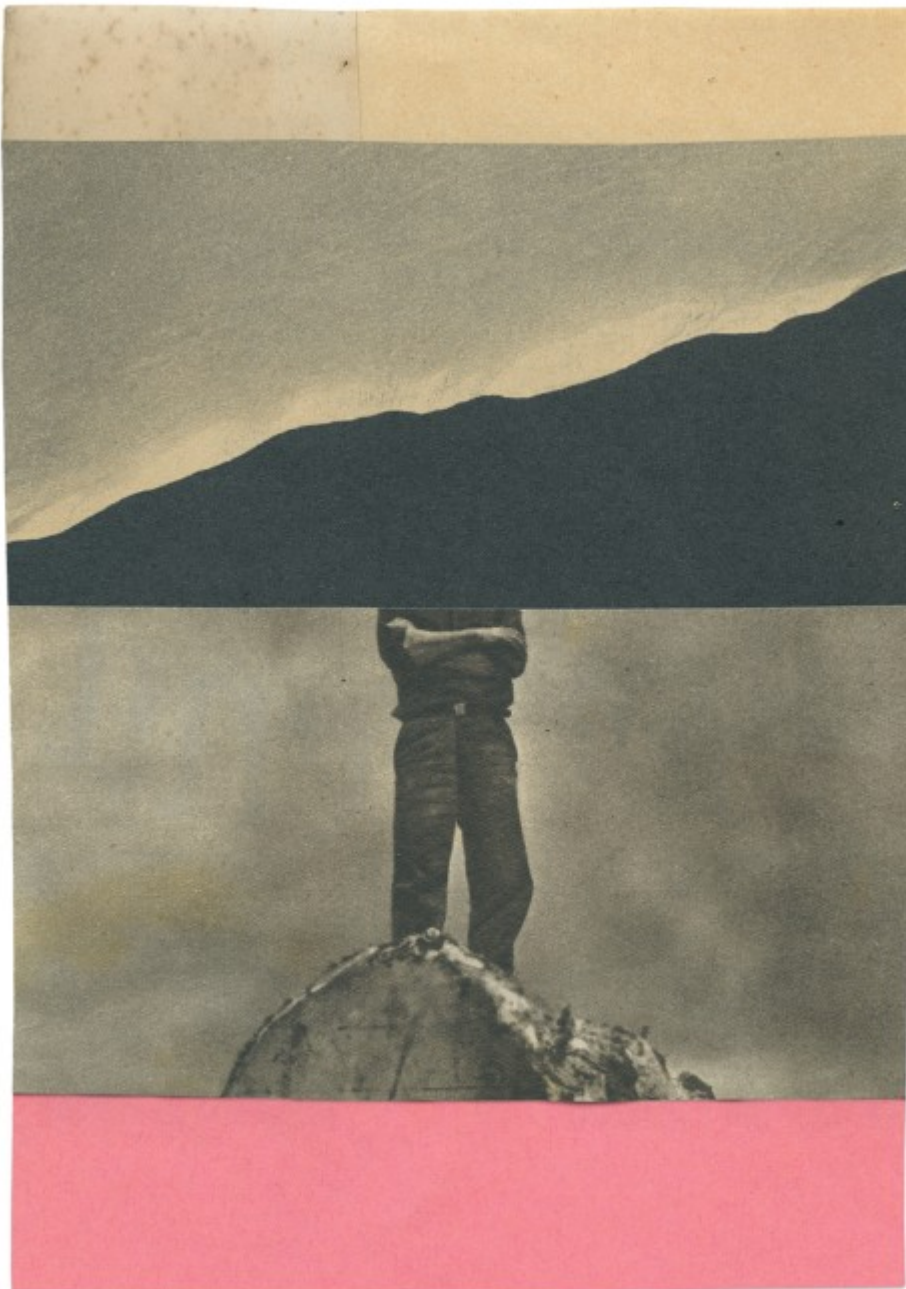


A church politics of nondomination

Liberal Anglicans and Methodists often face a tension between LGBTQ inclusion and anti-colonialism. But we don't have to choose.

