

The Church and Homosexuality: Post-Lambeth Reflections

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I formally applied for ordination training in 1975, just as I was coming up to my first degree exams. It meant filling in a form to be submitted to ACCM (as it then was). If you were also ordained around that time, you may remember this form, and the astounding list of questions that had to be answered under the heading 'Personal Health'. They began conventionally enough with various enquiries about one's general soundness in wind and limb, but then suddenly veered off into startling suggestions of personal peculiarity:

'Are you afraid of the dark?'

'Do your hands shake, for example, when pouring a cup of tea?'
(Obviously important for Vicarage entertainments, that one.)

'Do you have, or have you at any stage had, a bedwetting problem?'

And my favourite of all:

'Have you lost interest in almost everything?'

I suppose a cynic might say this showed a commendable realism on ACCM's part about the motives of ordination candidates, but it did give me worries about what I was letting myself in for. How many depressed and tremulous bedwetters had already got through the net, I wondered, and did I want to join them?

However, my sense of psychological superiority was short lived, because a couple of weeks after sending back the form, I was summoned to pay a special visit to the ACCM psychiatrist. This, I later discovered, was because I had given permission for ACCM to see my medical record, and although I was unaware of it, my medical record showed that at the age of fifteen I had asked my GP if there was a cure for being gay. The doctor had written it down, and that was enough to ring the alarm bells at Church House.

So I had to go and be checked by the ACCM psychiatrist. This was the first time I realized that in seeking ordination I was entering a danger zone. I was furious that it had happened, but I duly trotted down to London from Oxford one Saturday morning and arrived at a remarkably dingy practice in Battersea. It was the sort of place one might imagine a back street abortionist to operate in, a tiny surgery with peeling wallpaper lit by one fly-blown, naked lightbulb. This apparently was the Church of England's psychiatric H.Q. But the truly remarkable thing was the ACCM psychiatrist, whom at first I took to be a patient, since he was dressed in a leather jacket with studs and chains, leather boots, tight jeans, very long dark hair, and a cerise chiffon scarf. When he introduced himself as the ACCM psychiatrist, I began to wonder if this was some sort of entrapment procedure - perhaps I was supposed to respond to the uniform and try to get off with him, whereupon an ACCM official would leap out from behind a curtain and say 'Aha! Got you red-handed!'

That did not happen. We had a cup of tea instead, successfully poured by me with a steady hand, and a cosy chat about family and feelings. Nothing at all about sexuality, nor the entry on my medical record, which was the reason I was there. After tea he said, since he realized I was more than a little angry about what had happened, that he would write his report on me straightaway so that I could see it myself and post it to ACCM on my way home. So he did. He wrote, 'Dear ACCM Secretary, I have examined Mr John and conclude that he is a good deal saner than those who sent him to me. Yours sincerely...'. I posted it in the box outside.

Such was my introduction to the gay problem in the C of E, and I suppose it was symptomatic. Until 1987 the problem of homosexuality was generally dealt with by ignoring it - even when it was staring you in the face, like the ACCM psychiatrist's chiffon scarf. The policy of not dealing with it but quietly getting on with it was particularly endemic in old-style Anglo Catholicism. Some people regret it now.

and look back wistfully to the days of quiet toleration when those who wanted to did, and those who didn't want to pretended it wasn't there. No doubt in a way it was easier. But it is important to grasp that it is precisely that culture of double-think and turning the blind eye which has created the mess we are in today.

From the mid nineteen-sixties at least, when the subject began to be openly discussed in secular society, one could find a certain amount of constructive wisdom about it in the Church, but only ever in private, in pastoral consultation or confession. From the time I was a teenager most Catholic clergy would say privately that if you were not celibate, you should avoid promiscuity, find a partner and live as discreetly as you could. By the time I was at theological college in the mid seventies the staff took a very supportive line. When I began the relationship I am still in, I went along to the Principal to own up, and asked if I should leave. To my astonishment and joy he congratulated me. He told me I had been a miserable, introverted academic, and that this relationship would make me a better human being and a better priest. He was right; it did. They were the wisest words I ever heard him utter. When I informed my diocesan bishop, the response was equally kind and supportive. He thanked me for being honest with him, and certainly saw no bar to my being ordained. But there was no question of this support and pastoral wisdom being expressed in public. Such truths were to be kept within the Catholic clerical club, where gay relationships were entirely normal, and still are. By this time, however, the veil of secrecy is in tatters, and the old kinds of gentlemanly understanding will not work.

