

UNIT 3B: PASTORAL AND ASCETICAL THEOLOGY

79: Gender and Sexuality

1. Introduction: Facing the Issue

Christian views on gender and sexuality differ greatly at this time; and the opposing views are strongly held. Some individuals and Christian denominations believe strongly that homosexuality is always a sin; and, therefore, its full physical expression should never be permitted. Others believe that homosexuality is almost entirely based on genes, that individuals are “made that way;” and, therefore, should be permitted and encouraged to express their sexuality. Many other Christians are not sure how to reconcile these two approaches to homosexuality or what attitude to take to sexual promiscuity. What is an appropriate Orthodox perspective?

Four different issues arise: (1) What are the contemporary attitudes to sexuality among both Christians and non-Christians in the United Kingdom at this time? (2) What is the present scientific understanding of homosexuality? (3) What are the Biblical guidelines and the Tradition of the Church? and (4) What spiritual principles are relevant to sexuality itself?

2. Contemporary Attitudes to Sexuality in the United Kingdom

According to the Office of National Statistics (ONS), in 2015 more than 1,100,000 people 1.7% of the total population of the United Kingdom, identified themselves as gay, lesbian or bisexual.¹ Extensive data from the Integrated Household Survey from January to December 2014 showed certain differences between heterosexual and gay people that were to be expected, e.g. that the highest percentage of gay people (2.6%) live in London and that around 2.6% of those aged 16 to 24 identified themselves as lesbian, gay or bisexual (LGB), but only 0.6% of those aged 65 and over identified themselves as LGBTQ. However, certain comparative data is

¹ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/search?q=gay>

somewhat unexpected: 2.1% of adults in managerial and professional occupation identified themselves as LGBTQ, while only 1.3% in intermediate occupations and 1.4% in routine and manual occupations viewed themselves as LGB. Furthermore, twice as many men (1.5%) identified themselves as gay compared to 0.7% of women who saw themselves as gay or lesbian. However, in contrast more than twice as many women (0.7%) identified themselves as bisexual compared to men (0.3%). An earlier Integrated Household Survey indicated that 49% of gay people worked in managerial or professional occupations, compared to 30% of the heterosexual or “straight” population; 38% of the gay population have degrees compared to 22% of the heterosexual population; and, intriguingly, 66% of gay people considered themselves as “religious” compared to 80% of the heterosexual population.²

The United Kingdom Government seeks to protect the civil rights of same-sex couples through having their relationships legally recognised as “civil partnerships”³ and also in same sex marriage contracts with or without a religious context. In addition, the Government is also concerned with protecting the rights of the 4 million couples who are co-habiting in England and Wales. This is not surprising because in the whole of the United Kingdom, there are more than 10 million people who either consider themselves homosexual or are living together with a partner of the opposite sex—that is more than one-fifth of the 50 million people living in the UK who are age 15 and above. Furthermore, just under one-third of live births in England and Wales in 2014 were to cohabiting couples, while the proportion of UK families with dependent children that are now cohabiting couple families is now 15%.⁴ Cohabitation is the fastest growing relationship in the UK.

² Data available from ONS at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/search?q=Integrated+household+survey>

³ See <https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/family/>.

⁴ A February 2016 overview of the 64.6 million people living in the UK in 2014 indicates that nearly 19% of the population were under 16, with nearly 18% 65 and over. However, it has been estimated that by 2039 nearly 18% of the population will be under 16, but the percentage of the population 65 and over will have increased to 24.3%.

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/articles/overviewoftheukpopulation/february2016>. With reference to cohabitation see: <http://www.cpc.ac.uk/publications/Cohabitation%20trends%20and%20patterns%20in%20the%20UK.pdf> and http://www.familylaw.co.uk/news_and_comment/cohabitation-remains-fastest-growing-relationship-in-uk#.WKItJm-LTZ4 .

Civitas, a British educational charity that seeks the renewal of civil society, recognises the importance of cohabitation, as the percentage of single women who lived with a man before getting married has increased from only 5% in the mid-1960s to 70% in the 1990s, to the extent that more than 70% of couples now cohabit before marriage in the United Kingdom.⁵ However, *Civitas* also stresses the fragility of cohabiting relationships and, surprisingly, that “the more often and the longer that men and women cohabit, the more likely they are to divorce later.” Unsurprisingly, “both men and women in cohabiting relationships are more likely to be unfaithful to their partners than married people.”⁶

What has been the response of Christians to this contemporary “clubbing” and “pubbing” scene? It is difficult to estimate the extent to which either homosexuality or cohabitation is prominent within any particular Christian denomination, because, understandably, Christians are reticent to invite conflict with other Christians and with their pastors. However, Dr Michael S. Northcott, Reader in Christian Ethics at the University of Edinburgh, was essentially correct in 2004 when he suggested that: “The Church has mostly stuck to the view that true marriage happens only between those who are legally wed, whether before a priest or in a registry office”⁷ This view would certainly apply to the Orthodox Church in the United Kingdom today, but not to all Christian groups. However, whether this Orthodox approach is pastorally sustainable is a question that is considered in the final section of this lecture.

