

Working Party on Human Sexuality

Methodist Church in Ireland
Symposium on Human Sexuality and Biblical Interpretation
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Rapporteur's Comments

I

This has been a long and interesting day, although the discussion and debate on this topic are very far from over.

I am grateful to the Working Party for its invitation to eavesdrop on today's proceedings; and I have been listening-in whilst wearing a number of different hats. Gillian Kingston has noted that I was one of two theological advisors to the Church of Ireland, your Covenant partner's, General Synod Select Committee on Human Sexuality in the Context of Christian Belief. The Select Committee has now concluded its work, and presented its final report to General Synod; along the way, the ecumenical scope of the issue under discussion was highlighted by the MCI's Dr Fergus O'Farrell joining the Select Committee, and Dean John Mann (chair of the C of I's Select Committee) attending meetings of the MCI's Working Party.

In recent decades, the issue of human sexuality has become a challenge both **in** and **between** many Christian churches, and **within** and **between** many of the Christian world communions. As an Anglican, I am both a member of, and a consultant to the Inter-Anglican Standing Commission on Unity, Faith and Order (IASCUFO). This commission was established in the fraught aftermath of recent developments in the Anglican Communion, to be a vehicle to ensure that what we said with one ecumenical partner was consonant with what was being said with others; and also to monitor developments within the Anglican Communion of Churches that might impact on issues of Faith and Order across the Communion. Membership of the Commission brings with it an acutely painful sense of how disputes over human sexuality are impacting on multiple aspects of Anglican identity, on our witness as churches and on our capacity to engage ecumenically.

And, as someone who teaches ecumenics, I am also aware of how much energy, both across the churches and interreligiously, is being consumed in highly polarizing debates on human sexuality at a global level. It is not simply the case that Christians disagree about whether or not certain sexualities are compatible with publicly-acknowledged roles in the churches – there is a

further polarization caused by the sheer cost of disagreement – in terms of the time and resources devoted to the issue of human sexuality. Some ecumenical dialogues are now *beginning* to focus on the different ways in which Christians and Christian churches make moral decisions, and debates over human sexuality will form the backdrop to those conversations. I am not persuaded that moral theology is the ideal place in which to focus attention on human sexuality – that honour, I think, probably belongs to theological anthropology (that is, theological reflection on the possibilities and limitations of being human), on which I comment later.

Your conversations today – and into the future – on human sexuality and scripture are important, and are connected with similar conversations happening elsewhere. The following reflections, therefore, are shaped by not only by my eavesdropping today, but by eavesdropping elsewhere too.

II

As Christians, we disagree about human sexuality.

We also disagree about many other things, without, however, going to war with one another. Clearly, for many of us, sexuality is not something we are prepared to address with a shrug of indifference. But accepting that we disagree is not the same as being indifferent to that disagreement; we disagree on something that we consider important, and on something concerning which many of us cannot see ourselves being persuaded otherwise.

Since our disagreement on human sexuality is highly visible, and since each participant in the debate draws inspiration from scripture, rather than devoting all our energies to defeating the other side (whichever side that is), would it not be wiser to find a more evangelical way in which to address our intractable divergence? As churches, we need to find places and ways in which to disagree; to find a way in which we, as a church, simply sit with disagreement between people whom we know to be deeply divided despite also being conscientious, holy, thoughtful and prepared to give an account of the hope that is in them.

Churches are used to presenting themselves (having been shaped, for the most part, in a most unecumenical age and environment) as being of one mind, clearly defined against other churches. An era more indebted to ecumenical engagement and dialogue inevitably places less emphasis on the need to define 'us' against 'them' (who 'they' are, of course, depends largely on where and when 'we' are). If, instead of presenting ourselves publicly as all singing from the same hymn sheet, what would be the missional

consequences of attending publicly – and as an intentional stance – to how we live with disagreement, tension and conflict?