by [Ross Kane](#) in the [July 2024](#) issue

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(Illustration by Katrien De Blauwer)

Is affirming LGBTQ people an act of colonizing theology? When the Episcopal Church elected its first openly gay bishop 20 years ago, an Anglican bishop in Africa responded, “We grieve because we remember the pain that has come from similar imperial actions in the past.” More recently, after the Church of England decided to bless same-sex unions, traditionalist Anglicans invoked colonialism when they said that they no longer want to be led by the archbishop of Canterbury: having the head of the Anglican Communion based in England, they said, perpetuates patterns of authority from British colonialism. Meanwhile in Methodism, US traditionalists perennially say that they stand with Methodists in Africa when opposing ordination of LGBTQ clergy or recognizing same-sex marriage. We hear that progressives should be ashamed of ourselves for acting so colonialist in our LGBTQ support. Legacies of European colonialism have been at the heart of worldwide church conflicts over queer inclusion.

All this can feel dizzying for progressive Episcopalians, Methodists, and others in global church traditions. Sometimes we feel flat-footed, unsure what to say in response to this critique. We view ourselves as against colonialism but might feel lost for a response. We may assuage our conscience by saying that the colonial critique is a traditionalist strategy to employ our own affirmations against us. While I don’t doubt that some rhetorical strategy is at play, I also believe that the colonial critique isn’t entirely wrong. Progressives have sometimes used colonial-styled rhetoric, portraying a pro-LGBTQ stance as a necessary step in a path of progress defined by the sensibilities of liberal Western culture.

More importantly, progressives have struggled to articulate how affirming LGBTQ people is part of a comprehensive vision inseparable from the struggle against racism and colonialism. We’ve struggled to be both pro-queer and anti-colonial. In this regard, we’ve sometimes given in to a traditionalist framing of these issues that says we can be either pro-queer or anti-colonial but not both. Without a larger framework, we haven’t overcome this stark division.

There is, however, a larger vision to ground us: the refusal of church politics grounded in domination. In a politics of domination, some people arbitrarily exercise their will over others. Some say who others are; they exercise power without accountability from those others. Colonialism is one manifestation of such

domination, and refusing to recognize LGBTQ people is another. Each tries to overpower others and define who they are on their behalf.

We can draw from scripture and tradition to shape another kind of church politics: one that rejects domination and is grounded instead in interdependence.

The way American liberals talked about LGBTQ inclusion during the late 20th and early 21st centuries contributed to our predicament. Two decades later, it's easy to forget how we framed things. The most common narrative centered on progress and depicted social injustices as largely discrete. By this account, support for LGBTQ issues was the next chapter in a series of recent struggles against injustice. These included rights for women, represented by the vote, then rights for Black Americans, represented by the civil rights movement. LGBTQ rights was a final step. Yet that narrative of progress overlooked how systematic inequities like patriarchy or racism persisted beyond the granting of certain legal rights.

It also left out colonialism. For many White liberals in Episcopal, Methodist, and other US churches, colonialism seemed like something that happened elsewhere in the world, an issue closer to Europeans' past sins than our own. If anything, we saw ourselves as an anti-colonial power that shook off British rule and inspired others to do the same. We did not see the United States as an expression of settler colonialism, a state forcibly displacing Indigenous peoples as White Europeans settled across the continent.

When US liberals heard a colonial critique from bishops in the Global South, it felt unfamiliar because we weren't used to seeing ourselves as a colonial power. Our narrative of progress overlooked our colonialism and inhibited our ability to see the history behind the words and actions of traditionalist bishops in the Global South.