⁵ “The Facts behind Cohabitation” at: <http://civitas.org.uk/content/files/cohabitation.pdf> and Michael S. Northcott, “Sharing Bed and Board,” *Church Times*, 2 July 2004.

⁶ In considering the reality of a cohabiting relationship, one respondent, Wendy, commented: “I was wrong and I know it. All that stuff about freedom and independent are empty words...It did offer convenience and freedom all right, but only for Jim. De facto relations as an arrangement works for the males and not for us...After six months I could realise how this relationship was putting me deeper into insecurity and exploitation. I was investing my time and effort looking after him, I was neglecting my career, and had nothing in return, except that I could leave him at any time, which for me was far from a privilege...This is not a reward for our contribution to our families but an easy escape for males...Living in this arrangement offers a lot of freedom to one partner to exploit the other.”

⁷ *Church Times*, 2 July 2004.

3. What is the Present Scientific Understanding of Homosexuality?

The debate about whether homosexuality is biologically driven has not been resolved, in part because both those who are homosexual themselves (or view the homosexual lifestyle favourably), as well as those who are strongly opposed to homosexuality, insist vehemently that the biological evidence strongly supports their perspective. Homosexuality is a complex issue; and although there is a small genetic contribution, it is questionable whether any behaviour is predetermined by birth. As Norman Doidge suggests in *The Brain That Changes Itself: Stories of Personal Triumph from the Frontiers of Brain Science*: “the human libido is not a hardwired, invariable biological urge but can be curiously fickle, easily altered by our psychology and the history of our sexual encounters.”⁸

A good place to examine the existing scientific evidence about homosexuality is the website for *My Genes Made Me Do It: A Scientific Look at Sexual Orientation* by the New Zealand biochemist, Dr Neil Whitehead and his wife, the writer Briar Whitehead.⁹ The Whiteheads consider a large number of scientific studies and regularly update their website, so there is considerable evidence for their firm conclusion that: “Although gay activism sought to use some of these findings to argue homosexuality is biologically ingrained, the most that can be said scientifically about them [i.e. these studies] is that IF any differences exist they are probably the result of homosexual behaviour rather than the cause of it.”¹⁰ This view is in keeping with the ideas of Norman Doidge and other brain scientists which lead the Whiteheads to conclude that: “It is clear now that no-one is stuck

⁸ New York: Penguin, 2008, p. 95.

⁹ www.mygenes.co.nz . A new edition of this work, *My Genes Made Me Do It: A Scientific Look at Sexual Orientation* (Shreveport, LA: Huntington House, 2016) is available from the website. The division of popular opinion about homosexuality on www.amazon.co.uk is indicated by the nine book reviews from readers, four of which give the book five stars and four of which give the book one star, leading to a misleading evaluation as a three-star book. The book reviews are very interesting and well worth reading, but the regularly updated website is a better source than popular opinion.

¹⁰ Emphasis in original.

with the type of brain they were born with. Our assumption now should be: change is possible in many behaviours – sexual orientation not excluded—and extraordinary effort will produce extraordinary change.” With respect to homosexuality the Whiteheads note on their website:

Huge amounts of impartial scientific evidence now make it abundantly clear that homosexuality is not biologically hard-wired and that change is possible. The burden of proof now lies on those who advocate homosexuality is biologically imprinted. Sexuality is fluid. The brain is plastic. There are now more people alive today who used to be gay than there are practicing gay people.

Yet, the present “politically correct view” is that homosexuality must be caused by genetic factors. However, as the Whiteheads explain, the studies about what happens to twins, often cited by gay activists, have been misinterpreted because of a failure to recognise that there is a significant difference between those identical twins who have shared a single placenta and other twins.¹¹ The whole idea of a particular viewpoint being “politically correct” is highly fickle and easily subject to change.¹² It is much better to stick to the science.