For one thing, from the sixties on gay people were beginning to gain self-respect, and starting to see that leading this kind of double life is itself corrosive and degrading. Secondly, the Anglo-Catholic club had already lost a lot of confidence, and was now starting to fall apart, partly over this issue, and even more over the question of women's ordination. Thirdly, AIDS came along as a largely gay disease in this country, and

for a while it stopped the gradual process of emancipation in its tracks, though at the same time it produced the positive result of making gay people more visible. Evangelicals like Mr Higton who seriously regarded AIDS as God's judgment on gays realized the time was ripe to cash in this new fear and get a purge in the Church. At the height of the 'gay plague' terror in 1987 they successfully got the Synod to pass a condemning resolution to the effect that all homosexual activity should be 'met with a call to repentance'.

Say what you like about hard-line Evangelicals, at least there is a kind of mad integrity about them. But integrity on this issue was exactly what Catholics and Liberals did not have. Nor, by and large, did they have any theology or ethics to back up the liberal line they had quietly been taking all along. They could not raise a peep against Higton, precisely because the gay issue had always been handled by the Church in such a deceitful and compromised way; and now it came home to roost. We were treated to the spectacle of so many bishops and others who were themselves gay or had always supported gay relationships, lining up with Mr Higton to betray themselves and their friends. It was a disgusting moment, and there is no doubt that it created a large part of the impetus which led to the founding of Affirming Catholicism, and shortly afterwards of SCP.

Finally, after a few little skirmishes and debacles like the aborted Osborne Report, the Bishops' Statement *Issues in Human Sexuality* appeared in 1991, and was belatedly endorsed by Synod last year. However the Statement will get us nowhere, because it is essentially a political, not a theological document. It cannot point to a solution because it too has no integrity; it is literally double-minded. Theologically it does not hang together, and it is not surprising that its two most intelligent authors now dissociate themselves from it. Its real purpose is a holding operation; that is why the bishops are clinging so desperately to it. It has its good side, certainly: it is trying to hold gay people within the church by taking a small, grudging step towards the

acceptance of lay people in same sex relationships; but it can only get even that small advance past the conservative Evangelicals by throwing them a bone in the shape of the gay clergy, who are once again firmly kicked in the teeth. When it was published, a number of Catholic and Liberal bishops who had voted for it phoned round their gay clergy to say 'Sorry, of course we didn't mean it'. But the damage was done: the ban on gay clergy was down in black and white. Then, gradually, what was at first presented as a discussion document has turned into a policy document, which is now regularly appealed to when gay ordinands are refused ordination, or priests refused preferment.

Things deteriorated still further when a few weeks ago the majority of English bishops at the Lambeth Conference voted to assert that homosexual practice is 'incompatible with scripture'. This is a statement they surely know to be nonsense in terms of exegetical theology; but they made it because they imagined it was essential to the unity of the Church, and in some cases because they believed a worse resolution might have been passed. Several of those who voted for the resolution then signed a letter saying, once again, 'Sorry about that. Don't get too upset, we still want you to travel with us' - not noticing, apparently, that theologically they had just kicked us off the train. Meanwhile, no doubt, many of them quietly hope that social and political trends will continue to change attitudes, and that eventually the Evangelicals will come round, and it will all turn out sunny in the end without them having to stick their necks out. But of course it will not work. We have seen how hopelessly weak and compromised this 'ameliorist' line has been over the last twenty years. If the Lambeth Conference achieved anything useful, at least it showed us in the person of Bishop Chukwumba exactly what we are up against. Not that Bishop Chukwumbas only exist in the Third World. We have at least one English bishop who firmly believes homosexuality is caused by demons that live up one's backside. (That ought to be a joke, but it is not. This is the kind of Church we are becoming).

I tried to remonstrate with one senior diocesan bishop about all this recently. This is a man who passes for a hard liner, but who in private, as he says, doesn't give a damn about what anyone does in bed, and recognises that in reality I am far more conservative about sexual ethics than he is. Nevertheless, he voted for the Lambeth Resolution, and sticks to the Bishop's Statement like glue. Like most bishops by this time, he will not ordain or induct any gay clergy who dare to be open about it. When I remarked that this seemed to me a personally dishonest position which would only result in making other people dishonest as well, he became quite annoyed, and said 'It's all very well for you banging on about truth and honesty. You're not a bishop. We can't afford the luxury of telling the truth. Our job is to hold the show together'.

