

Honesty and Integrity

“Shall I uncrumple this much crumpled thing?” – Wallace Stevens

The wrestling is over. I am posting this weblog entry after much hesitation. The risk of offending some of one’s best friends and a number of one’s good friends is not an insubstantial risk, but the risk of failing to defend the faith at the point of attack is a graver one.

Bishop Eugene Robinson is the openly gay Episcopalian bishop most likely to go down in history as the man who kicked the stone that started the avalanche that brought the Anglican experiment to an end. It could hardly have escaped his notice, but he seems remarkably unperturbed by the prospect, even at times ebullient. In a recent interview with the Scottish journalist Andrew Collier, Bishop Robinson recalled a life-changing conversation he had with the chaplain at an Episcopalian college he attended.

One day when I was ranting and raving about how much of the Nicene Creed I didn’t believe, he said ‘well, when you’re in church, just say the parts of the creed you do agree with. Be silent for the others. We’re not asking you do so something against your integrity’. And again I thought whew, that’s what one would hope for from a religion – honesty and integrity. And I guess that’s a theme that has carried throughout my life in Ministry – that God wants us to be honest and full of integrity.



Stirring calls for honesty and integrity are hard to resist. Emerson (who spoke a lot of foolishness) once said that something foolishly spoken can be wisely heard. Perhaps there is some honesty and integrity to be found in Bishop Robinson’s puzzling remark if we but take the time to look for it. For, quite without realizing it, he has put his finger on precisely the key issue.

It seems only logical to begin looking for the grain of truth and integrity where Bishop Robinson has often testified to have found it, namely, in the social cause he is most famous for espousing. No, not the Gospel, the other one. (It is a link between the two that I want to explore.)

The process of mainstreaming homosexual behavior has moved inexorably from perfectly legitimate and long overdue early efforts to understand the plight of those suffering from same-sex disorders and to exercise both more compassion and more prudence when trying to prevent the social and moral damage known to be associated with homosexual lifestyles. And yet these early and appropriate steps, insufficiently guided by the underlying ethic that insured their moral coherence, quickly fell under the gravitational force to which cultures suffering “civilizational exhaustion” are vulnerable. In rapid succession, the declension began: from understanding to tolerance, from tolerance to moral indifference, from indifference to celebration, from celebration to intolerance for any moral objections, from intolerance to legal threats, and finally to teaching seven and eight year-olds the moral and social indistinguishability of homosexual coupling and heterosexual nuptiality. Thus, we arrive at where we are today: in the midst of a culture that thinks of itself as rational, one of history’s great flat-earth theories has so triumphed that few have been able to resist genuflecting at one time or another before its pieties.

Christianity’s empathy for victims has so shaped our moral environment that the historical mistreatment of homosexuals, after it had been as rectified as it is possible for such things ever to be, survived as icon, appealing to a kind of Christ-flavored moral sentimentality which made an ideal battering ram for demolishing the Christian moral realism of which the sentimentality was a parody. It has become increasingly clear to those paying attention – and *this* is why I come back to this issue more than I would like – that the question that is being adjudicated is not ultimately about sexual ethics; rather it is about whether the religion that taught us the sacramental dignity of the nuptial mystery (and a lot besides) is to lose its place in cultural life and in the education of the young for failing to regard as healthy and virtuous something that any Christian living in any age but ours would have had no trouble recognizing as “intrinsically disordered.”

The fact that many of the Christian faithful and most of the Christian denominations are tying themselves in knots over this issue is no accident. It has been known for some time that putting Christians in what feels to them like a moral double-bind – an empathy for victims, on one hand, and personal and confessional misgivings about the behavior of the “victims,” on the other – was a conscious strategy for dividing and paralyzing those whose moral instincts, if not creedal allegiances, were rooted in Christian principle.

And so, today this dangerous social, moral and cultural inversion finds support, not only among the sexual revolutionaries, moral nominalists, and psychological Peter Pans whose sadly shrunken idea of freedom makes them hostile to the very idea of human nature. Support for this reckless experiment is found as well among those speaking in the name of Christianity and espousing a revised Christian sexual ethic that would be unrecognizable to any Christian or Jew living before, say, 1995.

In the days before the onset of all this a couple of decades ago, one of the implicit and sometimes explicit arguments for overlooking thousands of years of human history and the testimony of commonsense was that, once the moral revulsion with homosexual behavior and the retrograde favoritism too long enjoyed by natural marriage were eliminated, the duplicity and psychological self-deception that even homosexuals themselves found to be a repugnant feature of the homosexual lifestyle would vanish.

Alas, not all the signs are encouraging. Young Eugene Robinson, “ranting and raving about how much of the Nicene Creed [he] didn’t believe,” was given advice that inspired his dedication to truth and honesty. The older – and one would have hoped more mature – Eugene Robinson looks back on the sophomoric advice he was given, only to see it as the moral theme of his entire ministry. The advice? The advice was to play make-believe, to pretend to be faithful to the Creed, but in fact to be quietly altering it to suit one’s own tastes.

“God wants us to be honest and full of integrity.” It’s true. But the mumbled and spiteful rejection of the very creed that one has solemnly sworn to proclaim to the ends of the earth is decidedly *not* “what one would hope for from a religion.”

Here’s my point: Whether it comes from *above* – from those in ecclesial robes leaning on a crosier – or from *below* – from those betraying their own dignity in vulgar public rejections of the very *idea* of sexual morality – the social and moral revolution to which each is contributing finally comes down to ranting and raving against the Nicene Creed and the breathtaking anthropological dignity to which the Council of Nicaea raised our mortal bodies by insisting that God had come to us in a human body, thereby repudiating the Gnosticism that regards the body as an assemblage of orifices which lends itself to a few passing pleasures but which is morally irrelevant and religiously inconsequential – a Gnosticism of which today’s sexual experimentalists are a very late and very sad manifestation. It is a Gnosticism, however, that is rapidly becoming a mandated feature of Western public education, very much at the expense of the Judeo-Christian anthropology upon which Western civilization was based.

Again, as G. K. Chesterton said: One small mistake in doctrine can lead to huge blunders in human happiness.

Like Christ, whose true mystery the Church began to commit formally to doctrine at Nicaea, the Church will ultimately be loved or hated. History consists of the process whereby the middle ground between them shrinks and those filled with ambivalence must move in one direction or the other. Compared to this, the question of sexual ethics is a small matter, but it doesn’t remain a small matter when the question of sexual ethics becomes the surrogate issue for the determination of the ultimate one.

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