We are presently living through the 50th anniversary of the deliberations of Vatican II, which provides an interesting visual aid to our understanding of how a church deliberates over how best to bring up-to-date its grasp of the faith once delivered to the saints. Sometimes Pope Paul VI is criticized for his anxiety not to alienate the minority of bishops at the Council who were deeply uncomfortable with being brought up-to-date and who believed that something central risked becoming displaced in the various reforms. It has been noted that the initial voting patterns amongst the bishops tended to diverge between two-thirds (conservative) and one third (much more conservative). The Pope's sensitivity to the concerns of the one-third often irritated the majority; but, to his great credit, Pope Paul was guided by an overriding awareness that securing a majority of votes and reaching a common mind in the church are not necessarily the same thing.

One of the best books ever written about the ecumenical movement is Ernest Lange's *And Yet it Moves*, which noted that the Christian ecumenical movement – rather than being a dewy-eyed quest for consensus – was actually much more about learning to stage conflict together in a Christian way. I think that Lange is correct: consensus is important, but conflict too has been a part of Christian identity from the very start.

Perhaps, ecumenically, we are beginning to see the emergence of a less-fixed emphasis on consensus. For example, in the Lutheran-Catholic agreement on the doctrine of Justification (which has also been received by the World Methodist Communion), one of the key aspects of the document is its notion of 'differentiated consensus'. Lutherans and Catholics have together stated what the doctrine of Justification means, *and* they have also acknowledged that they may read this agreed statement differently to one another. Being different and being divided are not necessarily the same thing.

As an Anglican, I am conscious that I belong to a church in a communion of churches that is not at ease with itself. One of the ways in which Anglicanism takes stock of itself is *via* the Lambeth Conference of Bishops: this takes place every ten years (except during World Wars, or when Justin Welby is Archbishop of Canterbury), and the resolutions of this gathering carry a moral authority rather than legislative force.

By design, the most recent conference in 2008 combined a retreat with Archbishop Rowan Williams together with a series of deliberative conversations – called the Indaba process – which had been proposed by the

Archbishop of Cape Town, Thabo Makgoba, as a South African alternative to the curiously confrontational Westminster Parliamentary procedures inherited by earlier Lambeth Conferences from Victorian Anglicanism. During a visit to Lambeth 2008, I spoke with one bishop who was greatly frustrated: as he looked around the other bishops, he reckoned that his 'side' had a majority but lacked any opportunity to advance its case. But there is far more to reaching a common mind in the church than securing a majority of votes among bishops.

Sometimes, we can develop an unhealthy desire to reach a decision, with the result that rather than simply sit with our disagreement, we make premature claims that must later be unlearned, perhaps by subsequent generations who will have lived with the consequences of our zeal to say something as quickly as possible. The Reformed/Presbyterian tradition has developed an approach from which we might learn, in the way in which its churches reach a decision when a particular issue presents the churches with the need to confront something that challenges the very integrity of the Christian faith. In recent times, the debate on the state policy of apartheid in South Africa furnished the Reformed with an issue that challenged the *status confessionis*: after due deliberation, an authentic profession of the Christian faith was deemed by the World Alliance of Reformed Churches to be incompatible with support for apartheid. And, in 1982, there were consequences for the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa for persisting in its belief that apartheid was sanctioned by both scripture and tradition. To date, however, the debate around human sexuality – in Anglicanism certainly – has lacked both the kind of wide-ranging deliberation and the structures that are needed for as fully participative a process as possible to identify how and why we have an issue of the nature of the *status confessionis*. And, in the Reformed view of *status confessionis*, the issues that provoke this kind of discussion are issues that come and go in the course of history. In the case of the Dutch Reformed Church, the internal and international debate helped the local church to rethink its theology, to rekindle its prophetic life and to accept that apartheid was a sin rather than an expression of the divine covenant with creation. And not every conflict may, in fact, be open to this way of dealing with the issues at stake.

