

Listening and Learning

Summary

Resolution of the Anglican Communion's current disputes requires empathetic and respectful listening. For this to take place disputants need to accept certain basic disciplines of dialogue between equals. This paper focuses on two avoidance techniques which need to be resisted.

The first is paternalism. When we express our opinions we expect others to respect, and reflect attentively on, what we have to say. In the same way we should all be prepared to respect, attend to, and learn from the opinions of others. Unfortunately some Christian traditions encourage believers in an excessive sense of certainty which prevents equal dialogue. The Church of Uganda Position Paper on Scripture, Authority, and Human Sexuality illustrates how paternalism easily takes root in certain circumstances.

The second is institutional closure. Here the temptation is to use the authority of institutional resolutions as a means to silence views of which one disapproves. Every institution needs methods for dispensing with some of its formally accepted principles when they become inappropriate, but this becomes impossible if the leadership is determined to suppress dissent.

Outside the realm of religious discourse, these two limitations are generally recognized and defended in principle, even though they are not always upheld in practice. It is a tragedy that in religious discourse they are widely rejected even in principle. We believe they need to be reaffirmed.

Text

The Listening Process website describes 'listening' in maximal terms: it 'presumes a striving for empathy' and 'requires respect'. On the other hand it 'is not a debate. It is not about persuading someone else that you are right, nor is it about finding a compromise between two positions.'

When there is controversy on a particular topic, with strong feelings on both sides, dialogue achieves nothing unless there is respectful and empathetic listening on both sides. There are certain rules of debate which need to be obeyed, and avoidance techniques which need to be rejected. This paper describes two such avoidance techniques, paternalism and institutional closure. The two have been chosen because they are currently being heavily used in the Anglican Communion's debate.

Paternalism

We all hold opinions about truth claims. Whenever we are persuaded that one of our opinions is false, we change it. At any one time, therefore, we believe that our opinions are true, and when we are persuaded otherwise it characteristically comes as a surprise.

Nevertheless in most debates most people recognize that, however strong their convictions are, there remains a slight possibility that they may learn something new which causes them to change their mind.

In matters of religion, however, there is a long tradition of denying this possibility. Some disputants conscientiously believe that their religious opinions cannot possibly be in error. This conviction is rarely held outside the sphere of religious doctrine, and when it is, it is generally characterized as bigotry.

The conviction of certainty leads to paternalism. Certainty about the truth of one's own views implies that those who disagree are equally certainly in error. By holding that their own views must necessarily outweigh those of their opponents, paternalists fail to accept that the dialogue is between

equals and therefore also fail to offer empathy and respect. From this paternalistic perspective listening may produce pastoral concern, but not a change of view.

This position is illustrated by the Church of Uganda Position Paper on Scripture, Authority, and Human Sexuality. The Paper is a helpful illustration because it describes an experience of Christianity which is widely shared.¹

The Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments teach that God's design for sexual relationships is male-female...

Concerning homosexual behaviour and relationships in particular, from a plain reading of Scripture, from a careful reading of Scripture, and from a critical reading of Scripture, it has no place in God's design of creation...

The authors make clear why they take this line:

The story of the Church of Uganda is one of obedience to the preaching and teaching of the gospel, according to the Bible. When the early missionaries announced the gospel of Jesus Christ to our fore fathers and mothers, they responded to the word of salvation. They acknowledged that Jesus is Lord and Saviour and for that reason gladly obeyed His word in Scripture. The transforming effect of the Bible on Ugandans generated so much conviction and confidence that even ordinary believers were martyred in the defense of the message of salvation through Jesus Christ that it brought. The adherents of the East African Revival, that broke out in the late 1920s and early 1930s (a movement that has shaped the ethos of our Church), were simple people who learned to take God at His Word. For the Church in Uganda, to compromise God's call of obedience to the Scriptures would be the undoing of more than 125 years of Christianity through which African customs, belief, life, and society have been transformed for the better...

Most traditional African societies were solely based on oral culture, which limited its ability to share ideas beyond the clan or ethnic group. For many centuries most of the African languages were un-written. The Bible was the first book in African vernacular. Thus African languages have been enriched and recorded.

This account helpfully illustrates how Christianity, having been experienced in a particular way, has come to assume a cultural significance which is not intrinsic to Christianity itself. As Uganda is far from alone in this, we can make some observations which apply more generally.

1) They experienced Christianity as a new and very different culture. We might speculate about whether, if the first Christian missionaries had taken more trouble to listen empathetically and respectfully to what Ugandans valued in the religious beliefs they already held, it might have been possible to find points of contact so that they could more easily own Christianity as theirs. However, as the Position Paper describes it, the arrival of Christianity presented a choice between incompatible alternatives.

The same often applies to subcultures. Many popular publications today describe the conversions of individuals who had previously been unsympathetic to Christianity but, through unexpected personal experience, became convinced of its truth. Those who have experienced, and value, a conversion of this type may think of themselves as belonging to a new culture, the community of the saved, and look back on their past lives as spiritually inferior. The contrast between the two is often expressed in two ways: by devaluing the culture with which they had previously identified, and by dismissing as inferior the faith of Christians who have not had their experience.

2) The Ugandan church received the Bible as a single and complete entity. It was therefore predisposed to treat it as a self-consistent whole, interpret it as such, and underrate the variety within it. Many people today experience it in this way, even in traditionally Christian countries. Experiences like these often lead people to think of Christianity as a coherent package to be accepted in its entirety.

Sometimes such people take an interest in learning more about Christianity, exploring how some teachings are more central than others, and making creative judgements about which elements of the tradition are most significant in their own situation. However, there remains a strong tradition of insisting that Christianity ought always to be interpreted as a complete package and accepted unquestioningly in its entirety. Those who take this view often affirm specific doctrines and moral commands not so much for their own value but because they are part of the package. Thus opposition to homosexuality ceases to be a measured judgement about the moral well-being of homosexuals and becomes instead a symbol of commitment to a worldview.

