

## **Same-Sex Unions of Christians**

A.M.C. Waterman

St John's College, Winnipeg

### *The Authority of the Bible*

During the Middle Ages the Bible was the only authoritative source of knowledge for Christians. Earth was the fixed centre of the universe; and sun, moon, and other heavenly bodies revolved about it. The Greek philosopher, Aristarchus of Samos (c. 200 BC), had formulated a model that placed the sun at the centre with Earth revolving around it. But this was forgotten in the Middle Ages until revived by Copernicus (1473-1543). Now, it seems, we live on the surface of a globe among countless others moving in space. But the Church was slow to accept this doctrine. As late as 1633 Galileo was convicted by the Inquisition of heresy for accepting Copernican cosmology – 'which contradicts the sense of Holy Scripture'. The Protestant Reformers Luther, Melancthon and Calvin, for whom Holy Scripture was sacrosanct, were united in condemning Copernicus.

Eventually, after two centuries of persecution, the Church came round; and by 1835 all Galileo's works were removed from the Index of prohibited books. Anglicans were among the first to accept the new science. Francis Bacon defined scientific method in 1620, the astronomer Flamsteed (1646-1719) greatly increased our knowledge of the heavens, and Sir Isaac Newton (1642-1726) produced a mathematical working model of the universe. In England at any rate, it was understood that the Bible gives us no information about cosmology.

Until the early nineteenth century, however, it was still believed that we can learn the age of the earth from Scripture. In 1650 the eminent Anglican scholar James Ussher, Archbishop of Armagh, calculated that the earth was created on 23 October, 4004 BC. On this basis he produced a chronology of principle biblical events. His contemporaries were in near agreement. Kepler had estimated creation at 3992 BC; Newton at 4,000 BC. Ussher's chronology was regarded as authoritative. In the Diocese of Rupert's Land, Archbishop Ussher's chronology was still to be seen as late as the 1960s, printed in the margins of lectern bibles of some country churches. But geological discovery in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries of stratification and the identification and dating of fossils – summarised by Charles Lyell in 1830 – demonstrated that the earth was immeasurably older than six millennia. It is currently estimated to be about 4.5 billion years.

It was the seeming conflict between Geology and *Genesis* that led Richard Whately (1787-1863) to develop what has gradually become the Anglican understanding of the relation between 'religious' and 'scientific' knowledge. Whately, perhaps the most powerful Anglican thinker of the nineteenth century, is the only economist in history to have moved directly from a professorial chair in Political Economy (Oxford) to an Archbishopric (Dublin) without intervening stages. In Oxford at that time, Political Economy was viewed with alarm by many high-church divines who believed it was 'hostile to religion': by which they meant contrary to Scripture. But for Whately, 'It is not . . . truth of all kinds that the Bible was inspired to teach, but only such truth as tends to religious edification; and the Bible is consequently infallible as far as regards this, and this alone'. It is therefore an 'erroneous principle' to appeal 'to Revelation on questions . . . of science', for 'Scripture is not the test by which the conclusions of Science are to be tried.' Whately showed that Political Economy was methodologically cognate with 'the physical sciences'.\*

Whately's demarcation of scientific and religious knowledge was ahead of its time. For in the 1860s there was intense resistance to Darwin's theory of organic evolution, denounced by Cardinal Manning as 'a brutal philosophy – to wit, there is no God, and the ape is our Adam'. Even the Anglican 'Soapy Sam' Wilberforce, Bishop of Oxford, seemingly oblivious of Whately's doctrine, attacked the theory publically. But though Roman Catholics and many Protestant

Nonconformists continued to deny evolution, the Anglican intellectual elite quickly saw the point: and Darwin was duly buried in Westminster Abbey in 1882.

The Roman Church eventually came round too; and *Humani Generis* (1950) conceded that there is no ‘intrinsic conflict’ between Christianity and the theory of organic evolution. But many Protestant churches and sects, particularly in the USA, continue to be in denial and seek to forbid the teaching of evolution in schools. It has, however, been the glory of the Anglican Church since the seventeenth century to have based its doctrine on *Scripture, Tradition* and *Reason*. This truly Catholic understanding of Christian theology has allowed ‘Reason’ to play its part in accepting scientific discovery without reducing the importance of the other two principles. And it has made it possible for our Church – unlike many liberal-protestant bodies – to avoid throwing out the baby of Catholic doctrine with the bath-water of bad science. It is no accident therefore that Anglicans since the seventeenth century should have been among the first to welcome – in some cases to initiate – new science, whilst remaining theologically orthodox.