This narrative of liberal progress led to colonial-styled rhetoric. Before the Anglican Communion's 1998 Lambeth Conference, for example, US bishop John Shelby Spong spoke about the differences between churches in the United States and Africa on LGBTQ issues this way: "They're yet to face the intellectual revolution of Copernicus and Einstein that we've had to face in the developing world," he said. "That's just not on their radar screen." Spong later apologized for the statement, but it was hardly an outlier in liberal church rhetoric, with its portrayal of the West as "developing" and places like Africa as stuck in time. In this telling, humans develop by passing through various stages of knowledge in science and culture toward

something that looks like the modern West.

A vision rooted in rejecting domination offers a different framing. Augustine and other theologians say that the human desire to dominate others is a fundamental way that we distance ourselves from God's vision of love and justice. In our own time, racism, patriarchy, homophobia, colonialism, ableism, transphobia, and more are grounded in domination that arbitrarily imposes one's will on someone else, that fails to see and recognize people for who they are. Various forms of domination intersect and amplify each other, such that one helps perpetuate others.

Such domination shows up in church politics all the time. This domination comes not simply from individuals in the church dominating others—though of course that happens too—but gets embedded within our church structures. It's not just in more obvious matters like who leads global meetings; it's in subtler matters like how they're set up. The fact that many global denominational gatherings for decades followed Western parliamentary procedures shows how domination can become structurally embedded in subtle ways. Western church leaders had an easier time navigating these meetings, given their familiarity with the process, while a representative unfamiliar with the procedure was stuck in a meeting they had no say in organizing.

Such structural domination in churches happens more locally too. In the United States, people who come from large, wealthy, White churches often have an easier time navigating ordination procedures than those coming from small Black churches do. Our church structures appear straightforward to some while requiring others to push against domination.

LGBTQ people have suffered domination by being subjected to abuse by those who treat queerness as something from which someone might be cured—or as a pattern of sin from which they should abstain—rather than as an intrinsic part of human identity. In church politics, LGBTQ people suffer from others insisting that queerness doesn't belong in the church's sacramental life or that LGBTQ people are unfit for ordination. These decisions and narratives are developed and enforced without input from the community they disenfranchise. To resist such domination, those of us who do not identify as LGBTQ must first listen to the experiences of queer people—in fact, we depend upon that encounter. Undoing systemic oppression in the church requires centering the experiences and theological voices of queer people. Undoing intersecting oppressions means empowering historically marginalized communities

to reshape our church structures.

Since domination is not just individual but structural, there is not an easy divide between those who participate in domination and those who don't. We are all enmeshed in domination, even as we struggle against it. Liberals participate in domination when echoing colonial rhetoric, and traditionalists participate in domination when seeking to erase queer experience.

But we are not equally enmeshed. Some participate in domination more than others. White liberal Christians in the United States easily overlook how entrenched we are in structures of domination on a global scale—especially economically—compared with Christians elsewhere in the world. Christians in the Global South see our excessive consumption which relies on extractive capitalism and our wealth accumulation that exacerbates wealth disparities. When many of the voices speaking about LGBTQ affirmation are wealthy, White, English-speaking voices, it can be hard to hear how queer liberation might be part of a wider project of dismantling systemic power.

The alternative to church politics based in domination is church politics based in interdependence. In the New Testament, John and Paul both see human communities in Christ as communities of interdependence in which members rely on one another. John sees us as mutually constitutive members of Jesus Christ, who is the vine of our branches (John 15). Anglican bishop Desmond Tutu, who very publicly went through a change of heart in his eventual affirmation of LGBTQ people, speaks similarly when he describes human beings constituting a web of interdependence in which each of us depends on the others. We are part of each other through shared lives, shared experiences, and even more through shared struggles against domination.

Paul provides another image, seeing us as members of the body that is Jesus Christ, a body in which members depend on each other to know themselves and to know Jesus (1 Cor. 12:12-31). Jesus' authority there is authority that does not dominate. In that body, no one is dispensable, and no one exists for the self-definition of someone else. We mutually constitute one another.

