

The Future of Sexuality Debates in the Church: Shared Challenges and Opportunities for Theological “Traditionalists” and “Revisionists”

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Introduction

In considering the future of debates on sexuality in the church, it is all too easy to get stuck in an impasse. As Tim Gibson (2013), Mark Vasey-Saunders (2017) and David Efird (2017) suggested several years ago, it is not uncommon for “liberals” and “conservatives” in the debate to end up talking past one another and to find that their positions become more rather than less entrenched – and, increasingly, polarized. What one believes about sexuality is, often, less a matter of hermeneutics, exegesis or even personal conviction, but is, rather, a shibboleth marking out allegiance to one “side” or another. Initiatives such as the Church of England’s Living in Love and Faith project (2018-2020) have attempted to promote good-faith conversations which take seriously the possibility of theological difference with integrity, but some observers of the project seem to remain sceptical about what they consider the either too-traditionalist or too-revisionist weight of the enterprise.

Such polarization is futile and unhelpful, not least given the non-binary nature of the reality of sex and sexuality on all kinds of levels. Furthermore, the church of the near future may well find that it has less familiar fish to fry, and that emerging questions in sexuality and sexual ethics prompt “liberals” and “conservatives” alike to step well beyond their comfort-zones and reconsider just what are the goods that Christians should endorse. In this way, they may discover that, despite their disagreements about well-worn chestnuts such as same-sex relationships, they are closer together on broader concerns such as faithfulness, stability and permanence than they might previously have suspected.

Emerging Questions

1. Non-binary identity

Whilst the existence of trans and intersex people is becoming better-known than before, and the need for more work to address their specific theological and pastoral needs was acknowledged by the House of Bishops in the Pilling Report (Archbishops’ Council 2013: 9) and has formed part of the work of Living in Love and Faith, the phenomenon of non-binary identity is still new to many within the church.

People who identify as non-binary or genderqueer (or perhaps gender-expansive, gender-variant or gender-non-conforming) find that neither masculinity nor femininity does justice to

their self-understanding. Some consciously play with combining characteristics, whilst others eschew gendered markers altogether and may understand themselves as agender or neutrois, not having a gender at all. Gendered markers are, of course, profoundly time- and culture-specific. Some people express their gender consistently, whilst others may prefer to inhabit a more fluid space, and present differently day by day.

There is a growing set of theological literature on trans identities, including first-person accounts from trans Christians in collections such as *Trans/Formations* (Althaus-Reid and Isherwood 2009) and *This is my Body: Hearing the Theology of Transgender Christians* (Beardsley and O'Brien 2016), as well as narratives such as Rachel Mann's powerful *Dazzling Darkness* (Mann 2012), and more specifically pastoral resources like those by Justin Tanis (2018), Austen Hartke (2018), and Chris Dowd and Christina Beardsley (2018). Yet literature exploring the theological and spiritual dimensions of non-binary gender forms a much smaller sub-set, of which Alex Clare-Young's book *Transgender. Christian. Human.* (2019) is the best example. Some trans people actively affirm that they always have been a gender not usually associated with their sex; others have had to self-narrate in these terms to access medical intervention even if it does not do justice to their experience. Christina Beardsley notes biblical imagery of miraculous transformations, and of migration, which "concerns human souls in transit, as much as human bodies in motion" (Beardsley 2015: 89). She notes that trans people's journeys are frequently not "one-way" migrations from one discrete gendered "place" to another, even if it might sometimes be expedient to figure such a journey along the lines of a spiritual quest. In trans studies as in cultural geographies, the very notion of the existence of borders is contested and problematized, and such "crossings" may or may not be understood to take place as licit response to a divine "call".

Christian theologies endorsing bodily specificity's goodness have sometimes found it difficult to parse trans identity, since this has seemed to some people to represent rejection of incarnation and the givenness of bodily specificity. This logic, for example, underlies Oliver O'Donovan's work (e.g. O'Donovan 1982). Non-binary identity thoroughly disrupts the notion that gender supervenes on biology in any straightforward or inevitable way. Furthermore, it may disrupt some fundamental assumptions about goods in Christian theologies of sex, gender and sexuality: constancy, stability, permanence. Still, it is conceivable that living into non-binary gender might chime with other goods: faithfulness (to one's body and its story even as it shifts and emerges over time); fecundity (in the generation of new modes of understanding); and the promotion of continued life (where living in birth-assigned gender hampers health and wellbeing). Clare-Young eloquently explains their experience as a non-binary Christian for whom a linear journey from femininity to masculinity is less than the full story, attuning them to the ongoing nature of gendered

becoming: “God has called me to let go of gender stereotypes and constructs and, instead, to believe that I am enough and that, by living in a state of flux, I can listen to that still small voice and go where I am led” (Clare-Young 2019: 89).

