

# The Church and the homosexual

**With UK Parliamentary discussion expected of 'Clause 28' and the homosexual age of consent, long-term commentator on issues of church and society John Martin reviews the background to the current situation**

A series of recent events seems to suggest that public opinion in the Western world is moving inexorably in favour of tolerance of homosexuality. In France in October, the National Assembly and Senate approved partnership contracts giving a new legal status to cohabiting non-married couples - heterosexual or homosexual. Non-sexual partnerships and friendships are included. but the main beneficiaries will be common law and gay relationships where the parties sign a contract 'with a view to organising their life in common'.

These contracts can be registered with a clerk of a magistrate's court and thus have the force of law. The debate took up a massive 106 hours of parliamentary time. To appease conservative critics, it was agreed that the legislation should make it clear that such relationships did not have the same status or enjoy the same advantages as traditional marriage.

In California, even some of the mainline churches have agreed to grant rights to employees with homosexual partners in order to retain receipt of public funding for their welfare programmes. Now every employee can designate either a spouse or a 'spousal equivalent' in the same household, to share in the married person's health insurance cover. There is no requirement for the employee making such a declaration to specify the nature of the relationship.

Here in Britain, reform of the House of Lords leaves open the prospect for fresh attempts to lower the age of consent for homosexual acts. Meanwhile, the Children's Society has added its name to a growing number of fostering and adoption agencies unwilling to rule out placement of children with gay couples. More far-reaching still was a legal judgement which found it possible to regard two homosexual men living together, though not married, as a family. Thus the surviving partner could inherit a tenancy after the death of the other.

## **The Church and sex**

So where does all this leave the Christian Church? The tradition of the Western Church over many centuries maintained that sex was for procreation. Sexual intercourse was seen as the transmission of seed, making procreation possible. Sexual intimacy was allowable only in the context of a relationship between a man and a woman in marriage. Sexual acts which did not allow the possibility of procreation were deemed to be 'sins against nature'.

Thomas Aquinas, who is still regarded by Roman Catholics as one of the Church's greatest teachers, identified four 'sins against nature': bestiality, homosexual acts, non-procreative heterosexual acts, and masturbation. His thinking, which follows the thought world of Aristotle, the Greek philosopher, had an enormous influence on all Christian ethical thinking until early modern times.

During the course of the twentieth century, many of the building blocks forming the traditional view of sexuality have been eroded. In the field of moral philosophy, for example, Cambridge professor George Edward Moore (1873-1958), who grew up as an evangelical but became an agnostic, said Aquinas and his successors had indulged the 'naturalistic fallacy'. Just because something was perceived as 'natural', he argued, it did not necessarily follow that it should have a positive moral imperative. Nor should something traditionally perceived as 'unnatural' necessarily be deemed 'immoral'.

Anthropology was another discipline that eroded older Western theories, with studies of the sexual behaviour of Pacific communities feeding a growing mood of cultural relativism. The forces of erosion were at work in popular culture as well. But not all the insights on offer were necessarily hostile to Christianity. One of the great weaknesses of Aquinas' teaching was its failure to offer an adequate account of feminine sexuality. It did not need the twentieth century feminist movement to expose the shortcomings of his understanding of women as receptacles for male 'seed'.

What spawned the twentieth century sexual revolution was growth of the popular belief that as well as being the means for the procreation of children, sexual intimacy was a source of delight that could of itself strengthen the married relationship. The Churches, recognising that the advent of birth control spelt a break with traditional teaching on sexual morality, fought a rearguard action.

Lambeth Conferences of Anglican bishops successively rejected birth control up until 1930. Even then Lambeth opened the door somewhat grudgingly, and with no small amount of obscurantism, declaring that birth control was acceptable within marriage 'where there is a morally sound reason for avoiding complete abstinence'.