Domination is a distortion of such interdependence. Writers such as Molly Farneth and Vincent Lloyd show the deformed social relations that come from domination. The person being dominated suffers under the dominator's capricious power. And as

much as the person dominating desires the other to recognize them and treat them with respect, they receive only “coerced recognition,” Farneth says. Nondomination, she argues, entails “relationships of reciprocal definition”—a phrase that resonates with John, Paul, and Tutu.

Lloyd shows how the “primal scene” of domination is slavery. Chattel slavery is the paradigm of domination in the political economy of recent centuries, and so the paradigmatic expression of domination in the United States today is anti-Black racism since it is the afterlife of chattel slavery. Struggling against anti-Black racism, Lloyd writes, enables us to see the extent of domination and how various forms of domination draw from one another, promote one another, and get tangled with one another. Thus, struggling against some forms of domination enables struggles against other forms as well.

Colonialism and its legacies comprise another form of domination that refuses interdependence. Colonialism is especially insidious in the ways that it draws from and perpetuates anti-Black racism in the global political economy. Anglicans and Methodists in Africa know all too well how their economies still suffer from practices established during colonialism that extract resources from their communities without contributing much to local economies. Anti-Black and anti-Indigenous racism embedded within colonialism shaped these extractive practices. From the early days of European colonialism in the 15th and 16th centuries, court theologians constructed racial rankings of people that shaped a global expression of anti-Black racism, especially through the transatlantic slave trade. European colonialism and its labor practices depended on these racial categories, while also perpetuating them across generations as a globalized economy took shape.

For many years, White progressives overlooked opportunities to use global church bodies as resources for organizing against colonial-styled economic practices. During the 1980s and '90s, the Episcopal Church's activity in the global Anglican Communion was limited, and so church leaders in the Global South saw us as distant partners who would reemerge rather suddenly during conflicts over sexuality. American progressives were active in the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa, but our activity elsewhere in Africa and the Global South was scant. African Anglicans and Methodists knew our churches were connected, but they did not experience us as collaborators in their struggles against things like the International Monetary Fund's structural adjustment programs, which purported to help overcome poverty but left economies struggling.

It's not too late to change course. Based on our interdependence, global church communions like Anglicanism and Methodism can organize against such domination in the global economy. What might a focus on nondomination and interdependence look like today?

First, it entails a change in rhetoric away from a narrative of Western progress. When we find progress over history in resisting domination, it's not along a unidirectional path forged by the West; rather, it's through collaborative struggles against injustice—struggles which often involve cross-cultural exchange and intercultural learning.

One example of this rhetorical shift came in Michael Curry's response to fellow bishops in 2016, when they voted to censure the Episcopal Church from certain roles in the global communion after it allowed same-sex marriage. Curry explicitly connected the pain of LGBTQ exclusion with the history of American slavery and anti-Black violence. Speaking to fellow bishops, he said: "I stand before you as your brother. I stand before you as a descendant of African slaves, stolen from their native land, enslaved in a bitter bondage, and then, even after emancipation, segregated and excluded in church and society. And this conjures that up again, and brings pain." Without equating slavery and homophobia, Curry spoke of how Black Americans and queer folks each have had their own unique experiences of domination. He described how experiencing anti-Blackness helped him interpret queer experience, since both entail the felt reality of exclusion and domination. Even if Curry didn't immediately change other bishops' minds, he poignantly showed the human pain and suffering experienced from domination.

In addition to changing our rhetoric, we can also be less partisan in our organizing—and more political. Nondomination provides an orienting center around which to decide how to engage specific issues like anti-colonialism or queer advocacy. In a partisan approach, it can be tempting to avoid collaborating with traditionalists in the Global South based on their refusal to support same-sex marriage. They are in one camp, and we in another. In a political approach, on the other hand, we can work with people anywhere on issues that involve rejecting church politics of domination. We can join traditionalist bishops in Africa when it comes to struggling against colonial domination embedded within church structures, even while we disagree about same-sex marriage. We can support proposals that press against domination and promote interdependence while resisting those that do not. Our church political alliances will have a conditional quality: we form

coalitions with some, based on resisting one kind of domination, and coalitions with others, based on resisting other kinds of domination.