[I might add that undue enthusiasm to reach a decision can sometimes be present almost unwittingly. In the case of the C of I's Select Committee, our remit was simply to facilitate conversations in the Church of Ireland concerning human sexuality: at various times in our deliberations, however, a number of committee members voiced their sense that our job was to recommend to the wider church that we should either reinterpret or retain church teaching. This was odd: our brief was to expand the conversation, not close it down. Moreover, it was striking that those who sometimes hoped for a

decision tended to narrow the options to either staying as we were, or changing our self-understanding on human sexuality. The option of deciding not to follow either of these, and to opt deliberately to remain together but in disagreement, never seemed to surface.]

The resolution-free Lambeth 2008 was largely in response to the fall-out from Lambeth 1998. At Lambeth 1998, a majority of bishops passed resolution 1.10, which is often reported as though it had simply condemned homosexual practice by Christians as being incompatible with scripture. Had that been the case, it would at least have been a clear decision. If one takes the trouble to read Resolution 1.10 – and many participants in the ongoing debates clearly have not – a far less clear picture emerges.

Resolution 1.10 is made up of 7 sub-resolutions, and these do not fit together coherently. The resolution commends the Conference working party's report on human sexuality to the churches for further study: this was a fairly brief but good report, in which the writers noted that – once again – the bishops in the working party had been unable to reach a common mind on the issue of homosexuality, and had listed some of the positions that were currently evident amongst the bishops. Yet, despite having commended a Report that acknowledged a conscientious internal diversity, the plenary session of the Lambeth Conference proceeded to demonstrate that lack of common mind through a vote, with a majority of bishops voting to affirm that homosexual practice is incompatible with scripture. A further element of Resolution 1.10 condemned any homophobic discrimination against gay people.

It is instructive to compare the discussion of human sexuality at Lambeth 1998, with the approach taken ten years before at the Lambeth Conference of 1988. In 1988, the bishops who penned the report on human sexuality had also signaled that they were not of one mind, and had indeed characterized Anglican attitudes and thinking on human sexuality as often exhibiting 'incoherence.' Had a vote been called, it is probable that an outcome similar to that of Lambeth 1998 might have resulted. The crucial point, however, is that in 1988 the bishops were content to acknowledge that they were not of one mind. In 1998, by contrast, although the bishops remained not of one mind, they were not prepared to remain so. An electoral majority ensured a certain kind of qualified normativity for the views of the majority of the bishops in 1998, leaving Anglicanism in the situation that it continues to face – we are not of one mind (for a variety of reasons), but one side has more bishops than the other. To put it mildly, this situation is far from ideal.

It is also worth noting that the Lambeth discussions on human sexuality in 1988 and 1998 occurred after multiple appeals, at previous Lambeth

Conferences, for a much greater engagement on the part of Anglicans with the study of scripture, and for a greater experience of scripture in the lives of the churches of the Anglican Communion. As I read these conference reports, I think of a wonderfully acerbic remark made by the Revd Martin Smyth, former Grand Master of the Orange Order – some people, he said, are great lovers of the bible, but not necessarily great readers of it. Over a period of some decades, the Lambeth bishops were becoming increasingly anxious that greater connections needed to be forged between the bible’s lovers and readers.

III

We disagree. *How* we disagree matters. In today’s discussions, two of our speakers used quite sharp language in delineating the positions they criticized. Despite the opportunities provided by intense disagreement, conflict within the church remains something that binds us together (we have no cause to disagree passionately with people who have nothing whatsoever to do with us). In expressing our disagreement with one another, it is important to resist becoming stuck in ‘a dialogue of the deaf’ – a phrase used by a letter-writer to the *Church of Ireland Gazette* – in which we fail completely to engage with those from whom we differ (and may even see our failure to connect with them as a virtue on our part).

