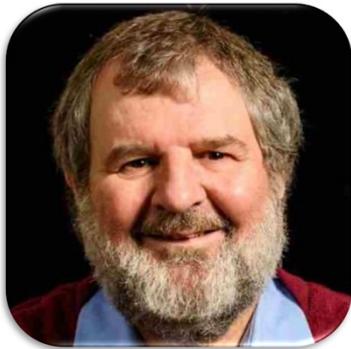


The House of Bishops on gay marriage

– Part two of a two-part study



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Yes, the Church of England is still arguing about same-sex partnerships.

On 18th January 2023 the House of Bishops [announced](#) their proposals for change, to be debated at the February session of General Synod.

They publicly apologise:

to LGBTQI+ people for the “rejection, exclusion and hostility” they have faced in churches and the impact this has had on their lives.

They offer [new prayers](#):

Same-sex couples would still not be able to get married in a Church of England church, but could have a service in which there would be prayers of dedication, thanksgiving or for God’s blessing on the couple in church following a civil marriage or partnership.

For most people outside the churches, what needs to be explained is not whether churches should perform or bless gay marriages, but why church leaders are so obsessed about them.

Sex and equality in early Christianity

There is a reason. I am told that, from a Buddhist point of view, Westerners ‘have sex on the brain, which is the wrong place to have it’. Our agonisings over which sex acts are permissible have long seemed, to outsiders, an odd feature of Western culture.

Why? Vern Bullough’s *Sexual Variance in Society and History* (1976) describes Western culture as a ‘sex-negative culture’. The reason goes deep into our history. It’s a sad story, and regrettably a Christian one. Judaism, Islam and Hinduism have always been more positive about sex.

Peter Brown’s *The Body and Society* describes in detail how total sexual abstinence came to be valued by early Christians. His Preface warns us:

It is disturbing to read of Saint Eupraxia, a noble girl, and so better fed and more vigorous than her fellow-nuns in a great Egyptian monastery, sleeping on hard ashes to tame her body at the time when her periods first began. The very matter-of-fact manner in which monastic sources report bloody, botched attempts at self-castration by desperate monks shocks us by its lack of surprise (p. xviii).

There is plenty more in this vein. In third century, Syria you couldn’t even get baptised without renouncing all sex for life. Christian fiction inverted pagan fiction: Judith Perkins

describes how stories ended not with a happy marriage but with a happy *refusal* of marriage (*The Suffering Self: Pain and Narrative Representation in the Early Christian Era*, 1995). The fourth century theologian Jerome wrote long diatribes including the remark for which he is best known: 'Marriage populates the earth: virginity populates heaven' (*Against Jovinianus*, 1.16, cf. 1.49).

There was a reason. Girls were normally married at around the age of 12, to an older husband chosen by their fathers. Brides could choose neither their husbands, nor when to marry, nor whether to marry. Marriage was unequal from the start.

The early Christians rejected unequal, oppressive power structures. It was Christians who founded convents where girls could run away from unwanted marriages to live together in community. Such convents were alternative, egalitarian communities challenging the oppressive patriarchy of the time.

Sexual abstinence as a virtue

Christian emperors, when they appeared, were of course unhappy with all this renunciation. Christianity began to lose its radical edge. The fourth century Eustathius of Sebaste, once mentor to the young Basil of Caesarea, was condemned by the Council of Gangrae in language which makes clear the connection between sex and inequality. The bishops

claimed that the disciples of Eustathius had endangered the institutions of slavery and of private wealth, and had denied the subjection of women. They were accused of expunging all social distinctions beneath a common dress... women and slaves would appear dressed alike, their social status and their sex obliterated by a common dress. They also claimed that wealth was to be renounced *en bloc* and redistributed at once "among the saints". Women gained their equality by shaving their heads. With the removal of the "natural veil" of long hair, so the bishops claimed, women were encouraged to throw off the sign "which God gave to every woman as a reminder of her subjection, thus annulling, as it were, the ordinance of subjection" (Brown, *The Body and Society*, p. 288).

By the Middle Ages church leaders had invented a distinction. The 'commands of Christ' were to be obeyed by all Christians. The 'counsels of perfection' were for those called to the monastic life; they alone were to renounce all sex and give their possessions to the poor. The egalitarianism which had at first been the reason for renouncing both marriage and wealth came to be restricted to the monasteries.

Outside them, once the expectation of the Second Coming had declined, marriage had to be acceptable because somebody had to produce babies. But the medieval church was governed by celibate men committed to the superiority of complete abstinence. Detached from its egalitarian roots, abstinence became a virtue in its own right.

