

The Church and Gay People

Introduction

The Derby Resolutions were adopted in 1993 as a way of enabling debate in the Methodist Church to continue. It is time to review them and face the fact that, by default, they condone, if not homophobia, then an attitude towards lesbian and gay (LG) people that gives aid and comfort to people who are homophobic.

The Church does not permit its clergy to bless civil partnerships. Officially the church regards sexually active LG people as sinners; as such they are not allowed to exercise ordained ministry within the Church. LG people who are not sexually active it regards with limited and watchful approval.

On both sides there is much uneasiness. The arguments produced on both sides are not easily comparable. It is therefore pointless to expect final resolution in the terms in which the debate has been conducted hitherto. I would like to argue that it is time to learn how to pursue the matter in an atmosphere of genuine mutual respect.

Some background

The late Fr Gareth Moore OP, in his book "A question of truth", has set out cogent arguments against the way the Roman Catholic Church has employed two styles of argumentation against homosexual practice. These are the biblical injunctions and the argument from Natural Law. Moore argues that the biblical evidence is much less clear than is supposed, because the cultural *milieux* in which it was written differ so markedly from our own. Indeed, he explores hypotheses which give a quite different reading to the key texts from Leviticus, Genesis and Romans. Moore also finds reasons to set aside the arguments from so-called Natural Law. His book is a model of cautious reasonableness. Time after time he says such things as: there may be good reasons for opposing homosexual practice, but the traditional reasons do not amount to a sound case.

Moore's discussion of scripture raises a key point. Where scripture is being used as the basis of an argument, but debaters do not agree about its exact role in the discussion, we surely have a difference that cannot be resolved simply by appeal to scripture.

There is abundant scientific evidence that human sexuality does not polarise into two distinct categories: hetero- and homo-sexual; there is a spectrum. While the population distribution may cluster around two points which we may refer to as normal male and normal female, individuals can easily be found at most of the intermediate points as well. Some people are bi-sexual; they cannot readily identify themselves in terms of a single point on the sexuality spectrum. Others find themselves with a physical sexual identity that doesn't match their psychological sexual identity; these cases are known as trans-gender, and yet again, this sense of disorientation can vary

enormously. Remedies range from occasional cross-dressing to surgical gender-reassignment. Yet other people are perpetually trying to understand their sexuality; these are known as questioners. Hence LGBTQ: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans-gendered and Questioning. I use the word gay, in most places, to include all non-heterosexual persons.

It is very important, however, to remember that the use of labels rarely illuminates a situation. Behind every label there are many persons, each with her (or his) own story. As a people who try to live by the gospel we must surely acknowledge the centrality of persons rather than badges of distinction.

A second spectrum can also be identified, ranging from a manner of conducting relationships which is above reproach, to one which is cruel and abusive. Both heterosexual people and homosexual people can, in their relationships, exhibit the extremes of love and exploitation, fidelity, discipline, promiscuity, cruelty and self-sacrifice. There is no basis whatever for the assumption that gay relationships are *necessarily* perverted, dysfunctional or unfulfilling, any more than for the assumption that all heterosexual relationships – and marriage in particular – are entirely fulfilling and free from selfishness. Marriage – even Christian marriage – is not a sufficient condition for a fulfilling or even a functionally successful relationship.

Further, regardless of position on the two spectra mentioned above, people differ in the extent to which they see sexual fulfilment or even emotional intimacy as important parts of their life. Some are able to tolerate abstinence with equanimity, while others would find it a very great hardship. While we need to affirm all those who have struggled successfully to remain abstinent and to live in a way that the church would view with favour, we need also to understand those who do not believe that this is required of them.

It is important to recognise these three dimensions of human personality, and to guard against unwarranted assumptions – for example, that homosexuals are necessarily promiscuous, or are a threat to the young.

Is homosexuality chosen?

This topic is difficult to discuss precisely because of the confrontational way in which the debate has been conducted hitherto. The latent hostility that prevails in some quarters towards gay people can promote a self-justifying defensiveness, a reluctance to accept that in *every* person sexuality (as well as all other behaviours) is open to the judgement of God. Both these aspects of the debate – the hostility and the defensiveness – cloud the issues and frustrate thoughtful discussion.

At the core of this is the question: why are some people gay? Is it a chosen lifestyle? Or is it the result of a dysfunctional relationship marring the formative years? Is it a disorder or a natural condition, no more to be frowned upon than the colour of one's hair or skin-colour?

The “traditionalist” camp seems unwilling to accept any explanation of “gayness” other than that it is a free, unconstrained lifestyle choice. This very particular perspective makes the other side equally unwilling to accept that free lifestyle choice plays *any part whatever* in the life-story of a gay person. Debate is often thus polarised into opposing camps each committed uncritically to its own paradigm of human sexuality.

