Anglican Church Policy, Eighteenth Century Conflict, and the American Episcopate: Book Review

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Perhaps the most charming aspect of Kenneth Elliott's *Anglican Church Policy, Eighteenth Century Conflict, and the American Episcopate* is its author's propensity to take at face value the statements made in the voluminous correspondence, the many pamphlets, and the occasional published sermons on the subject of whether a resident bishop would help secure the Church of England in the North American colonies and whether such an outcome was in any case desirable.

Oversight of the church in North America fell—largely by a series of administrative compromises and stopgap decisions—to the bishop of London, but, as Elliott's study makes clear, most of those bishops were not themselves convinced they had the authority to exercise control over the church in the colonies. Nor were they necessarily interested in promoting a resolution to the confused status quo. In that latter regard, they had allies in the various governments of the day in most, if not all, of the colonies and in Westminster. In short, the Church of England's relationship with the colonies, and with the governors of the colonies, was based on something other than a strategic plan.

Whenever an appeal was issued for an episcopal presence in the colonies—and the majority of such appeals came from colonial
churchmen—responses were shaped by secular relationships, relationships often defined in England by domestic considerations and in the colonies by issues of trade, demography, and self-determination. It would have been impossible to design a structure acceptable to a majority of those affected, and many of those involved knew this. That knowledge, however, did not mean church officials could afford to disabuse advocates for a resident bishop, hence the constant refrain from apparently sympathetic clerics in England of support couched with advice about the need to proceed with patience and caution. Regardless of the language of the debate around each proposal—language Elliott takes as his guide—religious considerations themselves were never the deciding factor.

The greatest of the prevaricators among the bishops of London was Edmund Gibson (Bishop of London, 1723–48), who upon his translation sent out “Queries to be Answered by Persons who were Commissaries to my Predecessor,” John Robinson. What Gibson wished to know was upon what grounds, and to what extent, he exercised authority over the colonies. The definitive answer seemed to come from Bermuda, which reported that “there was no document linking the bishop’s authority back to [William] Laud,” as had been suggested. Furthermore, “it was at the discretion of the particular governors whether to allow a commissary to operate within their province” (38–39).

Gibson ultimately appealed to George II for clarification. This appeal, however, came only after consultation with colleagues on the bishops’ bench in the House of Lords and after sounding out Robert Walpole as to what might be acceptable. Gibson, who was decidedly conservative on many church matters, was hesitant about the establishment of a colonial suffragan bishopric. More significantly, Gibson recognized the importance of preserving good relations with Walpole as the church sought to limit the spread of toleration. Ultimately, George granted a warrant for the “exercise of only a ‘Spiritual and Ecclesiastical Jurisdiction’” (39). The benefit to the church was that the warrant now vested that authority in the bishopric of London, rather than in a particular person, but it also severely restricted the scope of the church to act in the colonies.
In concentrating on the religious aspects of the public debate, Elliott downplays the importance of the secular and political components of the decision-making process. In the case of Gibson, for example, both Norman Sykes and various studies of Walpole offer context and analysis that Elliott eschews to prejudice the religious. It is not that the churchmen involved were not men of faith; it is that their faith was not blind to political reality. Sykes's book is cited in the bibliography, but, as with so many titles therein listed, it is not clear where Elliott draws on the works in his text or what aspects of the works he found influential. The index, perhaps a related editorial tic, is so perfunctory as to be of little, if any, use.

Elliott's account of Gibson's activities is indicative of the challenges faced by any author looking to examine the three components promised in the title: *Anglican Church Policy, Eighteenth Century Conflict, and the American Episcopate*. This is too vast a project to be undertaken in one slim volume.

The study, for example, does not once mention the Church of Ireland, which is important in this context because it was a constant reminder to all parties in England of what could happen if a church hierarchy had its own geographic and cultural identity. Perceived as meddling in both secular Irish and Anglo-Irish affairs, native-born Church of Ireland bishops caused considerable attention to have to be paid to the management of the Irish Houses of Parliament and to episcopal appointments there. Irish claims aside, there is evidence of a diversion to Ireland of promising clerics in England. Church of England managers and civil authorities were loath to consider the possibility of having similarly to divert talent to a new colonial bishopric.

In Scotland, the bishops of the Episcopalian church had chosen disestablishment and exclusion rather than affirm William III and Mary II as monarchs. Perhaps inaccurately, Scottish Episcopalians were identified with Jacobitism and were seen, more accurately, as a succor and a moral justification to the Non-jurors in England. The risk inherent in creating a church in the colonies capable of sustaining an episcopal line of succession after rejecting British civil authority was, likewise, not something the English wished to entertain.
Elliott mentions the Scottish church only in the final pages, when he recounts the route by which Samuel Seabury secured his postrevolution elevation to the bishopric; however, experience with both the Irish and Scottish churches, almost as troublesome to the Church of England as to the government in Westminster, limited enthusiasm even among putative supporters for a colonial bishop. Additionally, as Elliott notes, after the demise of Queen Anne, there was no regal support for Church of England expansion, but the secular domestic political consequences of a loss of royal support for an extraterritorial bishop is not an area Elliott explores. Such absences help reinforce Elliott’s reading of the correspondence and pamphlets as essentially complete records when they are, rather, guides to a far more substantive debate.

The book offers significant insight into the day-to-day experiences of church commissaries, clergy, and lay people in the colonies, whose isolation from England, in addition to the requirement for would-be clerics to travel to England for ordination—a principal argument for the appointment of at least one colonial bishop—almost ensured the failure of the Church of England to secure its presence in the colonies.

Elliott’s extensive examination of local reactions to attempts to bring a bishop to the colonies is the most significant component of this book. Demands for respect of local practices led to an increasingly energetic response from advocates. By 1760 Samuel Johnson (1696–1772), first president of King’s College (now Columbia University), a convert from Congregationalism, and the first Church of England minister in Connecticut, was asking “whether it is for the best public good, that the Charter Governments should continue . . . as the people are nearly rampant in their high notions of liberty, and hence perpetually running into intrigue and faction” (138). Not surprisingly, people such as Jonathan Mayhew (1720–1766), the near Unitarian minister of Boston’s West Church, responded with observations about the “monstrous hierarchy” of the Church of England and offered the opinion that Charles I was a “martyr . . . not because he bravely suffered death in the cause of truth and righteousness but because he died an enemy to liberty and the rights of conscience” (158).
As the American public sphere expanded the consequence of a polemic that had initially been designed to exploit British uncertainty about colonial public opinion, the rhetoric of Johnson and of Mayhew became absorbed in the broader discourse that led to 1776, and the debate about bishops and the Church of England in the American colonies was, ultimately, decided by events that owed little to the prevarications, hesitations, and uncertainties that had kept the Church of England from endorsing the concept in more than vague principles. It would turn out, of course, that that refusal to take a stance was what likely saved the Church of England and permitted Seabury to travel to Scotland after the Revolution and return a bishop, accepted not only by his coreligionists but tolerated by those who not so many years earlier had opposed the very idea of an American bishop.