If dialogue is *really* dialogue, then it presents us with a context where we actually learn something about another person that we could not learn by, say, looking them up on Google. We learn something real and new about them. And, since we are listening to what they say about us too, we probably learn something new and real about ourselves. That is why dialogue is so vital and so unsettling; it is also why ideologues of every shade view dialogue with grave suspicion. If we simply call one another names and misrepresent each other’s viewpoints, then real dialogue and transformation are frustrated. There are better ways in which to disagree.

One of the helpful elements in the workings of the C of I Select Committee was the scheme of inviting witnesses to speak with the Committee about their experiences. These encounters ensured that the lived reality of the matters that we were talking about remained vital in our deliberations. It also ensured that the Committee was made aware of the ways in which the people we met had been led to name their own experience of sexuality.

One of today’s speakers named his sexual orientation with the phrase ‘same-sex attraction’. This is an interesting phrase, very often (though not exclusively) used by conservative evangelical Christians. The C of I Select Committee met with a witness who self-identified in this way; the Church of

England, by contrast, did not. As a way of self-identifying, 'same-sex attraction' (SSA) has proven somewhat contentious: some conservative evangelical Christians use the term as a way of *not* using the otherwise conventional language of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, etc. (hereafter abbreviated to LGBTQI+), and/or denying the legitimacy of LGBTQI+ sexualities. Some who identify as SSA claim that SSA is confined to fallen, mortal existence; in heaven, the manufacturer's heterosexual setting will be restored.

This raises an important theological issue in the debate on human sexuality; for some, we are created by God to be the person that we are, sexuality included. Others, however, balk at the notion that a person whose orientation is LGBTQI+ could have been created thus by God. Identifying as SSA may well help someone from a conservative evangelical tradition to honour their commitment to their understandings both of scriptural authority and their sexuality. Not everyone will be persuaded that this naming of sexual orientation is, in fact, a thoroughly 'biblical' perspective, but that is beside the point for now – what matters is that our discussions are attentive to how people name themselves and their experience. But, as our discussions in the churches continue, it is important to take care in how we speak about how people name their experience. At the Dublin launch of the Church of Ireland's *Guide to the Debate on Human Sexuality*, the Archbishop of Armagh referred to 'Same-Sex Attraction', rather than to homosexuality throughout his remarks – and this limitation is open to serious misunderstanding.

Can we disagree *well*? Again, from a Church of Ireland perspective, there was evident disagreement amongst church leaders in the run-up to the Marriage Equality Referendum. When the result was known, the House of Bishops issued a statement, which clearly exhibited episcopal fault-lines, without explicitly naming these as such (differences of opinion, it appeared, belonged among the voters). It was, in short, a complete dog's breakfast of a statement, ending with the memorable word 'disaster'. Perhaps this was the best the bishops could do. But, as one friend said to me, if this was the best they could do, then it might have been wiser to say nothing.

But saying nothing may be as undesirable as trying to sound more unified than one actually is: our serious disagreements and how we live with them may well prove to be part of the message that we need to articulate as core elements in the churches' mission of reconciliation.

IV

Our disagreements are shaped by context. Some of the voices in today's discussions have alluded to the range of contexts represented in the room –

from memory, we have heard from people from the UK (GB and NI), from the Republic of Ireland, from Zambia and from the US. In all of these places, discussions of human sexuality reflect local and global influences. And there is change afoot.

On this island, homosexual activity was decriminalized in the Republic only in 1986, the government having been successfully taken to the European Court by Senator David Norris. Following the Hart-Devlin debates in GB, and the subsequent moves to decriminalize homosexual acts in the UK, Northern Ireland witnessed a strangely ecumenical effort – involving both Cardinal Tomás ó’Fiaich and the Revd Ian Paisley – to secure a derogation for Northern Ireland from Westminster’s legislation. Were the Assembly to be sitting again, it seems likely that this anomalous situation would come to an end fairly quickly. Contexts are distinctive, but they can also facilitate rapid change.