However, genes are not the only consideration; and homosexual orientation is to be distinguished from homosexual behaviour. In a submission to the Church of England on this matter the Royal College of Psychiatrists eloquently summarised the current scientific consensus on sexual orientation:

Despite almost a century of psychoanalytic and psychological speculation,

¹¹ www.mygenes.co.nz/kaminsky.html

¹² The Whiteheads note that the brain of young person is particularly immature and “is like a computer which is constantly reprogramming itself....The maturation of the brain happens in many cycles of neuronal growth and pruning. The last of these cycles is in the early twenties...One consequence of this is the important lesson, *Don't take too much notice of assertions about sexual orientation in adolescence*. Change is still happening. For any adolescent reading this—don't prematurely label yourself; you may well change!” By contrast, in the March 2011 issue of *Vogue*, Lady Gaga wrote and sang the highly popular song, “Born this Way” which was called by Elton John “the most gay song ever written.” The pull of the popular media is considerably greater than scientifically-grounded voices such as the Whiteheads.

there is no substantive evidence to support the suggestion that the nature of parenting or early childhood experiences play any role in the formation of a person's fundamental heterosexual or homosexual orientation. It would appear that sexual orientation is biological in nature, determined by a complex interplay of genetic factors and the early uterine environment. Sexual orientation is therefore not a choice, though sexual behaviour clearly is."¹³

Notwithstanding the plasticity of the brain and fluidity across the spectrum of human sexuality in many individuals, there remains a more embedded expression of homosexuality amongst those who never have had any memory of desire for the opposite sex, or confessed ambiguity in those desires, but who consistently and from an early age have experienced same sex inclinations.¹⁴ The reference in the Royal College of Psychiatrists report to the "early uterine environment" may shed some light on this phenomenon. Research by Garcia-Falgueras and Swaab (2010) has shown that there appears to be a connection between levels of testosterone in the womb before birth and the incidence of this more embedded form of homosexuality.¹⁵ They conclude from their research that: "the direct action of testosterone on the developing brain in boys and the lack of such action on the developing brain in girls are crucial factors in the development of male and female gender identity and sexual orientation . . ." ¹⁶ This being the case it is clear that we need to differentiate between those individuals whose sexuality is fluid and who may, over a long period, "migrate" to a more exclusive proclivity for the same sex or opposite sex (or indeed both) and those others whose sexual orientation is fixed at birth, not perhaps only by genes but by the science of how those genes are

¹³ Royal College of Psychiatrist's Submission to the Church of England's Listening Exercise on Human Sexuality. (October 2007). See <http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/workinpsychiatry/specialinterestgroups/gaylesbian/submissiontothecofe.aspx>

¹⁴ http://www.camh.net/Publications/Resources_for_Professionals/ARQ2/arg2_question_a2.html

¹⁵ Garcia-Falgueras A, Swaab DF (2010), "Sexual Hormones and the Brain: An Essential Alliance for Sexual Identity and Sexual Orientation".

Endocrine Development 17: 22-35. doi:10.1159/000262525. PMID 19955753. "There is no indication that social environment after birth has an effect on gender identity or sexual orientation."

¹⁶ Op. cit. p. 26

switched on and off (epigenetics) and hormonal factors in utero. There are also evolutionary questions to consider on whether or not there are adaptive advantages conferred by homosexuality on social behaviours.¹⁷ Consequently, when the Church addresses these issues, the complexity and diversity of human sexuality will necessarily lead to nuanced and pastorally sensitive responses to the differing needs and backgrounds of each person in relation to both nature and nurture.

The importance of a nuanced and pastorally sensitive response from the Church and from Christians to each person is of particular importance in considering transgender and intersex issues. The abbreviation LGBTI is often used for “lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex.” The word “transgender” refers to a person whose awareness of personal identity and gender does not correspond with their birth sex, with the possibility that this gender transition has been linked to hormone treatment or a surgical procedure. It should be noted that those who consider themselves as transgender make a distinction between “gender identity” and “sexual identity:” “Gender identity and transgender are different from sexual identity and lesbian, gay and bisexual. Sexual identity is about who you are attracted to; gender identity is about how you identify as male or female.”¹⁸ The word “intersex” refers to persons who are born with “both male and female anatomy, with ovarian and testicular tissue, and genitals that could belong to either a boy or a girl;” and these “at least 40 congenital variations [are] known collectively as disorders of sexual development (DSD), or intersex traits.”¹⁹

These are complex psychosexual, psychosomatic and, sometimes, purely biological issues. Neither society nor the Church has yet fully explored the ramifications of ongoing and, frankly, fluid scientific research. Tentatively we might say that the position at the margins is clearer. By this is meant that the Church repudiates gender identity as a personal lifestyle choice on the one hand while accepting the

¹⁷ See <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-26089486> “The Evolutionary Puzzle of Homosexuality.”

¹⁸ See the website of “Belong to” at <http://www.belongto.org/group.aspx?contentid=2918> .

¹⁹ See <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jul/02/male-and-female-what-is-it-like-to-be-intersex>

biological reality of DDS and intersex traits on the other. The territory in between, commonly called gender dysphoria, is a complex landscape and the very least the Church can do is offer pastoral support and non-judgemental counselling for those who seek it in conjunction with the services of qualified health professionals. However, on the basis that “hard cases make bad law” the Church sees no reason to revise its own witness to normative gender identity, sex and sexual behaviour. Economy can and should be exercised in relation to atypical cases. The Church cares for individual human persons, not classes or groups.