### *Homosexuality*

Until recently, homosexuality was regarded by almost all Christians as a voluntary disposition towards certain acts ruled out by the Bible, and its practice was condemned as sinful.

When the Roman Empire adopted Christianity in the Fourth Century the death penalty was decreed for homosexual acts. There was little change during the Middle Ages – although the Emperor Otto III, many high-ranking prelates, and very many members of religious houses, both male and female, were known to be openly homosexual. But the Abbess Hildegard von Bingen was told in a vision that a lesbian woman ‘takes up devilish ways’ and is condemned by God. St Thomas Aquinas was characteristically more subtle; but he considered homosexual acts to be ‘unnatural’ because they could not lead to conception, and therefore morally similar to heterosexual acts committed merely for pleasure rather than for procreation. The Lollards denounced clerical celibacy as a cause of sodomy.

But it was the Protestant Reformation, with its exaggerated and uncritical deference to Scripture, that fostered the assumption in Western Society that homosexuality is sinful and without

excuse. Calvin called homosexuality, 'that unnatural and filthy thing', the most serious of all sin. For Luther 'the vice of the sodomites is an unparalleled enormity . . . without a doubt it comes from the Devil'. This view persists among many Protestant bodies to this day, especially among those that describe themselves as 'evangelical'. The conservative Missouri Synod of the Lutheran church proclaims that 'Through his word, God teaches us very clearly that homosexuality is a sin'. In the USA, at any rate, this view is entertained by those many 'fundamentalist' churches and sects which also continue to deny evolution and resist its teaching in schools. Even in the Roman Catholic Church, in which a significant proportion of the clergy is known to be homosexual, there has been no fundamental doctrinal change. *Persona Humana* (1975) of Pope Paul VI declared that the Bible condemns homosexuality as depraved and 'intrinsically disordered'.

Here once again, we see a futile and misguided attempt by Christians to misuse the Bible to resist the growth of scientific knowledge. Homosexual behaviour in non-human species has been reported by biologists since 1900. Aristotle had observed it in certain birds in the fourth century BC. Before the 1990s, however, many scientists were under social pressure to suppress this evidence. But since that time homosexual behaviour of many different kinds has been discovered in virtually every species studied, from insects and reptiles to birds and mammals; including our nearest evolutionary kinsfolk the Bonobo apes: where the frequency of homosexual bonding of every possible variety is the highest of any primate species, including humans. On the face of it this evidence might seem to call in question the Darwinian theory of natural selection, which depends on the Malthusian assumption of fecundity constrained by resource scarcity. If homosexuals produce no offspring what use are they, and why do they survive? Current research is providing many possible answers, some of which are species-specific.

Homosexuality is therefore as 'natural' in humans, as it is in all other species. It is important to note that 'natural' in this sense – unlike that of Aquinas – does not mean 'right' or 'proper'. It simply means that which we may observe in animal 'Nature' by scientific observation; 'Nature' here understood as those aspects of His creation that God has made accessible for our inspection.

It is becoming clear that human sexuality is not restricted to binary male/female, male/male, and female/female relationships. It includes, for example, relationships among those who are bisexual, asexual and those in transition from one gender to another. The Church must be aware of

this in its teaching and pastoral work. But such examples are not relevant to my argument, which refers only to binary couples wishing to be joined in life-long, monogamous unions.

### *Holy Matrimony*

This ‘commonly called’ sacrament ‘was ordained for the procreation of children . . . to avoid fornication . . . (and) for the mutual society, help and comfort that the one ought to have of the other’. That the third of these is more important than the first appears from the fact that the same rite is used ‘where the woman is past child-bearing’. Marriage signifies ‘unto us the mystical union that is betwixt Christ and his Church’. Fornication – extra-marital sexual intercourse – has always been out of bounds for Christians. The service ends with the nuptial blessing: ‘Pour upon you the riches of his grace, sanctify and bless you, that ye may please him both in body and soul, and live together in holy love until your lives’ end’.

Until the early twentieth century the Anglican Church, like every other church in Christendom, assumed that sexual intercourse between husband and wife would normally create the possibility of pregnancy and ‘the procreation of children’: and that this was its only allowable purpose. All forms of deliberate birth-control – save abstinence or celibacy – were regarded as sinful. But Resolution 15 of the 1930 Lambeth Conference broke new ground.

Where there is clearly felt moral obligation to limit or avoid parenthood, the method must be decided on Christian principles . . . 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, provided that this is done in the light of the same Christian principles.