We do not face an either/or between Western progressives and Global South traditionalists. In the Anglican Communion, I've worked with many African pastors and bishops who are uncertain where they stand on same-sex marriage while they actively resist anti-Black racism in the church. Some are part of the traditionalist Global Anglican Future Conference, and others are not. Even if we have not been able to work together on LGBTQ inclusion, we can work together fighting anti-Black racism in Anglicanism. I've also worked with LGBTQ people in Africa who feel strongly that American liberal stereotypes about African Christians being homophobic has left them even more alone in their struggles against domination. One example of an alternative approach to global church politics, the Chicago Consultation in the Anglican Communion, brings together Anglican LGBTQ advocates from the United States and Africa for collaborative action.

Such work across perceived differences can change minds while resisting either/or partisanship. In my own case, it was a Southern Sudanese pastor who changed my mind about LGBTQ inclusion during the early 2000s. I was a young volunteer from conservative central Virginia working in East Africa. When the Episcopal Church consecrated Gene Robinson in 2003, this pastor asked me what I thought about the church ordaining a gay bishop. I rehearsed my usual arguments about the Anglican Communion needing more time to discern—which was probably a way of saying I wanted more time amid my own uncertainties.

The pastor replied, "You know, Ross, I'm just afraid the church will be on the wrong side of oppression one more time." This pastor knew oppression quite personally. He fled his hometown during childhood and could not return because of decades-long violence in his home region; his life had been threatened for standing up against brutal political violence in South Sudan. In that moment, I realized I couldn't see this issue the same way anymore. It's strange for me to hear people say that African Christians are homophobic, because it was an African Christian who pushed me to join the struggle against LGBTQ domination.

As another example of how we can make new political alliances against domination, consider the archbishop of Canterbury's role in the wider Anglican Communion. Not only does the wider communion have little say in who takes that office, its members are largely excluded from even holding it. The archbishop of Canterbury has

obligations both to the communion and to the British state; these latter commitments make it difficult for non-UK citizens to serve in the role. When traditionalist bishops said they no longer wished to be led by the archbishop of Canterbury, it's no accident that they named this office, with all its colonial baggage.

It's one thing—and to this non-Anglophile Episcopalian, a strange thing—to see a British archbishop like Justin Welby crown Charles III to chants of “God save the King!” and then go on to celebrate Holy Communion. It is another matter entirely when that British archbishop crowning the king also heads a global church with most of its members in former British colonies. By the very structure of the Church of England, the archbishop of Canterbury's office is aligned with structures of domination that played major roles in British colonialism.

Progressives and traditionalists can work together for reforms that lead to a more interdependent Anglican Communion. While conversations about changes in offices like the head of the Anglican Communion have begun—and Welby himself seems to support them—they move at a halting pace. And changing the geographic placement of the archbishop of Canterbury is only the beginning. Why is the Lambeth Conference always in England instead of, say, Nairobi? In Methodism as well, how might progressives make alliances to form polity structures that resist relationships of dependency and paternalism between less affluent regions of the global church and wealthier ones?

There is plenty of decolonizing left to do, and we need organized political coalitions to do it. Since none of our lives is utterly free of domination, we can't in good conscience self-righteously refuse to cooperate with people in another camp.

Progressive US Episcopalians and Methodists can affirm LGBTQ inclusion *and* be anti-colonial. We are not stuck in a position of having to choose. The grounding of this joint affirmation is a church politics of nondomination. It leads to a more adaptive approach to politics that rejects partisanship and works with anyone who struggles against domination. In our interdependence, we can shape a church that refuses domination in favor of beloved community.