by Ari's able successor, Laurie Goldstein, with a headline blaring "Episcopal Split as Conservatives Form New Group." The subtitle revealed the sex connection, for it read, "Furor on Gay Issue." The public loves church conflict over sex. Here was America's most prestigious and best read daily newspaper playing to that fetish.

In that issue of the Times, the front page right hand column, considered the lead story of the day, went to the offer of the United Automobile Workers Union to modify its contracts to help save the automotive industry. The second lead, which normally fills the left hand column, was dedicated to the decision of three excommunicated Episcopal bishops and one renegade bishop, elected by no one but ordained by a bishop in Nigeria, to form a new ecclesiastical body. This article, perhaps trying to give gravitas to trivia, then suggested that this new structure had the potential to "split the Anglican Communion," since homosexuality was thought of by the Bible-quoting Evangelicals and traditional Catholics led by the Pope as both overtly sinful and as something condemned by the clear voice of scripture. . With all due respect to the editors of the Times, giving this group and these attitudes front page attention probably represents the high water mark of this movement, before it begins its inevitable journey into anonymity.

Let me lay out the facts: The negativity toward homosexuality emanating from these groups is first based on a naïve and outdated definition of homosexuality, namely that it is a choice made by persons who are either mentally sick or morally depraved. If they are mentally sick they are to be cured if possible and if not, they are to be pitied. If they are morally depraved they are to be converted. If that fails they are to be judged, condemned and ostracized. Second, these dated and false ideas are then buttressed by biblical quotations that reveal little or no awareness of contemporary biblical scholarship. The favorite verses of condemnation come from Leviticus, which calls homosexuality "an abomination" in chapter 18 and prescribes the death penalty for it in chapter 20; from the story of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 18-19; and from chapter one of Romans. They fail to read the rest of Leviticus, which reveals attitudes and values long abandoned as immoral in our day or to note that the Bible itself calls the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah the violation of the Middle Eastern hospitality code. In Romans one Paul actually argues that homosexuality is God's imposed punishment on those who do not worship God properly. A strange God this would be! Several other texts are also frequently cited, but they are

usually based on mistranslations of a Greek word (*arsenokoitus*), which means a wide variety of other practices like Temple prostitutes, with homosexuality being a minor note, if present at all, in that word. All of these texts assume that homosexuality is a choice, for that was the "common wisdom" when the Bible was written some two to three thousand years ago. Other common assumptions of that period of history also found in the Bible are that epilepsy and mental illness are caused by demon possession, that sickness results from divine punishment, that women are property, that menstruation is an abomination, that slavery is legitimate and that God is the cause of everything we did not then understand. These data raise questions first about why anyone today would give credence to a literal understanding of a Bible, containing as it does such obviously outdated ideas; and second, why anyone would pay attention to those who do?

Both science and medicine have obliterated most of these dated attitudes. There is, however, always in every social change a small body of people who cannot embrace new knowledge and who thus will not move to any new conclusions. They shroud their fear in the suggestion that they alone represent "God's will" and that anyone who disagrees with them is actually disagreeing with God! The Christian Church has dealt with this mentality many times throughout history — when the divine right of kings was challenged by the Magna Carta in the 13th century; when Galileo opened our minds to the size of the universe in the 17th century; when Darwin's thought was published and when slavery was ended in the 19th century; and when segregation was struck down, women emancipated and mental illness recognized as a sickness in the 20th century. Today the energy of this backwater mentality floats around the issue of homosexuality. There is nothing unusual about this. What is unusual is that these ideas in their irrelevant death throes can still command a front page story in *The New York Times*!

Homosexuality is widely recognized today as no more a choice than gender, skin color, left-handedness or any of the other givens in life. We do not today persecute, enslave or segregate people on the basis of skin color. Indeed, we now have reached the level of consciousness that enables us to appoint people of color to articulate the foreign policy of this nation and to elect a person of color to the highest office of the land. We do not continue to make second class citizens of women by forbidding them the power to vote, to achieve university educations or to enter into the world of business and politics. Indeed, we now choose women to head Hewlett-Packard and eBay. We appoint them to the Supreme Court. We elect them to be senators and governors. We are not surprised when they run for the presidency, when they are appointed to be Secretary of State or are elected to be Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church. Similarly, we do not today still think it is socially acceptable to persecute gay and lesbian people. We place homosexual people on the New York Stock Exchange. We elect them in both parties to the Congress of the United States. In the person of Representative Barney Frank of Massachusetts, we entrust them with the central role in managing Congress's response to the economic crisis through which this nation is walking at this moment. The attitude reflected by this tiny group of dissident Episcopalians is so out of touch with reality as to be laughable. When sex and religion are mixed in the public arena, however, the media still consider it front page material.

Other indicators point to this splinter group's increasing irrelevance. Not only are the three excommunicated bishops mentioned in the *Times* article just three out of more than a hundred

diocesan bishops in the Episcopal Church, but they also represent three relatively small dioceses, one in Southern Illinois, one in the Fort Worth area of Texas and one in Western Pennsylvania. This article did not mention, however, that the largest Episcopal congregation in Pittsburgh refused to abandon the Episcopal Church when its bishop decided to do so or that individual churches in all the others have also broken ranks with these bishops to stay in the Church they have cared about for so long. All three of these bishops served in the House of Bishops when I was a member. It is fair to say that none of them was ever mistaken for a leader. One of them barely had his election as bishop confirmed because his views were so extreme. Another was primarily known as a whiner. They were by and large viewed as a tolerated minority of people, well meaning but out of the mainstream, who always populate the edges of institutional church life. They are still exactly that. If they cannot adjust to a church in which women and homosexual persons are treated equally and are ordained to be priests and bishops, perhaps they ought to find another tradition that will accept their prejudices as something other than an inability to adjust. There are a number of such churches in this land that will give them cover for their negativity at least for the balance of their lives. We have had splinter movements leave the Episcopal Church many times before. That is always a possibility in a church where democratic decision making is embraced. In the late 1800s, a splinter left the Episcopal Church in a dispute over churchmanship. Later in 1976 other splinter groups left when the prohibition against the ordination of women was removed and in 1979 when the new prayer book was adopted. Now it is the election, confirmation and ordination of an openly gay bishop in New Hampshire that is the celebrated cause of a new splinter of defection.

No one in this religiously free land is required to attend a church with which they disagree, so they are quite free to leave. This little group, however, wants to hurt the Episcopal Church in its leave taking. They also want to take the property of the Episcopal Church with them when they depart. They are the "True Church" they maintain. All of the others have violated the Christian faith and are "apostate." How wonderfully arrogant! This tiny group of defectors has lost every vote in the decision making conventions of the Episcopal Church for decades by significant majorities. Each of these now deposed bishops was elected, confirmed and ordained by the Episcopal Church, placed in charge of Episcopal dioceses, licensed to serve in the Episcopal Church to which all of them pledged at ordination time to abide by and to uphold the Canons and Constitution of the Episcopal Church. How they can now claim that none of this matters is a mystery. They surely know that this church will not turn its back on the future in order to affirm their continuing negativity. They have by their own choice violated their vows and have left the church. The property of this church does not belong to them.

The New York Times followed the Goldman rule: A story about religion and sex makes the front page even if it is of no great import. In less than ten years, these pitiful figures who have somehow confused themselves with God and their prejudices with righteousness will be long forgotten. History moves on and when it does it relegates those who cannot adjust to the dustbins of history.

– John Shelby Spong

John Shelby Spong is a retired Episcopalian Bishop and respected author who happens to be straight.