For recounting these things I will be charged with 'demonizing the bishops', but that is not my intention. I am pointing out a simple Christian truth, along the lines of

'Oh what a tangled web we weave,
When first we practise to deceive.'

We are now in a genuinely evil situation, which has arisen directly from a collective decision to collude in a lie. I do not only mean the collusion of the bishops; to some extent we have all succumbed to it. No-one can entirely blame the bishops; as I said, they have inherited a systematic habit of lying about homosexuality which has been endemic in our church and in all the churches for a very long time. Nevertheless it is disappointing that so few have summoned the moral and intellectual strength to cut through it - or even to want to.

What can we do in this movement? Our Resolution will help. It is important, because by the nature of this problem individuals are threatened by exposure and cannot stand up for themselves. That is why collective protest is essential. But of course it is not enough. On their

own resolutions and slogans cannot achieve the fundamental requirement, which is to teach and show how the Church can change, with integrity, according to reason and experience, while remaining true to the authority of scripture and tradition. Any movement which dares to insert the word Catholic into its name has to accept the constant, often boring and tiring struggle of reconciling, through reason, new knowledge and experience with the inheritance of the faith. Otherwise we will be, as our detractors say, mere liberals in vestments, or more accurately, postmodernist choosers of the bits of religion we happen to like.

The danger of not doing it that way is illustrated by the case of Bishop Spong. Bishop Spong is a nice man with a lot of admirable views. He has worked bravely and sacrificially, not only for the cause of gay people and women in the Church, but also on behalf of racial emancipation, gun prohibition, and many other just causes worldwide, for which he has courted real risk at home of hatred and retaliation. I like him and I admire him; but with a friend like him at the Lambeth Conference, one was doomed from the start. It was all the more tragic because the document he drew up with Bishop Lee of South Africa before the Lambeth Conference probably would have been the right way forward, recognizing differences of view in the Church but allowing enough space and freedom to keep everyone in and allow a learning process to happen. That might have been fine. But the personal doctrinal declaration Spong chose to make just before the Conference, denying theism itself and attacking almost every basic tenet of Christian doctrine, was a disaster. It justifiably confirmed conservatives in the suspicion they have always held, that to be liberal on the gay issue means you are probably not a Christian at all. By demonstrating that in his case it is true, Spong did genuinely Christian gay people the greatest disservice possible.

What we stand for as Anglican Catholics is an intelligent traditionalism, and an honest and consistent exegesis of scripture. We hold to those

things not in isolation from, but as an integral part of the Catholic life of prayer, worship and growth in God. If we let go of God, we lose everything. If we hold faithfully to Him, He himself will drive us, through prayer and conscience, to hold our faith, life and reason together. We need to remember what most so-called 'traditionalists' ignore: that tradition itself is none other than the record of constant change in the Church, but it is the record of organic change, a change which is evolutionary rather than revolutionary, where each development grows out of its own past, in the light of new experience guided by prayer. We need to remember too that scripture itself is also none other than the record of constant change, with each new generation of biblical writers re-interpreting, re-editing, re-writing, equally in the light of new experience and prayer. The stupidity and ultimately the brutality of all fundamentalisms stem from the failure to see that this is the way religion must always be in order to be true religion, a living relationship with God, and not a false idolatry of the past.

Above all, remember how Jesus worked with his own tradition. In Judaism Jesus was beset with two forms of congealed traditionalism: the Sadduceic tradition, the religion of the Herodians, the establishment men, who wanted religion to be the unchanging glue in the social structure; and the tradition of the Pharisees, the Evangelicals and enthusiasts of the day, who were much nearer to Jesus in spirit and doctrine, but who turned into even more murderous enemies when he wanted to challenge and change *them*. But in dealing with them both, it is important to see that Jesus argues for challenge and change always within the tradition, and always on the basis of scripture. He will not short-circuit scripture or tradition, even to the point of exasperation. When he tries to get them to see that they have turned the sabbath into an idol instead of a gift, he does not say, 'Look: the sabbath law is rubbish: just give it up'. Nor does he say, 'Look: I'm the Son of God so I'm telling you you can do what you like'. No; Jesus argues *from within the tradition*. He makes a point of showing that the tradition itself had strands of humanity and generosity that were being forgotten. He

reminds them that the purpose of the law is for the good of humanity, not the other way round. He points out that God's love for anyone who is suffering here and now had always overridden any petty concern with sabbath conventions.