It is possible that some people may be gay because of a disturbance in their upbringing – a dysfunctional relationship with a parent being the obvious, but not the only example. Predatory friends may also disturb the pattern of emerging sexual identity. People’s sexual orientation can be gay for many reasons, some of which can reasonably be regarded as damaging disorders requiring treatment. But not all; most are gay simply because they are made that way – by God.

In his speech on Holocaust Memorial Day 2007, the Chief Rabbi, Dr Jonathan Sacks, said this: “Humanity sinks very low when it demonises others and sees them as less than human; when it forgets that those who are not in our image are none the less in God’s image.” My question is simply: does a gay or lesbian person simply reinforce heterosexual persons’ sense of their own propriety, the perfection of the image of God reflected in them, or can that gay person open our eyes to a richer and fuller image of God? After all, there have been times in the past when it was the orthodox view that women do not have souls. We’ve moved on from there!

Analysing human sexuality in the way the fictional detective analyses crime, we may think of motive, means, and opportunity (though it is not easy to distinguish between means and opportunity). By motive we may denote the individual’s need for intimacy. People vary in the extent to which the expression of their sexuality is important to them.

Opportunity (or means) is self-explanatory: an individual, heterosexual or homosexual, may meet and fall in love with and choose to live with a suitable partner, or not. If they do, then to their life is added something, presumably worthwhile, by way of companionship, emotional intimacy, someone to talk to about the ups and downs of the day, and possibly someone with whom to share the even closer intimacies of touch, as well as the disciplines of fidelity and forbearance. In the case of heterosexual marriage, there is also the shared challenge and reward of raising children. (But for further discussion of procreation, see below).

In any marriage, one may presume, these elements will all play a part, though the balance between them will vary according to the inclinations of the partners. Gone, thankfully, are the days when a marriage that failed to produce children was regarded as a failure, regardless of any other worthy qualities in relation to the other elements of companionship, emotional and physical intimacy. The Church, naturally, has never had a problem with a marriage in which the parties are well beyond the age at which it would be

possible or prudent to attempt to have children. Procreation is therefore not a primary purpose of marriage.

Where an individual desires such companionship, intimacy etc, but cannot find the right partner with whom to share them, there is an element of sadness. Indeed, it may be that the desire is so strong as to be called a need. Populations in which, for whatever reason, one gender predominates over the other (as, for example when large numbers of young males fall in war), the attendant pain of the other gender is greater, not merely because one who was loved is lost, but there are so few others to love.

Rights

So, it may be argued, the joys and delights of intimate, mutually supportive relationship are not *rights* that can be claimed by everyone.

So what are “rights”? A right is something one can demand. In a marriage one cannot demand health, wealth and happiness. One can trust God for the grace to cope when “for better” becomes “for worse”. Even the best fertility treatments offer no guarantee even of conception, let alone of a healthy child. The supply of children for adoption is not limitless. Gay couples have (in my view) a right to go to the same (or, strictly, comparable) lengths in the attempt to achieve their desire, but no-one can be *guaranteed* success in that venture.

Heterosexuals who do not find a mate are obliged by society and even more rigorously by the Church to abstain from at least some of those joys and delights, to suppress those desires or needs, or to sublimate them in some worthy activity.

What cannot be said of single heterosexuals is that the church forbids them *ever* to act according to their desires. They are required to be abstinent, not celibate. All they have to do is find a partner suitable to their desires, and prepare to make the commitment of marriage. The church will then: bless them; recognise them as belonging to one another; acknowledge their mutual interest in each other’s well-being; understand that when one of them is ill the other feels the pain; attend to their needs upon the death of their partner.

The phrase “suitable to their desires” embraces a number of considerations: for the Church a suitable partner must be of the opposite gender, and must be able freely and willingly to enter into the commitment of marriage.

But it is not so for gay people. The church can barely bring itself to accept their existence as individuals, and certainly baulks at their relationships. It is sometimes claimed that gay people are inevitably promiscuous. But the Church provides them with neither moral framework for conducting their emotionally and physically intimate relationships, nor moral support in them. The church makes no distinction between fidelity and promiscuity in their relationships; their desire for such a framework, including fidelity and discipline, is given no value at all. In short, the Church regards gay relationships as always open to suspicion.

In fact Christian gay people long for the recognition of their sexuality on exactly the same basis as heterosexual Christians. They do not question the demand for integrity, faithfulness, and so on. They do not ask to be exempt from the disciplines the Church expects of all its members. Their relationships can and do reflect divine grace; they are not “inherently flawed”; they can bring deep personal fulfilment; they threaten no-one; and, like hetero-sexual relationship, they can end in tears. That vulnerability is part of loving, for all of us.

Procreation

Because the journey of a human child to maturity and independence is a very long one, it is essential that children enjoy stable a supportive environment. Hence the traditional emphasis on marriage, as opposed to relationships which, being heterosexual, involve the possibility of pregnancy and childbirth without entailing the commitment that the upbringing of children requires. The possibility of stable, fulfilling heterosexual marriages that are non-procreative by choice has only recently entered the equation.