We shall now attempt to look at the full breadth of the Scriptures and Church Tradition in relation to human gender and sexuality, exploring how this might be applied in the light of contemporary scientific research.

4. Biblical Guidelines and the Tradition of the Church

There can be no doubt that Scripture and the Fathers unequivocally condemn homosexual behaviour as sinful. As the [Appendix](#) resources amply demonstrate, any attempt to soften the impact of this teaching goes against the clear teaching of these texts. So, the attempts to narrow St Paul’s focus in Romans to pederasty through the re-interpretation of the Sodomite passages in Genesis as a reference to the violation of hospitality, as well as suggesting that prohibitions of the Levitical code refers primarily to fertility, both fall wide of the mark. It remains a simple fact of history and theology that monotheism has remained strongly intolerant of homosexual behaviour, even, sadly and shamefully, persecutory at times, in all but the most marginal of witnesses until the present day.

Exactly the same verdict, of course, is made against fornication (*porneia* in Matthew 19:9) which also, therefore, rules out pre-marital heterosexual behaviour. Homosexual and heterosexual sex outside of marriage both fall under the heading of promiscuity, although with same sex behaviour there is the added issue of its standing in the order of nature. Contemporary western societies have sharply distinguished sexual relations from procreation on the basis that sexuality is not

exhausted by reproduction and reproductive capacity but rather includes issues of bonding and union in love between persons. It has become more difficult, therefore, for the Church's traditional stance on same sex relations to be intelligible to many in western cultures. A huge gap has widened between these contemporary assumptions and religious legacies, not just in Christianity either. Markedly, in this respect, St Paul sees same sex genital relations as arising from idolatry although he has in mind here a much wider issue of descent of humankind occasioned by its loss of communion with God and the confusion of the Uncreated with the created. (Romans 1:22-27). It is doubtful whether anyone outside the Church today understands let alone accepts this teaching.

A second difficulty for the Church in relation to contemporary mores concerns how to deal with the issue of irregular or, more bluntly, sinful sexual activity within the membership of the Church itself. No double standard should apply here of course, but this does happen ... Confessors can, at times, turn a blind eye to the "indiscretions" of young heterosexual males or at least make preferential allowances for this group. The standard pastoral approach of the Orthodox Church, however, follows its traditional teaching as adumbrated in the following section. The lecture will then conclude with an account of a more nuanced and accepting approach which a significant minority of clergy seem to advocate without (for understandable reasons) being totally open and honest about this. First, we consider the traditional approach which remains normative in the Orthodox Church.

5. Spiritual Principles Relevant to Contemporary Sexuality

There are a number of significant spiritual principles that can empower Orthodox Christians to live their sexuality in a manner that draws them closer to God:

1. Chastity

Both the Old and New Testaments and the Tradition of the Orthodox Church have emphasised the importance of chastity, neatly defined by Patrick Riley as "the

confinement of deliberate genital activity to that shared by husband and wife.”²⁰ Dr Riley’s approach is based on “the conviction that marriage and marital fidelity are necessary preservatives of every society, and an indispensable means of rescuing our own.”²¹ His conviction about the importance of marriage and marital fidelity is grounded in the awareness that: “the family given us by marriage is the first school of culture: it is the native environment in which the accumulated discipline, wisdom, knowledge, and arts of the larger society are first handed down from one generation to the next.” Thus for Riley, and also for Orthodox Christians with their rich cultural heritage, sexuality is “a civilizing force in society” in two senses—chastity creates the conditions in which culture grounded in the family thrives; and chastity “tames the sexual drive, described by Plato in the opening pages of *The Republic* as ‘a mad and savage master.’”

The struggle to maintain chastity in the secularised culture of the West which has grown out of the Enlightenment has been exacerbated by an excessive pursuit of liberty—“perfection of the power to choose freely.”²² Just as Western culture has forgotten its history in the building of “The Great Secular Project,” in our assumption that saints “descend from heaven in pretty decorated boxes” we forget the reality that saints have struggled with their own sexuality in their local situations and their own feelings.²³ As Metropolitan Kallistos has pointed out: “The Orthodox faith is not abstract but personal. It is concerned, not with general principles or with a theoretical code of morality, but with the salvation of unique and particular persons created in the divine image.”²⁴

²⁰ *Civilizing Sex: On Chastity and the Common Good* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000), p. 7.

²¹ p. xi. The remaining quotations in this paragraph are also from Riley, p. xi-xii.

