

GENDER, INCLUSIVITY AND THE BIBLE

In this short piece I would like to move the arguments between the traditionalists and the revisionists about lgbt people in the Church, on. I shall do this by thinking less about sexual orientation and more about ancient theories of gender.

Four Broken Planks

The conservative abhorrence of same-sex love is based on four broken planks. The first broken plank is the claim that the Bible condemns homosexuality. The heart of the Protestant case relies on a peculiar reading of seven proof texts. Roman Catholics agree, but they add three more broken planks. The second plank is Tradition, which has always said that homosexuality is wrong. The third is Natural Law, which says that particular sexual organs fit naturally only in particular places for particular purposes between particular people (married couples). The fourth is the constancy of theological and moral doctrine, which cannot change. Recently both Churches have added another broken plank, "complementarity," to their tottering edifice. Apparently, alert readers of *Genesis 1:26-7* can conveniently spot God's design for all human sexuality, in all places and at all times. There are two sexes, and each is incomplete without the other.

Stalemate

The revisionary case is embarrassingly easy to state. In *The Savage Text*,¹ I show how homophobic readings of the Bible are similar to readings that justified the persecution of Jews, racism, sexism, slavery, and child abuse. Readings of the Bible become *savage*, instead of proclaiming the Word made flesh. But all four

¹ Thatcher, Adrian (2008). *The Savage Text - The Use and Abuse of the Bible*. Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell.

planks are well and truly broken! Even if the premiss is granted that the Bible can be used as a "guidebook" for sexual conduct, not one of the supposed seven proof-texts deals with the case of modern lgbt Christians, many of whom seek to have their unions blessed by God. Tradition is not static either. While historians like John Boswell² and Alan Bray³ have shown that same-sex love has long had a presence in the Church, the Church has changed its mind over many things. We don't burn heretics, or think kings rule by divine right, or that unbaptized babies go to hell, etc., any more. Whether the Churches *should* change their minds about homosexuality is a legitimate question: whether they *can* change their minds is not.

While Christians look for the presence of God in nature, the concept of nature is far too plural and ambiguous for moral doctrines to spring from it. And since the Catholic Church has taught that usury is wrong, that keeping slaves is OK, that religious freedom should *not* be recognised, and so on, and no longer teaches these things, it ill behoves Catholics to hide behind the assumption that moral doctrine is always constant. While there may be constant principles, their application in practice is certain to involve change.

Repetition, repetition, repetition

Mark Jordan has shown that Catholic teaching does not *contribute* to discussion at all.⁴ It is carefully designed to *silence* it. Discourse analysis of key texts shows ample evidence of misrepresentation, question begging, avoidance, and other literary devices of non-communication. Among Catholics constant repetition of the same old tired stuff, certified by the Magisterium, is trotted out in a vain

² Boswell, John (1995). *The Marriage of Likeness: Same-Sex Unions in Pre-Modern Europe*. London: HarperCollinsPublishers.

³ Bray, Alan (2003). *The Friend*. Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press.

⁴ Jordan, Mark (2000). *The Silence of Sodom: Homosexuality in Modern Catholicism*. Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press.

attempt to hold the line. Among Protestants the issue gets tied to impossible theories about what the Bible is and "says." (The Bible doesn't "say" anything. It is not a person with a tongue. It is a book that lets itself be read.)

While it is right to maintain the counter-arguments, it is also important to move the revisionary case on. One way of doing this is to uncover ancient theories of gender; to note how biblical understandings of male and female are rooted in these ancient theories; to note that these theories are no longer held; and to disentangle the Gospel from the gendered world view that the Gospel itself began to challenge.

One Sex, Two Genders

A milestone in gender theory was the publication in 1990 of Thomas Laqueur's *Making Sex*⁵ which showed that the classical world, followed by the European medical professions up to the 18th century, thought there was *a single sex!* Men and women shared the same anatomies. Vaginas were inverted penises; the womb was a scrotum; ovaries were testicles. *Sexual* difference lay in the internality of women's sexual organs. When babies were made, men and women both ejaculated, and the coagulation of their seed was what produced the child.

Writers like Laqueur think of sex as a single continuum running from male to female across the human species. What makes men and women different is *gender*. This view is amply confirmed by several other classical scholars.⁶ Men are, if not

⁵ Laqueur, Thomas, 1990. *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*. Cambridge, Mass. & London: Harvard University Press.

⁶ Conway, Colleen M. (2008). *Behold The Man - Jesus and Greco-Roman Masculinity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Kuefler, Mathew (2001). *The Manly Eunuch: Masculinity, Gender Ambiguity, and Christian Ideology in Late Antiquity*. Chicago & London. University of Chicago Press. Moore, Stephen D. & Janice Capel Anderson (ed.s) (2003). *New Testament Masculinities*. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature. Swancutt, Diana (2003).

perfect, always more perfect than women. Men are more like God than women. God is male. Men have greater *heat* than women. Women are cold. Men are active, especially when they have sex. Women are passive, receptive, uncomplaining. Men are in control, especially over their women, who suffer from uncontrollable lust. Men are hard and firm. Women are soft and leaky. Men are the penetrators; women the penetrated. Men command: women obey.

The classical world believed in two genders. What's more they believed that it was possible to slide from one gender into another. The eunuch was a mistrusted, ridiculed figure. Intersex people and people with unusual or ambiguous genitals blurred the distinction between male and female genders. Too much effeminate behaviour by men could lead to their becoming women, to being feminised! This view of gender makes good sense of what we read in the New Testament. Of course Jesus called God "Father." Of course the disciples were all men. Of course wives had to submit to their husbands in all things.

The Peril of Feminization

But this view of gender also makes sense of ancient worries about same-sex love. It is well known that same-sex love was common in Greek and Roman times. It is less well known that that love was carried on within firm social parameters. Given the gender binary, where men always regarded themselves as superior to women, the objection to same-sex love was that it was likely to involve either a man acting as a woman, or a woman stepping out of her socially passive role and acting like a man. The difficulty becomes obvious when men engage in anal (and presumably oral?) sex. No self-respecting man would ever let himself get penetrated, for that

"The Disease of Effemination: The Charge of Effeminacy and the Verdict of God (Romans 1:18-26)." In Moore and Anderson, 193-234.

would be, *God forbid*, to become feminised! What could be worse than for a self-respecting man to be seen as a woman!

This view of gender is unusable today. It is anatomically ridiculous, as well as insulting to women. It lies at the root of the problem of women's ordination. They can't be perfect without an external penis: an internal one isn't good enough. They can't represent the male Christ. They can't take on leadership roles because they are by nature submissive and controlled. But it is also the original objection to same-sex love as well. A man acts as a woman only in peril of his soul.

I want to find in the New Testament the beginnings of a grappling with this view of gender. The much-too-familiar text, "In Christ there is neither male nor female" (Gal.3:28) really does take on a new resonance within its original gendered context. Being in Christ is not to continue to conform to ancient (or modern) worldly notions of gender, but rather to discover among the "children of God" a mutuality and reciprocity of self-giving love. Where there is no longer male nor female, there are no longer gendered norms to interfere with our commitments. There is a new norm and gender hierarchies have no part within it.

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Visiting Professor, University of Exeter.

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