Gender identity and sexuality should not be conflated. Identity and orientation do not go together in any univocal or straightforward way. Nonetheless, growing awareness of non-binary identity is relevant to the churches as they move forward in work on sexuality, because non-binary identity on the “gender” axis, like intersex on the “sex” axis, disrupts the assumption that human identity is always binary, clear and stable and that assumptions about sexuality may be grounded in it. Where someone’s sex is not straightforwardly male or female, or where someone does not identify as man or woman, terms such as “homosexuality” and “opposite sex” become even more slippery. This is not to say that non-binary gender in itself can do all the work of deconstruction of the norms that have solidified onto binary sex. For one thing, it is unreasonable to expect it to do all that work on behalf of sexes and genders left less examined. For another, as I have argued elsewhere, if what matters is not *how* we are sexed but *that* we are sexed at all (Cornwall 2014) – in terms of concreteness, location, incarnation in a particular time and place – then binary sexes and genders should find themselves no more or less significant than more unfamiliar ones.

Even more importantly, though, we should be mindful of how even identities which initially appear transgressive may in fact chime with, or end up capitulating to, deeply normalizing agendas. Rosemary Hennessy’s discussions of the influence of late capitalism on the formation of feminist, lesbian and gay identities at the turn of the twenty-first century (Hennessy 1993, 2000) are instructive here. Capitalism thrives on innovation – new markets, new products, new streams of resources to be plundered – and has for this reason sometimes had liberatory effects. However, “Many new knowledges are often less innovative or progressive than they purport to be . . . Appeals to the new often serve as a strategy whereby potentially oppositional knowledges and subjects are incorporated into the prevailing norms” (Hennessy 2000: 31; cf. Tonstad 2017). In other words, legislating for “exception” renders it unexceptionable. We might therefore want to ask hard questions about how trans and non-binary identities risk being written into neoliberal agendas even as they seem to push back at normativity.

2. Polyamory

Other emerging questions in sexual ethics in coming years are likely to surround areas such as the possibility of covenanted relationships involving more than two partners. Indeed, John Witte Jr, expert on interactions between civil and religious accounts of marriage, believes that discussions about whether and how polygamous and other polyamorous relationships may be legally

recognized in Western societies will likely succeed discussions about same-sex marriage and other homosexual relationships as the most pressing concern facing family lawyers in coming decades (Witte 2015: 2). Witte does not believe that “liberalizing” trends toward greater rights for women, children and LGBT people make Western acceptance of legally-recognized polyamory inevitable; he explicitly rejects the notion that same-sex marriage is the thin end of a wedge which means polyamorous marriage is bound to follow. Indeed, growing awareness of equal rights means that polyamory (and more specifically polygamous marriage) is *less* rather than *more* likely to be considered acceptable in the West, since, he holds, polygamy tends to lead to unhappiness and dissent between rival wives and stepchildren competing for scarce adult male resources and attention.

But polygamy is only one possible kind of polyamory. The more likely scenario for Western societies will be pressure for recognition of voluntarist, equal-regard relationships involving three or more partners. In legal terms this will raise thorny issues about inheritance, survivors’ pension rights, and parental responsibility; some of these are replicated (and magnified) in more specifically theological terms. Objections to (two-spouse) same-sex marriages have sometimes held that moving away from exclusively two-sex marriage disrupts potent symbolism of God as “masculine” and the church or humanity as “feminine”, or God as “initiator” and the church or humanity as “respondent”, which proved significant in “nuptial” and other theologies of the twentieth century. Such theologies are already vulnerable to criticism on the grounds of their essentialism and their caricaturing of males and females – and even of their misunderstandings of the actual roles played by male and female gametes in human fertilization (Martin 1991). Furthermore, they do not persuasively show why properties that have been understood as integral to marriage-done-right, such as permanence, faithfulness, stability, and capacity to mediate grace to the spouses, may inherently or inevitably arise *only* within monogamous marriages rather than polyamorous ones. For example, if polyamorous relationships are currently less likely to be permanent and/or stable than monogamous marriages, it would be prudent to explore how far this might specifically stem from instability *caused by* lack of legal recognition – and associated matters such as fiscal protection for widowed spouses and their children – of polyamorous unions.