So there is more to sexual intercourse than ‘replenishing the earth’. ‘Reason’ suggests that it is also an expression of ‘the mutual society, help and comfort that the one ought to have of the other’. The Resolution was contested, but passed (193 for; 67 against). Pope Pius XI was provoked by this radical innovation to promulgate the encyclical *Casti Connubii* a few months later, which reprehended those ‘openly departing from the uninterrupted tradition’ who ‘recently have judged it

possible solemnly to declare another doctrine regarding this question' (CC 56). His condemnation of contraception was reaffirmed by Pope Paul VI in *Humanae Vitae* (1956); but most other Western churches eventually followed the Anglican lead.

However if Christians may lawfully engage in sexual intercourse, not to produce offspring but to express 'mutual society, help and comfort', this opens the door to a consideration of the needs of homosexual Christian couples, who cannot procreate. If they are not allowed to marry, their sexual intercourse, like that of unmarried heterosexual couples, is fornication. Thus in recent decades there has been a double standard in some Anglican dioceses which admit homosexuals to communion: fornication is forbidden to heterosexuals but tacitly allowed to homosexuals.

This is unjust and morally confused. For if we accept the scientific evidence that homosexuality is just as 'natural' as heterosexuality, there can be no ground for the Church to make any discrimination in its marital discipline. If homosexual Christian couples can 'live together in holy love' until their 'lives end', their union must be accepted, and governed by Canon Law in exactly the same way as unions of heterosexual Christians. As with them, their marriage signifies 'the mystical union that is betwixt Christ and his Church'. Either the Church must accept that the sexual orientation of its members is completely irrelevant to its marital discipline, or it must revert to the age-old condemnation of homosexuality as unnatural and its practice as sinful.

The latter approach was favoured by the 1998 Lambeth Conference. Resolution L.10 on 'Human Sexuality' rejected homosexual practices as 'incompatible with Scripture'; and was unable to 'advise the legitimising or blessing of same-sex unions' or 'ordaining those involved in same gender unions'. It is evident that these bishops of the Anglican Communion had not remembered or understood their great predecessor, Archbishop Whately's, critique of the use of Scripture to adjudicate scientific questions. In this they seem to have been confused: for there were no resolutions condemning Copernican cosmology, archaeology or Darwinian evolution. The most likely explanation of that anomaly is that the scientific evidence on the ubiquity of homosexuality had barely begun to appear by 1998.

There were no formal resolutions at the 2008 Lambeth Conference and the next conference will not be until 2020. Meanwhile, General Synod of the Anglican Church of Canada considered a

resolution in 2016 to amend the Marriage Canon to permit the solemnization of same-sex marriages. The Resolution received the necessary votes in all three houses; but by Canon Law was required to be ratified at a second reading in 2019. And on this occasion the Resolution failed to achieve the required two-thirds majority in the House of Bishops and was therefore defeated. One of the bishops who voted against same-sex marriage declared that ‘Scripture prevents me from doing what I want to do . . . if I don’t have Scripture, I have no authority to go on’.

Anglican authorities, from Richard Hooker (1554-1600) down to the current *Dictionary of the Church* published by the Episcopal Church in the U.S.A., could have reminded him that the teaching of our Church since the seventeenth century has been based on the ‘three-legged stool’ of Scripture, Tradition and Reason. Each one of these can only be understood in light of the other two. By means of the three the Anglican churches have constructed a unique *via media* between the seeming errors of Romanism on the one hand and of Protestantism on the other.

The use of Reason allows us to see that the knowledge of God which Scripture gives us cannot contradict the knowledge of His creation which science gives us. Homosexuality is as ‘natural’ as heterosexuality. If it appears to some that the Bible calls this in question, they stray into a domain in which Holy Scripture can have no authority. To the extent that the argument against homosexual unions is grounded in the claim that homosexuality is an ‘unnatural’ practice, that argument can have no scriptural basis.

\*For the intellectual history of Whately’s demarcation of religious from scientific knowledge see A. M. C. Waterman, *Revolution, Economics and Religion: Christian Political Economy 1798-1833* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991) chapter 5; and A. M. C. Waterman, *Political Economy and Christian Theology since the Enlightenment: Essays in Intellectual History*, (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave-Macmillan 2004) chapter 8.

I am grateful to all who have read and commented on earlier drafts, in particular to Geoffrey Brennan, Brett Cane, Allison Courey, Diarmaid MacCulloch, Murdith McLean and Ellen Waterman.