²² The definition of liberty is taken from Riley, p. xiii. However, Riley sees chastity and liberty as part of a unity; and this is not helpful in the context of sexuality, because the excessive emphasis upon sexuality has grown up in large part because of the excessive emphasis upon personal liberty.

²³ Father Gregory Hallam, “Remembering the Holy,” *Cornerstone*, Number 75, Spring 2011 [published by the Antiochian Orthodox Deanery of the United Kingdom and Ireland], pp. 1-2. Father Gregory’s article refers solely to culture, but the link between forgetting culture and forgetting sexuality is relevant.

²⁴ Metropolitan Kallistos, “Foreword” of David and Mary Ford, *Marriage as a Path to Holiness: Lives of Married Saints* (South Canaan, PA: St Tikhon’s Seminary Press, 1999). p. ix.

2. The Salvation of the Person

The stress that Metropolitan Kallistos places upon “unique and particular persons” applies to every human being in every situation, because we are all “created in the divine image.”²⁵ In a sexual context, many of the situations into which both Christians and non-Christians manage to entangle themselves are far from holy, posing significant challenges to their pastors (if any), their partners and themselves. Yet the vision of St. Symeon, the New Theologian, writing in the eleventh century remains a guiding light for us today: “In every situation, whatever the work or task involved, it is the life lived for God and according to God that is wholly blessed.”²⁶ Thus both the pastor and the person living out a personal sexuality are confronted with the same question: How should the expression of sexuality be linked to salvation – how can my personal sexuality be wholly blessed? That question involves not only the choice of whether to live a monastic life, a single life in the world, or to take a partner for life with whom to seek salvation together, but also the personal choices taken every day about how to express or control one’s sexual behaviours, as well as choices that pastors make about advising persons in irregular sexual liaisons.

3. Developing Relevant Contemporary Guidelines on Sexuality

The theological emphasis of Orthodox Christianity upon both chastity and the salvation of the person is *sine qua non*—that is, absolutely essential for the integration of one’s sexuality into one’s spirituality. However, how a Christian or a pastor should confront the sexual lifestyles in contemporary Western culture is more problematic. Each Christian denomination has struggled to develop relevant rules or guidelines for its members. Because of the uniqueness of each human person, “it has never been the [Orthodox] Church’s practice to give moral guidance by issuing standard formulas claiming universal validity on questions which actually require a personal act of conscience.”²⁷ For example, while not encouraging

²⁵ Metropolitan Kallistos, p. xi in *Marriage As a Path to Holiness*, p. xi.

²⁶ *Chapters iii*, 65; cited by Metropolitan Kallistos, p. xi.

²⁷ Father John Meyendorff, *Marriage: An Orthodox Perspective* [Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1984], p. 62.

contraceptive practices, the Orthodox Church within many of its jurisdictions has adopted the perspective that each married couple has the right to decide for themselves to the best of their ability when is the appropriate time to have a child and to what extent contraception is appropriate. This is not usurping the power of God to create life, but rather acknowledging that God-given free will can be exercised responsibly.

For married couples, the Orthodox approach to sexuality rests upon a fulcrum that balances sexual intercourse and sexual abstinence as equally important attributes. All married couples are asked to abstain not only from meat, fish, eggs, dairy products, oil and alcoholic drink each Wednesday and Friday, but also from sexual intercourse. That same insistence on sexual abstinence also applies from midnight of the evening before receiving Holy Communion, as well as throughout the whole of Lent, Advent, the Apostle's Fast and the Dormition Fast—almost half the entire year. Given the appropriate reticence of Orthodox Christians to discuss their sexual practices in marriage it is difficult to know to what extent these guidelines are observed. It may well be that these monastically influenced guidelines are more an ideal that can be achieved by some, rather than a reality that is consistently experienced by many couples.

For those who choose not to marry, their confrontation with the largely amoral sexual culture is severe, unless they choose to enter a monastery or convent. A situation may arise in which a man and a woman are drawn to have sexual intercourse but have not made the decision to marry, or a particular person may be drawn to a same sex relationship. Both of these situations would be viewed as sexually promiscuous within the traditional Orthodox guidelines on sexuality; however, every person grows in their understanding of life and their understanding of God's will for them. The Orthodox pastor is confronted with the issue of how to guide such persons to a deeper understanding of the Orthodox Christian life without communicating a condemnation of their prior decisions about exercising their sexuality. The task of how best to promote the salvation of every person whom

one's life touches is a challenge not only for a pastor but for all Orthodox Christians. Nonetheless, according to Orthodox Church teaching and practice, sexual abstinence is enjoined on *all* persons outside of heterosexual Christian marriage and if that means indefinite celibacy for those who choose to remain in the single state, gay or straight, then that must be their way of serving God.