Polyamory seems to risk undermining some goods of monogamous marriage, and might therefore provoke various objections. These include the suspicions that polyamory might disrupt monogamous marriage’s capacity for sacramentality; detract from its potential for full self-giving between spouses; disrupt the imagery of complementary pairs; equate to infidelity; disrupt the link between sexual intimacy and procreation; lead to unchallenged distortions and over-concentrations of power and control; undermine social stability; or, pure and simple, move too far from how

marriage has commonly been understood in the church and beyond. Nonetheless, it has been suggested that there is an inherent “queerness” even in monogamous heterosexual marriage: “Ephesians 5’s joining of the couple to the body of Christ translates the two into the one and the many ... These verses short-circuit the gap between monogamy and polygamy” (Stockton 2017: 6).

I have written elsewhere (Cornwall 2017: 49-63) about the fact that paying serious attention to the ethical, moral and theological questions posed by polyamory may in fact lead to further interrogation of the norms and goods of monoamorous marriage so often taken for granted and left unexamined. It is difficult to argue that *by definition* multi-partner relationships cannot be permanent, faithful, stable, sites for the mediation of grace, and so on. Christians who object to polyamorous relationships – whether or not these become legally recognized as full-blown marriages – will increasingly find themselves needing to explain just what it is that renders monoamorous marriage so unique.

Thus, (some) “conservatives” and some “liberals” may find themselves allied. In theological and church circles, “liberals” tend to be those in favour of the legal recognition of (monoamorous) same-sex marriage, and the right of same-sex couples to have their marriages consecrated in church. But as a rich abundance of queer critical theorists and others (Lisa Duggan, Michael Warner, Judith Butler, and the members of the Against Equality collective anthologized in Conrad 2010 among them) have noted, marriage looks like a notably conservative institution all told, regardless of the sex of the spouses. Butler criticizes the over-investment by some LGBT activists in bringing about same-sex marriage since, she believes, this means that “options outside of marriage are becoming foreclosed as unthinkable, and ... the terms of thinkability are enforced by the narrow debates over who and what will be included in the norm” (Butler 2002: 18). Elsewhere, she holds,

“The pro-marriage agenda prescribes long-term monogamous pairs when many people in the lesbian, gay, bi- community have sought to establish other forms of sexual intimacy and alliance. Second, it breaks alliance with single people, with straight people outside of marriage, with single mothers or fathers, and with alternative forms of kinship which have their own dignity and importance.” (in Blumenfeld et al 2005: 22)

In the US context in particular, such scholars have critiqued the over-investment in equal marriage campaigns to the detriment of work to overcome the actual issue that many people have inadequate access to proper healthcare, a liveable income, and social support. Same-sex marriage may mean more people can access the (pragmatic) benefits afforded to marriage, but it still leaves many others

out in the cold. Better to extend such protections to all than to make marriage the golden gate through which one must pass to gain them. Expansion of the border of marriage to encompass more sex configurations than male and female may suddenly look to Christians like a much smaller step than expanding the borders to encompass partnerships of more than two spouses.

3. BDSM, Kink and Fetish

The trope of the sensation of physical pain as sexually pleasurable is common across bondage, domination, sadism and masochism; desires for discipline and/or submission frequently extend this play beyond the physical and sexual. The centrality of adult consent and “safe words” strongly built into BDSM culture have not done enough to dispel a sense among many Christians that BDSM, fetish and kink are inherently (and problematically) disordered or distorted expressions of God-ordained human sexuality. In part this is because BDSM play is rarely, if ever, directed toward procreation. Furthermore, practitioners frequently play with and subvert normative gender categories and roles.

Patrick Califia (2012), Thomas V. Peterson (2012) and others have noted that some who practice BDSM find it a deeply spiritual experience. But in many respects BDSM practices seem a long way from the procreation-focused marital sexual activity endorsed by many Christian theologians. However, some authors note that practices involving the deliberate infliction of pain are not unheard of within the Christian tradition. Margaret Miles, in her study of Christianity and the body, notes,

“In modern Western society the suggestion that pain can have ‘uses’ tends to horrify people. Yet numerous historical authors – like Catherine of Siena, Henry Suso, and Francis of Assisi, to name only a few – intentionally used involuntary and voluntary pain to produce religious insight and/or mystical experience.” (Miles 2005: 7)

Indeed, both BDSM and Christianity (at least in some forms) *reframe* the notion of pain, and suggest that, rather than being something to be avoided at all costs, it can serve a positive function. Penitential practices like flagellation or wearing hair shirts might be understood as close to if not in themselves a form of BDSM, since they are deliberate inflictions of physical pain or discomfort which bring about a higher pleasure or good (for example, a sense of solidarity in suffering with Christ – though this has frequently been used to the detriment of people with disabilities, slaves and oppressed people, and those otherwise exhorted to suffer “virtuously” in silence). Even milder practices such as fasting might be understood as bodily mortification.