The medieval Penitentials, handbooks advising confessors on hearing confessions, were far blunter and more detailed than modern sensibilities would consider acceptable. Confessors were to ask which sex acts the penitent had performed with whom: which part of the body was put where, and with what effect. Penances were given accordingly: for sex outside marriage; for masturbation; for sex avoiding conception; for sex on a forbidden day (they varied, but in general most days were forbidden); for priests who desired, even if they didn't perform, a sex act with someone.

Toleration and guilt

Liberalisations have of course happened. Luther, famously, encouraged monks and nuns to marry. Protestants accepted married clergy.

Anxieties about forbidden sex acts continued. We inherit values from our culture, often unconsciously, and pass them on to the next generation. We still have sexual relations, but – as critics from other cultures point out – our history makes us more prone to feel guilty about them.

Psychologists observe how we often cope with our feelings of guilt by projecting them onto somebody else. The nineteenth century produced a major moral controversy over marriage to a deceased wife's sister. Like the current debate about trans people, very few individuals were affected but public debate was widespread. When that subsided, we fell out over divorce. Then contraception. To 'limit or avoid parenthood', the 1930 Lambeth Conference resolved, 'the primary and obvious method is complete abstinence from intercourse':

Nevertheless, in those cases where there is such a clearly-felt moral obligation to limit or avoid parenthood, and where there is a morally sound reason for avoiding complete abstinence, the Conference agrees that other methods may be used... The Conference records its strong condemnation of the use of any methods of conception-control from motives of selfishness, luxury, or mere convenience.

There the matter stands. The Resolution hasn't been amended or repealed. Nor has any official statement defined what might constitute 'a morally sound reason for avoiding complete abstinence'.

When our denunciations are really only projections of our inner feelings of guilt, it's most convenient to direct them against a small minority who aren't going to answer back. This worked well with deceased wife's sister and divorce (much less common than now). However, when the 1967 papal encyclical *Humanae Vitae* forbade contraceptives to Catholics, it was too late. Too many people were using them.

But still, often, feeling guilty. At the time the 1960s could be described as an age of permissiveness; but compared with today, in sexual matters, they were not. It wasn't just the Pope: contraception was still widely condemned, even within marriage. Guilt feelings, among Protestants as well as Catholics, required some other minority onto which to project that sense of guilt. Gays and lesbians became the new victims of public disapproval.

I am of course simplifying. Much else was going on as well. But in historical perspective, our current agonisings about sex can be seen as the dying embers of an ancient firestorm. Once, a long time ago, there were substantial Christian reasons, rooted in the commitment to equality, for challenging normal patterns of sexuality. Those reasons have now been forgotten. What replaced them was a church hierarchy that promoted abstinence as a virtue in itself. A clerical culture expressed a generalised discouragement of sex in rules which were probably always widely disobeyed. Step by step, over time, the denunciations of one sex act after another got abandoned.

Who are the real traditionalists?

The opponents of gay marriage are defending the long-held role of religious leaders in setting rules for morally acceptable sexual activity. They are doing it very selectively, a pale image of what went before – but still, it is a recognisable part of the tradition.

Today, though, most people don't care. It is likely that the focus on sexual ethics by church leaders is the most influential reason for the collapse, over the last century, of the moral authority of the churches. Public opinion prefers a greater toleration of a range of different sexual practices. As more people have become more confident about their sexuality, in all its diverse forms, they cannot see why church leaders are so hung up on them.

On the other hand, if we understand that whole tradition – the 'sex-negative' tradition, in Bullough's language – as a product of the unequal, exploitative marriage practices of ancient Rome – maybe the equivalent response for today would be something like *equal marriage*. In this sense the [Campaign for Equal Marriage](#) can perhaps claim to be a true representative of what the early Christians believed in.

Reflecting on that whole history of church teaching about sexual ethics, one cannot help noticing that the changes since the early 1960s have been remarkably fast. I suspect this means three things. Firstly, the changes have been much needed. Secondly, younger people find it hard to understand why their parents and grandparents behaved as they did. Thirdly, we are left with much unfinished business.

A century ago, there was a clearly understood ethical tradition about sex: it was only for childbearing within marriage. That tradition was sanctioned by a widely accepted moral authority, the Christian churches.

Now, there is no clearly understood ethical system. If any principle is emerging as a criterion of acceptable sex, it is simply consent between the parties. In the process, the moral authority of the churches has collapsed. So far, nothing has replaced it.

As long as the ecclesiastical leadership continues to tear itself apart over gay marriage, the general public cannot forget why the churches are no longer seen as a moral authority.

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