One of the interesting areas of change is generational. In the US, there is a fascinating sector of the population, designated the ‘non-denoms.’ These are post-denominational churches, often worshipping in a mildly Pentecostal style, whose evangelicalism embraces a concern with social and ecological ethics, and not the standard concerns (sexuality, abortion) of the US Religious Right. As yet, this is a somewhat unfocused group, politically and religiously. But its disconnection from the standard Religious Right agenda should make us wary of identifying one side in the debate on human sexuality as ‘evangelical’.

A similar feature is exhibited by the Global Christian Forum, an affiliation of largely Pentecostal churches from the Global South. Some conservative Christians in the Global North view the theological concerns of the Global South as a remedy to what they see as the jaded liberal projects of a more Eurocentric age and church; but this diagnosis may not turn out as northern conservatives hope. Many of the deliberations of the Global Christian Forum sound very similar to those of the non-denoms in the USA: their focus is firmly on economic, eco and gender justice.

Where we are impacts on the kinds of issues that we prioritise. In the debate on human sexuality, it is important that we avoid categorizing the competing points of view without taking context into consideration.

In Ireland, there is an excellent example in the differing contributions on these debates offered by Evangelical Alliance Ireland and Evangelical Alliance Northern Ireland, following the introduction of same-sex Civil Partnership in the Republic. Indeed, the excellent contribution of the Evangelical Alliance Ireland to the debate on Marriage Equality in the Republic (*Who Owns*

Marriage?) included a trenchant critique of the received tradition written from within the evangelical tradition. There is real and lively diversity within our traditions and churches on issues relating to human sexuality, and the various sides all draw on the scriptures in shaping their perspectives.

V

Recent discussions about the nature of the Church (both tradition-specific and ecumenical) have shown evidence of a revitalized understanding of the church as communion. Some of the global denominational bodies – including those of Methodism, Anglicanism and the Reformed – have explicitly included the language of ‘communion’ in their global brand. Like all models of being church, the language of communion offers both possibilities and limitations. In debates over sexuality, the language (and the reality) of communion merits greater prominence.

One of the key positive features of an ecclesiology of communion is that it emphasizes the divine initiative through which we become persons together. Communion is not like-mindedness; it is not a matter of elective-affinity; it is not something that we achieve through managerial skill. We obviously find our lives in common a great deal easier if we share at least *some* like-mindedness, elective affinities and people skills: but our communion with one another, and with our creator and redeemer is something else. In several of the heated debates about human sexuality and the Christian faith – and Anglicanism provides copious examples – it is not hard to catch a whiff of a casual and dangerous Pelagianism in the way in which participants sometimes give the impression that communion is something to which we can set dogmatic limits. *We* neither create nor end communion; we find ourselves in communion by the grace of God. Some recent publications have rather carelessly positioned ‘conflict’ and ‘communion’ as opposite realities; the truth is surely that conflict may very well be an expression of communion in a community where truth matters.

VI

Methodism has long been associated with holiness, and with encouraging Christians to pursue lives of active holiness. This has an interesting bearing on the issue of Scripture and human sexuality, since some of the key passages debated by Christians are from the ‘holiness code’ in Leviticus, or are obviously a later echo of the Levitical material. The thrust of the holiness code is its call to Israel to be holy – you shall be holy, as the LORD your God is Holy. But, added to this theologically positive call to holiness is a negative judgement on the neighbouring peoples: do not do as the nations/gentiles do. Being the holy people of God involved being like God, and being unlike

the gentiles. And those who compromised Israel's holiness were to meet an unpleasant end.

The Levitical presentation of holiness helps us to grasp some of the shock and outrage that Paul of Tarsus caused to Jesus' earlier disciples, when he began to proclaim to the Gentiles that Jesus the Messiah had come. This was an appalling up-ending of assumptions for many of Jesus' early followers. Paul, their former tormentor, was now claiming to have been charged by the Risen Christ to build a new community of Jews and Gentiles. And, what was even more shocking, the Gentiles were not required by Paul to first embrace Judaism – the Gentiles were welcomed into this new, eschatological community precisely *as* Gentiles.