Of course, such practices are rarely (explicitly) directed toward deliberately *sexual* gratification. Nonetheless, Mark D. Jordan holds, “Sexual sadomasochism lies closer to many of our ‘purely religious’ experiences than we might have supposed” (Jordan 2002: 168). Jordan says that too-emphatic Christian condemnation of sadomasochism “implies ... that sadistic elements are not present in most sexual acts, as it ignores the ways in which socially enforced norms of the feminine are intrinsically masochistic” (Jordan 2002: 168). Jordan suspects that *all* sexual acts, including unremarkable heterosexual ones, contain elements of domination and submission. Christianity’s discomfort with this association leads to a lack of self-reflexivity which may exacerbate its own complicity with unjust structures of gender and power.

Jeremy Carrette argues that any apparent similarity between Christian penitential practices and BDSM should not be overstated (Carrette 2005: 15). Indeed, BDSM may seem like a difficult set of behaviours to square with a Christian sexual ethic which promotes equality and non-violence as goods in sexual relationships. Critics believe that acting out violent or pain-inflicting fantasies is a kind of collusion with violence (especially patriarchal violence), reinforcing exploitative and unequal power dynamics: this logic underlies objections to BDSM from Susan Griffin (1982), Sheila Jeffreys (2003) and others.

Nonetheless, it might be held – rather as Jordan does – that it is failure to acknowledge the sadistic elements of “unremarkable” sex that is damaging, rather than, itself, the existence of pain- and domination-inflected fantasies and desires. Just as watching pornography could arguably be an outlet for the exploration of “sinister” desires or fantasies which might become more damaging if left uninterrogated (Gorringe 2001: 60-61), BDSM play might be understood as an imaginative “safe space” for investigating the direction of violent desires, enacting them only consensually and in controlled circumstances. However, Melinda Vadas rejects the idea that BDSM is truly transformative of the situations of coercion and violence it purports to parody, arguing that rape fantasies and plays are titillating precisely because they invoke (and are therefore reliant on the existence of) real rapes: “If the old meaning is gone, so would be the sadomasochistic pleasure. If the sadomasochistic pleasure is not gone, neither is the old meaning” (Vadas 1995: 160).

Those who practice BDSM often stress the importance of consent: although people might enter into a world of bondage, domination, and handing over control, this happens within a context where consent is valued and spoken. People entering BDSM games typically invest much time discussing and agreeing in advance what will happen, what each person consents to, and “safe words” that mean the game must stop. In some respects, “bottoms” actually have *more* power than “tops”, because it is the top’s responsibility to assure the bottom’s safety and ensure play does not exceed what the bottom has agreed to. BDSM advocates argue that it is therefore actually more

egalitarian and consensual than sex where consent is assumed or the need for consent is ignored. Rather than colluding with violence, they suggest, BDSM actually criticizes sexual violence by parodying it. Violence, domination and submission are built into the very structures of society: rather than pretending this is not the case and is not evident in sexual behaviour, proponents of BDSM *play with* these concepts, thereby – perhaps – stripping them of some of their power. Robin Bauer gives a useful overview of this freighted concept of consent in BDSM, noting that the assumption that two individuals will always give consent mutually, contractually or in truly egalitarian terms may be naïve given internalized oppression and the ways in which patriarchy has already affected individuals' capacity to self-determine (Bauer 2014: 76ff). Furthermore, the boundaries of consent may be somewhat fluid; there may also be good-faith misunderstandings of what each party has consented to (Bauer 2014: 81). Moreover, having given consent is no watertight safeguard against later regretting the activity to which one consented (Bauer 2014: 93).