In respect of homosexuality, however, is this all that can be said for Orthodox teaching and practice? There are two answers to that question. The first is uncontroversial to all except those who are ignorant of Orthodoxy's historical and pastoral approach to same sex relations and who may have unwittingly and indifferently taken their views from Catholic or Protestant sources. The second is highly controversial and marginal; we might even add 'grossly offensive and totally unacceptable' for most, if not the overwhelming majority, of the Orthodox faithful and their pastors. An explanation of this position here should not be taken in any way as an endorsement of this approach as it remains contrary to Orthodox Christian teaching (although its support amongst some clergy neither cannot nor should not be overlooked or discounted).

The first uncontroversial response is that the Orthodox Church has absolutely no problem with two men or two women loving each other, and this includes intimacy and affection but NOT a sexual expression of that love—to be specific, mutual genital excitation. This kind of love is not uncommon in the Scriptures and the Tradition of the Church, nor is it rare today. We may speak in this connection of the love of between David and Jonathan, Naomi and Ruth, or of Christ himself and his disciples, (particularly the “beloved disciple,” St. John and St. Peter) and the love of the two holy soldier martyrs, Sergius and Bacchus. Indeed we could and should extend this to our Lord's LOVE for each and every one of us, male and female alike!

This affection, physical, emotional, spiritual, has, however, become extremely problematic in the post-Puritan situation of the contemporary West where all

intimate relations have become sexualised. Intimacy without sharing a bed has now become all but impossible to envision; and this has had disastrous social and personal consequences for Western culture. We apologise to strangers whom we unwittingly brush past on the street, but some of us apparently have no problem jumping into bed with those self-same strangers after one or two drinks (or more) on a Saturday night. In the Middle East and elsewhere, however, physical affection within deep same sex friendships is utterly “normal” and not at all “gay” in appearance or reality. One of the authors of this lecture has seen this at first hand and it is an enormously touching and liberating thing to witness—this preservation of a healthy normal deep same sex friendship and love. As Father Thomas Hopko explains concerning this love:

Christian history, beginning with the Bible, demonstrates without exception that saints always come in clusters. Most of them have holy parents. All have spiritual fathers, mothers, sisters and brothers with whom they share their lives and struggles in the most intimate and candid ways, on the deepest levels. They also have intense and intimate friendships with persons of both sexes.²⁸

In the Middle Ages in the Balkans it was not unknown for such deep same sex friendships to be blessed with a service in church,²⁹ but contrary to the conclusions of John Boswell³⁰ and others who have carried out research on this matter, this was definitely NOT, by intention at least, an Orthodox “gay marriage.” (The rite may have been suppressed, however, on account of its occasional misuse).

One Orthodox bishop at a conference in 2004 publicly endorsed the propriety of such same sex friendships: loving, intimate and affectionate yet **not sexual**. He said that this was the only way that the Orthodox Church could deal with the

²⁸ Fr. Thomas Hopko, *Christian Faith and Same Sex Attraction- Eastern Orthodox Reflections* (Chesterton, IN: Conciliar Press [now Ancient Faith Press], 2006 pp. 69-70.

²⁹ Medieval Sourcebook: Two Versions of the Adelphopoia Rite,
<http://www2.kenyon.edu/projects/margin/rites.htm>

³⁰ John Boswell, *The Marriage of Likeness - Same Sex Unions in Pre-Modern Europe* (London: Harper Collins, 1995]

unfortunate consequences of disallowing ALL same sex relations through the assumption that these would necessarily or inevitably be sexually expressed. He could even countenance two gay or lesbian people living together but without sharing a bed. The outright cynicism (or sober realism?) with which this contribution was met by some conference participants may reflect some of the issues we have in our society concerning intimacy of any kind of a non-sexual nature.

Finally, what is this “highly controversial and marginal (position), ‘grossly offensive and totally unacceptable’ for most, if not the overwhelming majority, of the Orthodox faithful and their pastors”? It is simply this: that some Orthodox clergy, at great personal risk to the security of their own ministries, operate a “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy for committed, monogamous, sexually active gay couples in the congregations that they serve. They do this on the grounds that they believe that science has now granted a much better understanding of sexuality, both its provenance and diversity, in the human and the animal worlds. They hold that the Church should not penalise let alone discriminate against or, God forbid, hate those whose love may not as yet still fully speak its name in our churches. They regard universally applicable mandatory life-long celibacy as just as unrealistic for homosexuals as it is for heterosexuals and consider that the Church should not discriminate between the loving unions of either. Nonetheless, as we have observed, this minority marginal view does not at all represent Orthodox Church teaching on gender and sexual relations which remains the same—namely that sex is for the union of a man and a woman in marriage and in no other context.