Paul's Gentiles were, therefore, a sign of eschatological blessing and not a contaminating stain on the holiness of Israel. The subsequent story of Paul's strained relationships with both the church in Jerusalem and his own Judaism indicates precisely how hard it was for his contemporaries to follow Paul's lead.

We are currently living through exciting re-interpretations of Paul, many of which have helped to bring back Paul himself into view – and has distinguished Paul the first century Jewish thinker from Paul as he has often been re-read and re-constructed by subsequent generations of Christians (by St Augustine and Martin Luther in particular). Perhaps only 2 decades ago it was possible to read Paul's letters as being principally concerned with justification by grace through faith, secondarily concerned with practical issues that had come to light in, say, Corinth or Galatia, and finally – securing an exegetical wooden spoon – concerned with offering some helpful moral advice (or *paraenesis*) for the community's common life.

Paul, however, was not a Protestant Christian; therefore he did not treat *paraenesis* as a matter of dubious 'works' to be tolerated only once justification had been shouted from the rooftops. The holiness of Paul's community was its ability to live together in Christ, and the rudimentary moral advice supplied by Paul was actually the climax of his letters – here, he was saying, *this* is what you have to do if you are going to live together, Jews and Gentiles, in one community. And we know that, for Paul, the sources of much of his 'how to live together' advice were widely-available household codes, collections of sage advice on how to manage a home.

Paul's model of holiness, therefore shocked his contemporaries by treating as gifts those who had traditionally been viewed (because the scriptures said so) as contaminants, and then binding together a new community of Jews and Gentiles which was nourished by the sanctified pragmatism that characterized

the wisdom Paul found to help the community live together. This was a model of holiness that was moving away from a previously sanctified model of exclusion of all things Gentile.

VII

The remarks on holiness included some remarks about exegesis. Biblical study is an important aspect of Christian life. In part, I want simply to echo what the Lambeth Bishops have been saying – like a stuck record – down the decades: the church needs to become more nourished by biblical study.

Some of our debate on human sexuality reflects different theologies of scripture, and it is important for us to spend time on looking at how we read scripture. The Church of Ireland's *Guide to the Debate on Human Sexuality* quotes from a report on the Authority of Scripture, produced some years ago by the Church of Ireland Bishops' Advisory Commission on Doctrine. It is striking that – aside from signaling that the Commission members could subscribe to Article 6 of *The Thirty-Nine Articles* – 'Of the Sufficiency of the holy Scriptures for Salvation' – the rest of the report was not really a report at all, but rather a collection of quite different essays on how such authority might be understood.

The Church of Ireland's committee on sexuality listened to a number of expert witnesses who work as scripture scholars. This made an immensely helpful contribution to our discussions. Were we to do it all again, this is an aspect of our work that I think would benefit from an even more generous allocation of time. We need to make space for ourselves to digest the significance of having our experts tell us something that sometimes proves to be not quite what we expected to hear (Were we asking the wrong questions? If so, what would the right questions be?). Moreover – and this has been my experience in other committees – it can be deeply unsettling to have an expert provide us with an outline of how certain texts have been interpreted down the ages, as well as how the same texts are being interpreted now, only to hear several committee members continue to claim that 'the bible says X', when it has been made abundantly clear that 'X' is a fairly peripheral interpretation of what the bible has said, and says now. Hearing what scripture actually says, and curtailing our desire to co-opt the authority of scripture for our own views has proven very difficult to-date, in this debate as in others. But we should be able to reflect back to our churches that we are taking scriptural exegesis seriously, and that we expect the wider church to do so too as part of any ongoing discernment process.

