

Justin Welby's plan to split the Anglican Church tells us a lot about religion and politics

The Archbishop of Canterbury wants warring Anglicans to take a step apart, but keep debating their differences – as if they might eventually be able to agree. But if they did, God really would be finished



The schism in the Anglican communion is now so huge that conservatives and liberals can't even share metaphors any longer. The Archbishop of Canterbury, the most reverend Justin Welby, has suggested that links between the various scrapping churches worldwide should be loosened, so that they can all go their own way a bit more. He says that it would be like “separate bedrooms” rather than “divorce”.

Imagine the scene.

“I'm gay,” announces a husband. “So I think we should have separate bedrooms.”

“I see. Then stay in your room until I've successfully persuaded one of the heterosexual men who have all the power in our organisation to stop trying to have you imprisoned.”

What is the Anglican communion and why is it under threat?

Whatever you think about this, it does have the virtue of remaining true to the founding spirit of the Church of England – which is no coincidence.

The Anglican church has always been a political organisation first and a spiritual one second. (Its worldwide communion, of course, is a consequence of nothing more spiritual than colonialism.) It's no different to any other organised religion, whose earthly purpose is always the downward control of human attitudes and behaviour. Handily, if there's a possibility that people can't see any logic in the rules their leaders propound, religious organisations can simply shrug their shoulders and say that it's what God wants.

So, in that respect, Welby is doing something interesting. He's admitting that it's become impossible for Anglicans to agree on what God wants, but that it's also important for Anglicans to carry on squabbling about it. The trouble is that this is as liberal as religion can get. It's precisely because the Anglican church has lost its ability to be authoritarian (since this would have thrown it out of step with the liberal democracy it wants to remain an established part of in Britain) that Anglican conservatives are so furious.

Religious conservatives are in the game precisely because they want certainty. They don't want to sit around discussing the meaning of life, pondering what a good life might look like and considering what humans can do to foster their own progress. They want such matters to be off the table, because nothing should be allowed to disturb their delusion that they've got it all right and everyone who disagrees with them has got it all wrong.

Ironically, the great attraction of such a position is that once you assume it, you can justify the most awful behaviour because you believe your rectitude is beyond question, whatever vile things you're actually doing. People are fond of saying that religion causes wars. It's self-righteousness that causes wars, and religion is a marvellous tool for the self-righteous.

In our secular and atheistic age, there are a lot of people around to whom all of this Anglican-crisis stuff looks quaint. But I still find the political machinations of the Anglican church fascinating, not

least because it clarifies wider politics so much. To put it simply, if you're an entirely secular conservative, then the market takes the place of God, and you're scandalised by those who dare to suggest that the market is as partial, biased and fallible as any other human creation.

I'd even go as far as to say that the much-discussed propensity for fundamentalism in politics – not just market worship, but also people outraged by a less-than-absolute commitment to Scottish nationalism, or by the suggestion that Jeremy Corbyn isn't necessarily a prime minister in waiting – is all about left-of-centre people hoping against hope that they too can find a delusion equal to the delusion of certainty the market provides to non-religious as well as religious conservatives.

Everywhere you look, people are so keen to behave like the Anglican church has been behaving, and to line up against each other in two opposing teams. The kind of ongoing debate Welby envisages, shouted respectfully between the bedrooms, has become unfashionable. Everything is polarised, a great clash between good and evil, with each side, of course, convinced that the evil guys are the other guys. And western Anglicans don't want to look forensically at why religion isn't working any more, any more than mainstream politicians want to look at why politics isn't working any more.

But at least Welby is trying something. His gamble, I guess, is that this way people will stay because they still want to win the argument and dominate this big, prestigious organisation that has great buildings, fabulous outfits, dignified ceremonies for every occasion and quite a lot of remaining influence. Rather in the way that everyone in England, outside the home counties, hates Westminster but stubbornly ignores the possibility of regional assemblies.

And yet it's regional assemblies, rather than separate bedrooms, that Welby is trying to opt for. The hope remains that an Anglican who believes that homosexuality should be punishable by death can become an Anglican who believes that homophobia is something everyone really should have got over by now. Because that has indeed happened to lots of Anglicans. (And lots more non-Anglicans, I reckon.)

The trouble, of course, is that once you've won the liberal argument and everyone has agreed that people should be allowed to be who they are as long as they aren't hurting others, then God is neither here nor there, let alone everywhere. And that's the basic problem the Anglican communion faces.

If Lambeth Palace ever works out how to unite its worldwide communion in liberal harmony, then

there will be no more need for God, or politics. Because God isn't love. God is politics and God always has been. And heaven, I rather suspect, is a place where politics never happens.

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