However, the Orthodox Church does need to confront what Philip Sherrard has termed “negative and even suicidal asceticism,” as well as the uncomfortable reality that “lust is itself a form of love detached from its spiritual source.”³¹ For both women and men, Sherrard’s vision of healthy sexuality is challenging, but achievable:

³¹ Philip Sherrard, *Christianity and Eros: Essays on the Theme of Sexual Love* (Limni, Evia, Greece: Denise Harvey, 1976), p. 48.

To be redeemed and hallowed [sexual energy] has to be linked once more to its [spiritual] source. It has to become what it really is. This can never happen if it is not allowed to happen. If it is continually compelled into outer darkness, it can only fester and breed ever more deformed creatures after his own distorted image: Caliban begetting Calibans. It can never happen unless man takes on himself the whole of his incarnate self and is willing to know and experience deeply within himself the reality of his sexual nature and so of his body. [Each] [m]an must start from where he is and with what he is capable of experiencing and grow from that.³²

In an Orthodox perspective, homosexuality itself can be looked upon as “Caliban begetting Calibans.” As Sherrard insists, his forthright consideration of sexuality is grounded in a bold awareness that the integration of sexuality and spirituality in any human being may not be able to “be achieved without the highest degree of chastity ... and certainly cannot be achieved without the highest degree of self-control.”³³ However, in contemporary society there may well be situations, especially homosexuality and cohabitation, when the quotation from Friedrich Nietzsche with which Sherrard begins his essays on the theme of sexual love is disturbingly insightful: “Christianity gave Eros, the god of love, poison to drink; he did not die of it, it is true, but he degenerated to vice.”

³² Sherrard, p. 48. It should be noted that Sherrard does not consider or condone homosexuality in these essays.

³³ Sherrard, p. 49,

APPENDIX: Homosexuality in Scripture and Tradition

Biblical Texts

Genesis 19:5-8

“And they called to Lot and said to him, ‘Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us that we may know them carnally.’ So Lot went out to them through the doorway, shut the door behind him, and said, ‘Please, my brethren, do not do so wickedly! See now, I have two daughters who have not known a man; please, let me bring them out to you, and you may do to them as you wish; only do nothing to these men, since this is the reason they have come under the shadow of my roof.’”

Leviticus 18:22

“You shall not lie with a male as with a woman. It is an abomination.”

Romans 1:26-27

“Professing to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man—and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things. Therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts, to dishonour their bodies among themselves, who exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen. For this reason God gave them up to vile passions. For even their women exchanged the natural use for what is against nature. Likewise, also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust for one another, men with men committing what is shameful, and receiving in themselves the penalty of their error which was due.”

1 Corinthians 6:9, [cf. 1 Timothy 1:9-10] (KJV)

“Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate³⁴, nor abusers of themselves with mankind**.”

Jude 7

“... Sodom and Gomorrah, and the cities around them in a similar manner to these, having given themselves over to sexual immorality and gone after strange flesh, are set forth as an example, suffering the vengeance of eternal fire.”

Patristic Texts

Basil the Great

"He who is guilty of unseemliness with males will be under discipline for the same time as adulterers" (*Letters* 217:62 [A.D. 367]).

"If you [O, monk] are young in either body or mind, shun the companionship of other young men and avoid them as you would a flame. For through them the enemy has kindled the desires of many and then handed them over to eternal fire, hurling them into the vile pit of the five cities under the pretence of spiritual love ... At meals take a seat far from other young men. In lying down to sleep let not their clothes be near yours, but rather have an old man between you. When a young man converses with you, or sings psalms facing you, answer him with eyes cast down, lest perhaps by gazing at his face you receive a seed of desire sown by the enemy and reap sheaves of corruption and ruin. Whether in the house or in a place where there is no one to see your actions, be not found in his company under the pretence either of studying the divine oracles or of any other business whatsoever, however necessary.

(*The Renunciation of the World* A.D. 373).

John Chrysostom

"[The pagans] were addicted to the love of boys, and one of their wise men made a law that pederasty . . . should not be allowed to slaves, as if it was an honourable thing;

³⁴ ref: malakoi = soft, pliable ones, lit; arsenokoitai = word invented by St. Paul, difficult to translate ... etymology: men / bed. Not the usual word for homosexual = paiderasste]

and they had houses for this purpose, in which it was openly practiced. And if all that was done among them was related, it would be seen that they openly outraged nature, and there was none to restrain them. . . . As for their passion for boys, whom they called their *paedica*, it is not fit to be named"

(Homilies on Titus 5 [A.D. 390]).