One final point concerning Scripture in these discussions draws from the Anglican experience, and the work of Canon Phil Groves, who was appointed

to the Anglican Communion Office to help facilitate conversations about human sexuality across the Anglican Communion. One of the resources developed as a result was a website that invited LGBTQI+ Christians to share their reflections on scriptural passages that spoke most to them. I remember a particularly moving meditation on 'God so loved the world that he gave his only son to the end that all that believe in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.' It is important to be mindful that LGBTQI+ Christians are not necessarily living their religious lives in a state of constant fretting over the exegesis of Leviticus. Their experience of living with scripture may help to enlarge the horizons of other readers too.

VIII

What does it mean to be a human person? This is the question addressed by theological anthropology, and it seems to be to be a fairly key issue in all our various discussions of human sexuality. And with this, I conclude my reflections.

Much ink has been spilled answering the question of human identity, but, pending the eschaton, there is little chance that this will ever reach a 'final' answer. Some answers are hopeful, others less so – I particularly enjoy the answer of the medieval monk Peter Abelard to the question of what separates humans from other animals – we are different, according to Peter, because we can smile and sail a boat.

Becoming human is the work of a lifetime. One of the best accounts of life as a pilgrimage comes to us in St Augustine's *Confessions*. Some of Augustine's other writings about sexuality, particularly when he is engaged in fierce debate, can be deeply off-putting. Over the course of his life, however, his mature theology emerged and provided him with the insight that – even when his own moral compass was on the blink – his deepest desires were (however strangely) drawing him to God. You have created us, he tells God, in a you-wards direction, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you. Augustine has often been claimed as the patron of puritanical reform movements in the church, but the Augustine of the *Confessions* knows that puritanism simply doesn't work. The things that lead us astray are not to be excised from our life; they are the very things that point to our hunger for God and are the raw materials of our redemption.

Despite their indebtedness in other ways to Augustine, both Luther and Calvin rejected Augustine's claim that human disordered desire (or concupiscence) was not itself sinful, but the occasion of sin. Both of the Reformers can be fairly savage in their denunciations of human desire. Interestingly, one of John

Wesley's recurring instructions to his correspondents was that they should read the 'Greek Fathers'. Wesley greatly admired Augustine, but the Latin Father's great creation of the doctrine of original sin, was something that needed the correction of the Eastern church, which saw the human person embarking on a journey of deification in life and in eternity. *Befriending Our Desires* – the title of a book by Philip Sheldrake, is something to which the western churches in particular need to attend.

One of the more dramatic features of the Marriage Equality Referendum in the Republic was the way in which the argument was structured. In general, those wishing to retain the existing definition of marriage tended to argue normatively: marriage is a legally recognised relationship of a man and a woman, *therefore* – and by definition – it cannot be extended to cover a man and a man, or a woman and a woman. This argument concerned the very nature of marriage (perhaps even with an explicit appeal to a natural law), the very nature of men, the very nature of women and the very nature of the family as a child-producing and child-rearing unit in society. And for some people, this kind of argument worked.

In its publicity, however, the campaign to alter the Irish constitution did not engage in normative deliberations of the nature of marriage. Instead, many of the adverts were indirect and rooted in experience: e.g., a woman would tell the audience about her wonderful grand-daughter, who had met the love of her life and now wanted to settle-down and marry; or a man would tell the audience about his brother, who had been living in a partnership for years and who now wanted the legal protection of marriage in his old age. In other words, the campaign to change the constitution presented empirical data in the form of stories of real people and real lives. For many of the voters, this kind of non-normative argument worked very effectively.

It's important that, in all our discussions of human sexuality, we remember that 'human' and 'sexuality' are abstractions, and it can be tempting to argue normatively about abstractions. If nature didn't present itself as dynamic and changing, perhaps arguments from a static natural law might be more persuasive. If abstractions aren't abstracted from the lived reality of human life, and kept open to regular correction as lives change, then those abstractions can be plausible at an abstract level, but say little or nothing to the concrete situations in which live and move and have their being.

Knowing what is the case, before declaring what it ought to be is an important element in commending anything that we have to say.

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