There are many Christians who, like me, support the rights of gay and lesbian persons to have their loving committed relationships recognised, accepted and affirmed as such, and given a moral framework.

Such a framework would be equivalent to marriage except in this one respect. Married heterosexual couples are assumed to be entitled to procreate if they wish – and if they are able to do so. It is assumed either that they will be good parents. Society has no right to intervene unless their children are in actual danger. Although a gay couple *can* become parents, a third party has to be involved. Opinions differ about whether this should – or could – be regulated. A gay marriage cannot therefore be *autonomously* procreative in the same way as a hetero-sexual marriage.

Even so, many, perhaps most, Christians find this too big a step to take, in the face of what the tradition has had to say about sexuality.

Homophobia

Heterosexual people are not obliged to have a favourable opinion of the sexual practices of homosexual people. But some take their distaste for homosexual lifestyles to the extreme of pursuing discrimination and violence towards gay people.

Happily, most official church re-statements of traditional teaching on sexuality, including the Derby Resolutions, now affirm the personhood of the individual gay person. But such official statements have not reached every pew; what happens in reality hardly amounts to cordial affirmation of the gay person as such. Traditionalists may protest and deny to the contrary, but gay people feel the Church is *against* them – or at least, is not *for* them. They feel discriminated against and not understood.

Few in the Churches would openly condone violent or discriminatory homophobic persecution. It is surely a reasonable question, however, to ask

whether the Church's perceived hostility, or reluctant and qualified affirmation, gives aid and comfort to those outside (and perhaps inside) the Church who *do* want to persecute gay people by word and deed. *For evil to triumph it requires only that good people do nothing.*

Violence against gay people is in no way whatever justified by pointing to them as gay. To leave no room for misunderstanding, the Church needs to state clearly and unequivocally that abuse of a homosexual person is precisely analogous to the abuse of a heterosexual person. If the Church is not willing to make such a statement then I wonder whether the Church is not to some degree complicit in such abuse. The way in which gay relationships are regarded so negatively and treated with such horror by many in the Church comes close to the only kind of persecution which the Church could ever bring itself to practice – severe, life-denying disapproval. It is this culture of discrimination and disapproval that encourages some folk to believe that the Church supports them in their persecution of lesbian and gay people.

Duplicity

It is hardly surprising, then, that LGBT people within the Church feel obliged to secrecy about their sexuality and the relationships in which they find wholeness.

All this leads, inevitably, to a culture of duplicity. Gay people who are in a relationship, even if it is not a sexually active one, are cowed into secrecy by the prospect that someone will, in effect, blackmail them into surrendering some part of themselves – either their relationship or their calling. Many of those involved in the process of candidating for ordained ministry have concluded that the best policy is “ask no question, get told no lies”. It hardly needs to be said that this is a most unhealthy atmosphere.

Whither?

We have come to a point where different views strongly held are threatening the unity of the Church, and threatening its integrity also. We impede our mission if our ethical stand is based on uncritical acceptance of the biblical text where that flies in the face of modern scientific, psychological and medical insights into the diverse nature of the person. Equally, we do the gospel a disservice if we accept uncritically the fashions of the day as they are seen in a particular culture.

It seems to me that we are in danger of losing sight of the reconciling character and power of the gospel. If we situate the gospel in an imperative to conform to settled, traditional understandings of personhood, then we cannot respond sensitively and creatively to what the world is saying. If, on the other hand, we situate the gospel in an imperative to respect and honour difference, then we can

So long as the Derby resolutions are left in place, we are committed not to dialogue but to the primacy of the traditional teaching, underlying which is the fixed assumption that the only possible basis for human attachment,

friendship and affection is heterosexual, and hence realised exclusively within traditional marriage. The Derby resolutions do indeed affirm lesbian and gay people *provided* those gay people adhere to an ethic which was designed (rightly) for a quite different scenario.

Given the profound changes in society and in the life sciences, perhaps we need to adopt a wider and more generous understanding of what it means for one human being to find love and fulfilment in a committed, exclusive relationship with another, regardless of gender. Perhaps, too, we need to let go of the notion that only in a family in which there is a male and a female parent can children be given a balanced upbringing. That concept is deeply coloured by the notion of the isolated nuclear family. In an extended family there is no need for children of either sex to want for appropriate adult role-models.

Unless we are able to move in this sort of direction, LGBT persons will continue to feel denied and discriminated against, and the life of the Church continue to be tainted by secrecy and duplicity. Further, the Church is charged to be not only the bearer of good news but also the embodiment of good news. Without deep and perhaps painful change this charge will be hard to fulfil.

We must move on, and recover a sense of full mutual respect. It will be a profound challenge across the board. Strongly differing views are held with equal passion. The debate must, however, be without preconditions, except that the individual Christian conscience answers to God and God alone. Let the taking of sides, the striking of poses, be removed from the discussion. Let reason and compassion, empathy and respect, govern the conversation. It is in this spirit that the Resolutions must be revised.

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