If Jesus was a revolutionary at all, he was never a disconnected revolutionary. He constantly faced the accusation that his teaching was 'incompatible with scripture'; he was put to death for being 'incompatible with scripture'; but as long as lived he never denied scripture, but kept on trying to explain, exhaustively and patiently, why their understanding was false. He pointed out how conveniently *selective* his enemies were in their biblical literalism, obeying one rule about Corban but ignoring another about caring for their own parents. If they accused him of not keeping the rules of washing and fasting, he pointed out that scripture was more genuinely concerned with cleanliness of heart and soul, not pots and pans. If they objected that his consorting with Gentiles was 'incompatible with scripture' he reminded them that their own exclusive attitude contradicted the openness of Elijah and Elisha to Naaman and the widow, or the message of Jonah to the Ninevites, or the promise of Isaiah and Jeremiah and Zechariah that the light would come to the nations. If they accused him of overturning the Law, he showed them that he came to fulfil the law, not to abolish it. He works within the tradition, and despite all his rudeness to the Sadducees and Pharisees, he respects the tradition, he comes as one under the law, to complete and not to destroy.

This has something of crucial importance to say to us as Anglican Catholics today. Many of us are tired and impatient, because it seems so hard now to love the Church and work with it. Often it is hard not to hate it, to the point of slamming the door and walking out, in the well-tried Anglican way. So of course it is tempting to short-circuit argument. Of course some will say silly unthought-out things like 'Well I don't care about scripture', or 'tradition has nothing to say at the end of the twentieth century'. But once you say that, you have given up the

pass. Once you stop negotiating with tradition and scripture, once you give up the struggle to pray with them and think through them, you are as much cut off from the lifeblood of Christian growth as any fundamentalist, and you are about as much use. Because it is not true that scripture has nothing to tell us. It has *everything* to tell us. And it is not true that tradition has nothing to say at the end of the twentieth century. Now, of all times, finding our true bearings in the tradition is more important than ever. But yes - compared to the easy simplicities of fundamentalism and the easy simplicities of atheism it is hard, painful work.

I was meant to be at the Lambeth Conference. I had been invited by the Bishop of Johannesburg to present a paper on the theology of gay relationships to the bishops' section that was dealing with human sexuality. However, I was disinvited the day before, along with others who had been originally invited, because a majority of the bishops had decided that it would give too much credence to gay people to allow them to speak - especially since they hadn't invited paedophiles or bestialists or any other 'equivalent' group.

The point I had hoped to make at Canterbury was, precisely, that contrary to the usual assumption, gay relationships do not overturn either scripture or tradition, but can be compatible with their deepest wisdom and discipline. I wanted to say that in terms of the kind of development which it implies within the tradition, accepting same sex partnerships is exactly analogous to ordaining women. It looks like a revolutionary step, but is nothing of the kind. Accepting same sex relationships does not change the Church's doctrine or discipline of marriage, it simply applies it to a different group of people. The sacramental theology is the same. Provided it is based on the same quality of love and commitment, provided it creates for two adults the same covenant framework for life and growth, it will be equally in the image of God's covenanted love, and will be morally indistinguishable from a childless marriage.

The Church took the decision to ordain women once it had realized that doing so does nothing to alter the sacrament of orders. It does not change the doctrine of the priesthood or the sacramental relations which ordination sets up, it simply admits a different category of person into those relations. Sacramentally nothing has changed, because the imaging of Christ in the priesthood does not relate to the physical gender of the priest but to her person. In the same way the sacramental imaging of Christ in a same-sex relationship does not relate to the couple's gender but to their personal covenant. What St Paul calls the *μυστήριον*, the 'mystery' or sacrament, relates to the way that a sexual relationship based on a covenant of total commitment potentially reflects Christ's covenanted, faithful love for his Church. It is not the male - female polarity that creates the 'mystery', nor anything to do with procreativity (otherwise we would not marry the infertile). It is the quality of the commitment between two persons, the combined direction of love and will, which is the heart of Christian sexual ethics. Such a relationship is sacramental precisely because, however imperfectly, it makes God's own reliable, unswerving, self-sacrificing kind of love a visible reality in human life. And that is not just a matter of theological theory, but of experience. Countless Christian gay couples have found that 'mystery' to be just as true of their own relationship as it is of heterosexual marriage; and it is an experience that demands to be respected.