Roman Catholic leaders followed a somewhat different course. During the 1960s the Church conceded the value of sex for its own sake within the marriage bond, but at the end of the decade took its stand against birth control through Pope Paul VI's controversial *Humane Vitae* encyclical. For a Western Society that for more than two generations had lived with the fruits of the rejection of the traditional moral consensus, the Papal teaching was greeted with incredulity. How could a system whose priests were sworn to celibacy possibly teach anything about sexual relations?

### **Traditional views eroded**

So we live in a culture where the traditional consensus on sexual ethics has been eroded. It is not surprising, then, that a great deal of confusion exists about homosexuality as well. How, then, does the Christian disciple approach the issue?

A few years ago Ian McKellen, the actor and gay activist, publicly tore up a copy of the Bible. For McKellen, at least, the teaching of the Bible was patently clear: there was no room for homosexual acts within its teachings. The ground has been well worked over, so in a short article I do not intend to go over all the key texts.

I would argue, however, that the biblical texts need to be examined within their cultural context and that this adds to their potency. The ancient Hebrews lived on part of the Mediterranean basin. They lived among a plethora of peoples who followed a legion of fertility cults and approved sexual intimacy between men and men, and between men and boys. For their part the Hebrews uniquely refused to accept the sexual norms of their neighbours.

Early Christianity shared a similar situation within the sexual mores of the Mediterranean basin. Peter, Paul and the rest of the Apostles engaged in a series of controversies about which parts of Judaism should be insisted on as normative, and which could be jettisoned by Christians. Paul insisted that he was willing to 'become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some'. But there is never a hint that any of the Apostles even considered accommodation to sexual norms less stringent than those Jews insisted on.

So the implication is clear. A biblical Christianity insists that the only allowable context for sexual intimacy is between a man

and a woman in the bond of marriage. But, as anyone who has been following Church events over the last year or two knows, there are growing numbers of Christians who would insist that this cannot be the last word on the subject.

### **Bible References on Homosexuality**

Genesis 2:24; 19:1-29  
Leviticus 18:22, 20:13  
Judges 19:1-30  
Romans 1:24-27  
1 Corinthians 6:9-11  
1 Timothy 1:10

### **Re-interpretation of the Scriptures and history**

The late Michael Vasey was a leading exponent of a position that was both pro-gay and seeking to live under the authority of the Bible. He has argued at length and with no small amount of ingenuity, that what we know as gay lifestyle at the end of the twentieth century has no common ground with that sexual behaviour which the Bible condemns. Likewise the late John Boswell won a big following in the USA and to some extent in Britain by historical research that tried to show that gay relationships had received much wider approval in the life of the Church in the Christian era than had previously been thought. The views of both Vasey and Boswell have been widely contested. But the debate is set to continue. In a media world that loves innovation and does not view fixed positions as newsworthy, gay apologists will continue to get most of the headlines. Their opponents will be presented as repetitious and hard faced.

### **The right to sexual delight**

Already I can hear some of my gay acquaintances saying 'How can it be fair that a heterosexual person is entitled to sexual delight in the company of another, while Christianity offers nothing but celibacy for the gay person?' What is certain is that the Church itself has become a source of confusion. The imprecise wording of the 1998 Lambeth Conference resolution on gay relationships has muddied the waters and played into the hands of the radical gay apologists. A great many gay Christians contend that they are not helped by the radical gay rights movements. Likewise many reject the help of Christian leaders like Bishop Jack Spong of the USA who, they say, fail utterly to understand them or their aspirations. As well, by uncritically supporting programmes that purport to offer gays 'healing', Christian churches have sometimes done more harm than good. So if the Christian Church is to continue to rule out anything other than celibacy for gays, then it must do more to offer community and support to disciples of Jesus who have chosen celibacy.

I am certain there is much about the gay scene, and in gay sexual practices, that is enormously destructive. If Christian churches can become the loving communities of faith they say they aspire to be, they have much to offer the gay person. But the path will never be an easy one.

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