Perhaps one of the most compelling theological arguments against BDSM is that it tends to commodify sexual pleasure. The commercialization of BDSM, through the selling of fetish gear and the production of BDSM porn, might also seem to feed into a sex-as-capitalist-commodity model. However, Carrette suggests that, in the intimacy and extreme trust exhibited between BDSM practitioners, deep community is formed which exemplifies vulnerability and openness more profoundly than in other contexts. It is here, he suggests, “where sex gets dangerous, not in its glossy commodification but in its personal imaginative pains and enacted fantasy, with all the messiness of human suffering and our multiple polymorphous desiring selves” (Carrette 2005: 23). This kind of vulnerability and honesty might characterizes many kinds of human sexual relationships, not only those formed via BDSM. But Carrette holds that mainstream theology – and the heterosexual, procreative sex it has tended preferentially to endorse – actually elides and undermines vulnerability and honesty because it plays out patriarchal power relationships silently, and therefore more treacherously. If BDSM is understood as means to transcend the often-unqueried alliance between sex, power, capitalism and the Christian tradition, it may cut through patriarchal and kyriarchal distortions of freedom and egalitarian living even as it parodies them. Jordan concurs that, in BDSM, “Pain or subjection is used as a way beyond ordinary consciousness – a way to reach the point where the apparent relations of dominance and subjection are dissolved in mutuality, intimacy” (Jordan 2002: 167).

Sexual sadism and masochism continue to be included in the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (the most recent edition being 2013's DSM-5), described as *algolagnic disorders*. The “disorder” paradigm exemplified by DSM-5 reinforces the notion that anyone aroused by pain and domination is psychologically damaged,

and that BDSM practices cannot be understood as part of “healthy” sexuality. However, recent research into BDSM practitioners’ mental health and psychology finds them no more likely than anyone else to be antisocial, violent or psychologically disturbed (Cross and Matheson 2006; Moser and Kleinplatz 2006), and somewhat *more* likely to be conscientious, open-minded and happy (Wismeijer and van Assen 2013).

Furthermore, and more challengingly, as the growing number of websites dedicated to “Christian domestic discipline” makes clear, there is a subset of Christian couples for whom sex play involving pain, domination and capitulation is a logical outworking of a belief in God-ordained gender roles and hierarchies (e.g. <https://christiandomesticdisciplinelife.wordpress.com/>; see also Bennett-Smith 2013). Those Christians who find this idea abhorrent may need to re-examine the implications of the theologies grounded in gendered initiation and procession, leadership and submission which so many find unexceptionable. Mainstream theologies of sexuality have barely begun to scratch the surface of this interplay of authority, discipline, devotion and desire, nor to reflect on how far it reflects uninterrogated norms more inextricably woven into accounts of intra-human and human-divine relationality.

Conclusion

Too often, church statements and theological writings about “sexuality” have actually only been about *homosexuality*. Homosexuality is frequently figured as problem, other, issue, boundary case, with the sense that heterosexuality is *so* normal, natural and ubiquitous that it requires no interrogation or reflection. As well as being unsatisfactory because it continues to paint homosexuality as something “other” from the group of those who speak, write, and make church statements, this also impoverishes theological discourse more broadly. Sexuality is broader than what people do or do not do with their genitals – and, especially, broader than only what *some* people do with their genitals. Over-focus on genitality detracts from how sexuality may be understood as energy and creativity that exists even in relationships that will never be genital, and in permanently or temporarily celibate people as well as those who are genitally active.

The conviction that the church’s over-focus on homosexuality is a smokescreen that allows it to proceed fairly unreflectively – and unreflexively – on sexuality more broadly is not novel. All this said, however, I wonder whether it still lies behind a sometimes prurient interest in “boundary cases”. If there is an increasing awareness of more niche sexual tastes and practices – including BDSM, polyamory, bisexuality, and various fetishes – then this must not be a substitute for good robust interrogation of what the more “vanilla” among the church’s ranks are up to. And if we immediately recoil from the idea that what we are “up to” (or not) sexually should be anyone’s

business but our own, that in itself is telling: why has the church so often believed that it has more authority to pronounce on what it considers heterodox and marginal than on what it claims – or assumes – to be normal, natural and (ideally) ubiquitous?

The reduction of theological discourses on sexuality to liberalism versus conservatism – and, moreover, to liberal versus conservative accounts of one sub-set of sexual relationship types – deeply impoverishes the kind of discussion it is possible to have. Theologians do not need to agree that polyamory or BDSM are unequivocally (or even equivocally) positive in order to engage seriously with them as phenomena and with those for whom they are meaningful. If by engaging with these entities, and with the mounting evidence that a growing minority of people do not find their gender adequately expressed or described in a binary system, Christian theologians find that they are able to do deeper and more soul-searching self-reflection on the tradition's often uninterrogated excesses and omissions, then that can lead only to richer and more thorough accounts of what it means to be sexed and sexual creatures in relation to God. If there continue to be goods in sexual ethics on which Christians can agree, let us ask which institutions, behaviours and theologies actually best uphold them.

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