The scriptural arguments around gay relationships also run parallel to the scriptural arguments around the ordination of women. Both issues relate to creation ordinances, and especially to particular Pauline passages which seem to rule out both homosexual practice and female leadership on the basis of those ordinances. But of course everything depends on the hermeneutic you apply. A literal exegesis will no doubt rule out same-sex relationships, but it would equally rule out giving any authority to women (let alone ordaining them). Even more strongly, not just on the basis of Paul's teaching, but on the basis of Jesus' own teaching in four separate Gospel passages as well as in Paul, it would

rule out the remarriage of divorcees as being equivalent to adultery. I suppose one might just about respect those who reject gay relationships on the basis of scripture, provided they also veil women, forbid them to speak in church, and condemn the remarried as adulterers. But on these other things we are not, thank God a literalist Church; and there in no intellectual honesty at all in applying a literalist hermeneutic to the gay issue and quite a different one to these others.

What I hoped above all to say at Canterbury is that religiously serious gay Christians are not asking the church to overthrow scripture and tradition, but only to read them with the same kind of reasoning which we already apply to these other issues. People constantly see the gay issue as a threat to traditional morality, but it is nothing of the kind. What we are asking for is an affirmation and extension of traditional morality, not the abolition of it. We do not want to change the rules, we simply want the rules to be the same for everybody, whatever their sexuality. Nor do we want the Church to adopt a 'new' theology of sexuality. There is none to be found. What we want the Church to grasp is that her old theology of sexuality, with all its strength and depth, and its moral challenge, applies to gay people too, and works for countless gay people already. We want the Church to be able to say to the gay scene - which, God knows, is in need of moral challenge and redemption - 'Look: the Gospel of love, and the Church's real, deep wisdom about love, is for you too.'

Wherever I have been able to talk about this, even in the most unlikely settings - in deanery meetings in deepest Somerset, in Evangelical churches in the suburbs, in debates with Reform, at the Greenbelt festival - every time a large majority of ordinary people have said 'But this is obviously right! Why hasn't anyone put it like this before?' Why indeed? Because most people who know - and particularly gay clergy - are still silenced by fear. That is why claims that the Church wants to listen to gay people will remain hollow, as long as silence and hypocrisy continue to be rewarded, and truth-telling continues to be punished.

I make no apologies for expanding on this issue, because it is a paradigm example of how we have to handle all issues of tradition and change. It is the most important issue of the moment, whether we like it or not, and it is silly to pretend otherwise. Those who would prefer to pass over it frequently protest that the gay issue has become obsessive, it seems to shut out all else. I agree. I am bored to death with it. I resent the time and energy it costs me, and would dearly love to pass on to other things which in a real sense are more important. But in another sense this issue is not like the others. It is about the Church's fundamental acceptance or rejection of millions of its own members and servants - and not simply of what they do, but of who they are. If you are a heterosexual, imagine that your own sexuality, your own marriage, the deepest and best perceptions you have of human love, suddenly became unacceptable and an object of repeated public condemnation. Would you find it easy to continue your membership and ministry of this Church? And quite apart from the personal misery it brings to so many, this issue matters because it signifies what kind of Church we are going to be. Are we going to go down the road of biblical or ecclesiastical fundamentalism, or are we going to be the sane, rational and inclusive body which the word Catholic ought to imply?

Much of this has been grim, but I am not, in fact, pessimistic. All shall be well, but it is a question of how long, and how much damage we have to suffer on the way. The sad thing is that the Church will only get there reluctantly, following the State. Progress will certainly come in terms of the age of consent, legal partnership, employment rights, pension rights. The Church will eventually catch up, and will grudgingly realize, all too late, that the impulse which brought these things about was truly a Christian impulse, even though it had to begin outside the Church. As with the equality of women, as with the emancipation of slaves, the thing which at first was supposed to be 'incompatible with scripture' finally turns out to be demanded by the heart of the Christian Gospel itself. That is how it so often is. But how bizarre that so few see it in advance.

As Jim Cotter wrote twenty years ago:

There are four stages in the Church's response to any challenge to its tradition. First, it pretends the challenge isn't there. Secondly it opposes it vehemently. Thirdly, it starts to admit extenuations and exceptions. Finally it says, 'That's what we *really* thought all along'.