¹ May 2005, <http://www.aco.org/listening/world/docs/doc6.cfm>.

3) As an oral culture, Ugandans did not have the skills to appreciate how written texts develop different meanings in different circumstances. The only easily available way to interpret the Bible was to treat it as a source of insights which transcended traditional Ugandan reason and knowledge. In order to establish the contemporary relevance of biblical commands they took for granted that the condemnations of homosexuality which they found there were God's commands to people of all times and places.

Again, the experience is common. No society today has a similar culture to ancient Israel. To understand ancient texts requires specific skills. Some Christian traditions remain unaware of the insights of biblical scholars, or are determined to resist them. In these cases the easiest resolution of the cultural differences is to treat the statements and commands of the Bible as though they were applicable to all times and places.

The result of these factors is, as the Position Paper explains, that the Ugandan church, having received the Bible like this, welcomed it like this, and discovered its transforming value like this, resists the idea that there is any other way to understand it. The authors of the Paper are therefore unwilling to respect, as equal to their own, the very different experiences of other societies.

This illustrates how a paternalistic stance characteristically arises. The way Christianity was first experienced by Ugandans - as culturally alien, as a self-contained package, and as above question - is the way it is experienced by many people today. Such people are therefore tempted to believe that their own account of Christianity is the only legitimate one, and alternatives must be in error. The result is a refusal to share dialogue *as equals* with those from a different tradition, and therefore a paternalistic refusal to engage in empathetic and respectful listening.

Currently this paternalism is the main cause of the Anglican Communion's inability to resolve its differences. Constructive dialogue needs to be based on accepting that our own experience of Christianity's power and relevance does not give us the right to reject the different experiences of other Christians.

Institutional closure

Institutional closure is a similar but different technique. An example is the *Windsor Report*, which states that 'The Communion has... made its collective position clear on the issue of ordaining those who are involved in same gender unions'² and cites the 1998 Lambeth Conference Resolution 1.10 in justification. The Resolution rejects 'homosexual practice as incompatible with Scripture'.

The claim that the Anglican Communion's position is clear is central to the *Windsor Report's* proposals, and to subsequent statements from Primates' meetings which appeal to it to argue that the matter is closed. The way they have admonished the North American churches makes it clear that they do not believe there is any longer any room for homosexual activity to be formally accepted in any part of the Anglican Communion.

This is not a claim to certainty, as it does not state that Anglican resolutions are infallible. It is, however, a way of telling supporters of homosexuality that their views have no formal legitimacy within the institution; at least at a managerial level, they are not to be listened to.

Similar claims have been made in the past. A major theological effect of approving the Nicene Creed and the Thirty-Nine Articles was to restrict the range of views permitted to members of the Church. In effect the *Windsor Report* is following their example, claiming that the Lambeth Conference Resolution adds a new restriction.

In each case, the views imposed were far from being the 'collective position' of the church as a whole; if they had been, neither debate nor resolution would have been necessary. Subsequently, however, they have provided grounds for claiming that a collective position does exist. Just as it is possible to argue that anyone who disagrees with one of the statements in the Creeds or the Thirty-Nine Articles ought not to be a priest, so also the *Windsor Report* tacitly invites the claim that people who approve of homosexuality ought not to be priests.

² Para 127.

We recognize that the argument has logical validity as a theoretical principle. In practice, however, no organization would last long if it stuck to it rigidly. This is because, if those who disagree with an established principle are not allowed to voice their disagreement within the organization, there is no means of change. For example, when Tony Blair became leader of the UK Labour Party he proposed to repeal Clause Four of the Party's constitution. His opponents could have insisted that since he did not agree with the constitution he should not be a member of the Party at all. They did not take this line. They knew it would have smacked of pedantry. We live in an age of countless organizations, each with its own constitutions and founding principles. Most people, when they feel inclined to join an organization, do not read all its foundational documents and check that they can assent to every item; on the contrary, most people are willing to join an organization when they agree with its main thrust, even though they may disagree with some of its principles. The fact that they do join makes it possible for the organization to change with the times and survive.

Applying the point to the current debate about homosexuality, empathetic and respectful listening are only possible when members of the organization are free to express opinions at variance with established policy without fear of discrimination. The listening process is impossible as long as the people most directly affected on one side of the debate are silenced.

We recognize the difficulty church leaders have in allowing organizational 'fuzzy edges'. In practice, virtually all organizations experience tension between the honest search for truth and the pressures for loyalty to the institution. Many gays and lesbians feel torn between their desire to be accepted within the Church and their reluctance to damage its unity. However, we believe that whenever churches protect their own institutional well-being at the expense of honest and open debate about God's will for people today, they undermine their very purpose and lose the right to claim that they are expressing God's word.

Summary

We agree that resolution of the Communion's current disputes requires empathetic and respectful listening. We believe this in turn requires acceptance of two limitations.

The first is that we humans never attain complete knowledge. It is precisely because of the limitations to our knowledge that we can enter into dialogue with other people as equals and grow in understanding. When we express our opinions we expect others to respect, and reflect attentively on, what we have to say. In the same way we should all be prepared to respect, attend to, and learn from the opinions of others.

The second is that we should not use the authority of institutional resolutions as a means to silence views of which we disapprove. Every institution needs methods for dispensing with some of its formally accepted principles when they become inappropriate, but this becomes impossible if the leadership is determined to suppress dissent.

Outside the realm of religious discourse, these two limitations are generally recognized and defended in principle, even though they are not always upheld in practice. It is a tragedy that in religious discourse they are widely rejected even in principle. We believe they need to be reaffirmed.