



Anglican Schism

The Turbulent World:

“Anglican schism is not just about theology. It’s about geopolitics too.”

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Nahdlatul Ulama Chairman KH. Yahya Cholil Staquf presents a commemorative plaque to Archbishop Henry Chukwudum Ndukuba, Primate of the Church of Nigeria, at the G20 Religion Forum (R20) in Bali

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with James M. Dorsey



James M. Dorsey | April 24, 2023

KIGALI, Rwanda — A schism that could tear the Anglican church apart is about more than LGBTQ rights. It's about fundamental cultural and religious differences with potentially profound consequences for the geopolitical battle to shape a 21st-century world order.

The rift also raises questions about the Church of England's priorities at a time when the Anglican congregation in Nigeria, home to the world's largest Anglican community, is [under persistent attack by Muslim militias](#) in an environment of escalating [violence in the country that targets multiple communities](#).



Burned vehicles after Good Friday raid on April 7, 2023, in Ngban, Benue state, Nigeria. Photo: Justice, Development, and Peace Commission

Even so, the Nigeria-based International Society for Civil Liberties & Rule of Law reported last year that [52,250 Christians had been killed in Nigeria in the past 13 years](#). Jihadists also killed 34,000 Muslims in that period, the group said.

Political scientist Jidefor Adibe noted that Muslim-Christian violence dominated headlines because of [competition between the two faith groups](#).

“Both religions are constantly competing for space and control. Each suspects the other of wanting to encroach on its space and poach its members,” Mr. Adibe said.

“Similarly, many Muslims fear that globalisation and Western culture undermine Islam and therefore view them with suspicion if not antagonism,” Mr. Adibe added.

Asked about statements by Justin Welby, the Archbishop of Canterbury and ceremonial head of the global Anglican community, the cleric’s National Inter Religious Affairs Adviser, Reverend Richard Sudworth, directed this writer to an online listing of Mr. Welby’s pronouncements over the past decade that referenced Nigeria.



Archbishop of Canterbury the Right Reverend Justin Welby. Photo: Press Association

Most of the [43 statements](#) did not refer to the violence or mentioned it only summarily.

In a twist of irony, Nahdlatul Ulama, a conservative, Indonesia-based reformist Muslim civil society movement, has discreetly stepped into the breach left by the Anglican church.

NU included Archbishop Henry Ndukuba, the primate of Nigeria, in the opening plenary of a summit of religious leaders held in Bali in November 2022. This summit was part of last year's run-up to the Indonesia-chaired Group of 20 meeting that brought together leaders of the world's largest economies.

The religious gathering was designed to position religion as a solution to global problems rather than part of the problem.

“Nigeria is now one of the most dangerous countries to be a Christian... What is most problematic in the current situation is that very few are willing to listen to the victims... The West insists that this is just a matter of tribal clashes between pastoralists and farmers, both fighting for scarce economic resources caused by climate change,” Mr. Ndukuba told the gathering.

Critics accuse Lambeth Palace, the Archbishop of Canterbury's residence, of being more concerned about the LGBTQ community's plight than of the church's African flock.

The critics said the English church's stance prompted [this week's rejection of Mr. Welby's leadership](#) by 1,300 Anglican clergy and laypeople gathered in the Rwandan capital of Kigali for the fourth Global Anglican Futures Conference (GAFCON IV).



Delegates in the main hall at the gathering of GAFCON IV in Kigali. Photo: gafcon.org

“Leadership of the Anglican Communion is shifting to the Global South, particularly Africa. This has major implications for Western foreign policy. It sets Christianity in Africa in direct opposition to key elements of current US and European foreign policy,” said one observer who maintains close ties to Lambeth Palace and Anglican church leaders in Nigeria.

In what the conference dubbed the [Kigali Commitment](#), the Anglicans said they had no confidence in the ability of the Archbishop of Canterbury or “the other instruments of communion led by him (the Lambeth Conference, the Anglican Consultative Council, and the Primate's meetings)... to provide a Godly way forward that will be acceptable to those who are committed to the truthfulness, clarity, sufficiency, and authority of scripture.”

Responding to an invitation last year to married gay and lesbian bishops to a global conference of Anglican clergy, the Kigali statement, read out by Mr. Ndukuba, declared that Mr. Welby’s welcoming of “the provision of liturgical resources to bless these practices contrary to scripture... renders his leadership role in the Anglican Communion indefensible.”

The schism in the church is the latest fallout of resistance by conservatives in the Global South to US and European efforts to force recognition of LGBTQ rights. This is despite widespread official and public rejection.

The issue’s sensitivity and rejection of a top-down, Western-centric approach by governments and human and LGBTQ rights groups was on public display during and in the run-up to last year’s Qatar World Cup.

While Qataris were willing to embrace reform of their country’s onerous migrant worker regime, they were, by and large, at best willing to adopt a ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ policy towards LGBTQ fans during the tournament.

Sports journalist Karim Zidan noted that Western activists had failed to reach out to local LGBTQ people in Qatar and elsewhere in the Middle East to ascertain how they felt about Western approaches.

“A lot of these people don't want the traditional coming out or getting out of the closet the way we see it in the Western world. This is not exactly how a lot of the Arab world wants to handle this. I've heard it personally from friends of mine. They don't have a sense of familiarity with how it's handled in the Western world,” Mr. Zidan said.

Similarly, Russia's more than a decade-long exploitation of the cultural and religious cleavage between North and South is one factor driving reluctance in the Global South to condemn President Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine. Mr. Putin's rejection of gender and sexual diversity has earned him brownie points among conservatives in the Global South.

A decade ago, Russia's Valdai Discussion Club organized a gathering in Marrakech of Islamist groups in the Middle East and North Africa. Russian officials and journalists asserted that [Russian Orthodox Christians and Muslims shared common values](#).



Russian President Vladimir Putin at the 19th annual meeting of the Valdai Discussion Club. Photo: en.kremlin.ru

The Russians argued that gays and gender equality threatened a woman's right to remain at home and serve her family and that Iran should be the model for women's rights.

“It's a brilliant strategy if it works,” said a Russian analyst at the time.

The analyst need not have worried. US and European failure to understand that ramming Western notions down the throats of Global South conservatives rather than engaging in a long-term process that considers local concerns is likely to backfire.

To be sure, the Russian effort does not automatically produce support for Russia's invasion of Ukraine. However, it potentially creates a sense of shared values that undermines Western influence.

By the same token, the Anglicans gathered in Kigali did not have Russia or Ukraine on their minds. Even so, the schism in the Anglican church is another dent in the West's armour.



Kigali Commitment Read by Archbishop Henry Ndukuba