

Whatever It Is, I'm (Not Necessarily) Against It!

I used to be a regular participant at the two most frequented "conservative" Episcopal/Anglican blogs. I refuse to comment at one at all any more, and do no more than make the occasional comment at the other.

Why? While I consider myself an orthodox Anglican, I do not in any sense of the word consider myself a "conservative." I reject the term "conservative" when applied to orthodox Christianity because, first, it is a meaningless term. "Conservative" only makes sense as an adjective. "Conservative" as to what? What do I think it worthwhile to "conserve"? Furthermore, "conservative" only makes sense in a spectrum from "conservative" to "moderate" to "progressive," a spectrum in which both ends and middle constantly shift. A generation ago, I would have been considered a "moderate" in the Episcopal Church. Without having moved, the same positions I held then, are now considered "conservative" or even "fundamentalist." Finally, "conservative" too often confuses the realms of politics and religion. To embrace any political ideology, whether it calls itself "conservative" or "progressive" is a betrayal of the gospel. If Jesus Christ is Lord, he stands in judgment on all political positions.

However, "conservative" can also mean "reactionary," and this is more and more what the term means on the two most widely read "conservative" Episcopal/Anglican blogs. A "reactionary" is someone whose position can be summarized in the lines from Groucho Marx's song from the movie *Horsefeathers*:

"I don't know what they have to say
It makes no difference anyway;
Whatever it is, I'm against it!"

More and more frequently in the last year or two, discussions on these two blogs have become a constant repetition of Groucho's theme. I first began to notice "Groucho-ism" in the comments in response to blog posts in which orthodox Anglicans would be accused of various "politically incorrect" offenses by their opponents. I often found myself preparing to respond to the accusations by protesting that they were stereotypical caricatures, only to discover that I had been beaten to the punch by commenters who had already gotten there first, not only failing to renounce the criticisms as caricatures, but rather enthusiastically embracing the "caricature": "You think conservative Christians don't care about the environment? Darn right! Environmentalism is an invention of atheists who love trees more than people! There is no such thing as global warming, and I drive the biggest gas-guzzling SUV I can afford!"

I then began to notice that even before looking at comments, I could predict the direction in which discussion would flow. Predictably, if the posts were about any political or theological position that was even slightly to the left of the extreme far right of the political or theological spectrum, the Groucho refrain would kick in, "Whatever it is, I'm against it!"

The end really began for me with last year's political election in which I could predict that any discussion having anything to do with Barak Obama would produce myriad posts of unthinking vitriol in which Obama would be accused of every imaginable evil. I had hopes that once the election was over, conversation might return to a more thoughtful tone. Instead, both blog sites have become "all Obama, all the time." Even in discussions that have nothing to do with politics, Obama's name will frequently appear. Any time someone writes or says something with which commenters disagree, this shows that the offending party is just like Obama.

At one of the sites today, there was a post indicating that

Reinhold Niebuhr is President Obama's favorite theologian. The responses were predictable. Anyone liked by Obama had to be bad, and immediately Niebuhr was attacked as a "relativist," and a "socialist." While Niebuhr does not stand in my top list of theological influences, he was one of the most important theologians and political thinkers of the twentieth century. I noted that "Amidst the superficial partisan soundbites that have passed for political discourse in this country for the last three decades or more, a little dose of Niebuhr would be a helpful tonic." And, of course, the original commenter responded by simply affirming his original sound bite. Or, in the words of Groucho, "Whatever it is, I'm against it."

I have great hopes for the future of orthodox Anglicanism in North America. I work at a seminary with some of the most intelligent and thoughtful orthodox Christian biblical scholars and theologians I have met anywhere. I teach students who have made great sacrifices to pursue ordination for an uncertain future in which many of them will be starting churches in store fronts and gymnasiums. I have gotten to know just a little some of the leaders of this movement, including Archbishop Bob Duncan, and global leaders like Primate Mouneer Anis. I am amazed at how much the people in this community love one another, and at how they pray and worship together.

If orthodox Anglicans commit ourselves to be transformed by the gospel, including the challenging of our favorite prejudices, God may well bless our efforts. At the same time, there is a dark underbelly to this "conservative" Anglican movement. If we define ourselves as a church in reaction, we deserve to fail. Jesus did not die so we could say, "Whatever it is, I'm against it!"

Addendum: As an experiment, I did a search on the more restrained of the two blogs, ostensibly concerned primarily with Anglican/Episcopal matters.

On TitusOneNine, I found the following number of references in

titles, entries, and comments:

Obama 1746

Schori 1258

Rowan 1494

Duncan 774

It makes it very difficult to make the case that the disagreement between “conservative” Episcopalians/Anglicans and “progressives” is about theological disagreements rather than politics when President Obama is more of a topic of conversation in articles and comments than either the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, the Archbishop of Canterbury, or the head of the new Anglican Province in North America.