"[Certain men in church] come in gazing about at the beauty of women; others curious about the blooming youth of boys. After this, do you not marvel that [lightning] bolts are not launched [from heaven], and all these things are not plucked up from their foundations? For worthy both of thunderbolts and hell are the things that are done; but God, who is long-suffering, and of great mercy, forbears awhile his wrath, calling you to repentance and amendment" *(Homilies on Matthew 3:3 [A.D. 391]).*

"All of these affections [in Rom. 1:26-27] . . . were vile, but chiefly the mad lust after males; for the soul is more the sufferer in sins, and more dishonoured than the body in diseases" *(Homilies on Romans 4 [A.D. 391]).*

"[The men] have done an insult to nature itself. And a yet more disgraceful thing than these is it, when even the women seek after these intercourses, who ought to have more shame than men" (ibid.).

"And sundry other books of the philosophers one may see full of this disease. But we do not therefore say that the thing was made lawful, but that they who received this law were pitiable, and objects for many tears. For these are treated in the same way as women that play the whore. Or rather their plight is more miserable. For in the case of the one the intercourse, even if lawless, is yet according to nature; but this is contrary both to law and nature. For even if there were no hell, and no punishment had been threatened, this would be worse than any punishment"

(ibid.).

Clement of Alexandria

"All honour to that king of the Scythians, whoever Anacharsis was, who shot with an arrow one of his subjects who imitated among the Scythians the mystery of the mother of the gods . . . condemning him as having become effeminate among the Greeks, and a teacher of the disease of effeminacy to the rest of the Scythians" (*Exhortation to the Greeks* 2 [A.D. 190]).

"In accordance with these remarks, conversation about deeds of wickedness is appropriately termed filthy [shameful] speaking, as talk about adultery and pederasty and the like" (*The Instructor* 6, ca. A.D. 193).

"The fate of the Sodomites was judgment to those who had done wrong, instruction to those who hear. The Sodomites having, through much luxury, fallen into uncleanness, practicing adultery shamelessly, and burning with insane love for boys; the All-seeing Word, whose notice those who commit impieties cannot escape, cast his eye on them. Nor did the sleepless guard of humanity observe their licentiousness in silence; but dissuading us from the imitation of them, and training us up to his own temperance, and falling on some sinners, lest lust being unavenged, should break loose from all the restraints of fear, ordered Sodom to be burned, pouring forth a little of the sagacious fire on licentiousness; lest lust, through want of punishment, should throw wide the gates to those that were rushing into voluptuousness. Accordingly, the just punishment of the Sodomites became to men an image of the salvation which is well calculated for men. For those who have not committed like sins with those who are punished, will never receive a like punishment" (ibid. 8).

Cyprian of Carthage

"[T]urn your looks to the abominations, not less to be deplored, of another kind of spectacle. . . . Men are emasculated, and all the pride and vigour of their sex is

feminised in the disgrace of their enervated body; and he is more pleasing there who has most completely broken down the man into the woman. He grows into praise by virtue of his crime; and the more he is degraded, the more skilful he is considered to be. Such a one is looked upon—oh shame!—and looked upon with pleasure. . . . Nor is there wanting authority for the enticing abomination . . . that Jupiter of theirs [is] not more supreme in dominion than in vice, inflamed with earthly love in the midst of his own thunders . . . now breaking forth by the help of birds to violate the purity of boys. And now put the question: Can he who looks upon such things be healthy-minded or modest? Men imitate the gods whom they adore, and to such miserable beings their crimes become their religion" (*Letters* 1:8 [A.D. 253]).

"Oh, if placed on that lofty watchtower, you could gaze into the secret places—if you could open the closed doors of sleeping chambers and recall their dark recesses to the perception of sight—you would behold things done by immodest persons which no chaste eye could look upon; you would see what even to see is a crime; you would see what people made brutes by the madness of vice deny that they have done, and yet hasten to do—men with frenzied lusts rushing upon men, doing things which afford no gratification even to those who do them" (*ibid.*, 1:9).

Eusebius of Caesarea

"[H]aving forbidden all unlawful marriage, and all unseemly practice, and the union of women with women and men with men, he [God] adds: 'Do not defile yourselves with any of these things; for in all these things the nations were defiled, which I will drive out before you. And the land was polluted, and I have recompensed [their] iniquity upon it, and the land is grieved with them that dwell upon it' [Lev. 18:24-25]" (*Proof of the Gospel* 4:10 [A.D. 319]).

Augustine

"[T]hose shameful acts against nature, such as were committed in Sodom, ought everywhere and always to be detested and punished. If all nations were to do such

things, they would be held guilty of the same crime by the law of God, which has not made men so that they should use one another in this way" (*Confessions* 3:8:15 [A.D. 400]).

The Apostolic Constitutions

"[Christians] abhor all unlawful mixtures, and that which is practiced by some contrary to nature, as wicked and impious" (*Apostolic Constitutions* 6:11 [A.D. 400]).